From Resistance to Resilience: Why Hezbollah Remained Undefeated and the Myth of a Unified 'Axis of the Resistance'

An in-depth journey into the 'Party of God'

By

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Abstract

This thesis investigates a central question in contemporary conflict studies: how has Hezbollah, a non-state actor born of occupation, marginalisation, and repeated confrontation, remained undefeated despite overwhelming military, political, and economic pressure? Across four decades of Israeli military campaigns, targeted assassinations, sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and large-scale infrastructural destruction, Hezbollah has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation and endurance. This endurance has persisted even when leadership depends more on cohesion and ideological trust than bureaucratic efficiency, showing how organisational unity can offset institutional constraints.

The thesis argues that Hezbollah's durability cannot be explained solely by military capability. Its resilience emerges from the interplay of ideology, society, and strategy. The movement's ability to endure lies in its capacity to unite ideological coherence with deep social embeddedness, community legitimacy, and adaptive strategic behaviour. This resilience has also been reinforced by the Lebanese state's chronic inability to provide security and essential services, creating a vacuum in which Hezbollah has assumed many state-like roles — offering deterrence, welfare, protection, and representation while remaining a distinct political and military actor. In doing so, it has come to embody a form of embedded sovereignty rooted not in formal authority but in social legitimacy and everyday governance.

Methodologically, the thesis adopts a constructivist–critical realist framework combining ethnography, discourse analysis, and process tracing. It draws on an original corpus of confidential interviews conducted between 1985 and 2025, alongside more than four decades of direct fieldwork and firsthand observations dating back to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. This longitudinal empirical record encompasses Hezbollah's emergence, its military and political evolution, the 2006 war, and subsequent conflicts, including the 2023–2025 confrontation, a period that remains insufficiently theorised in academic research despite extensive empirical documentation.

Unlike existing military histories based predominantly on battlefield observation, public material and Israeli sources, the corpus includes confidential testimony from commanders, Jihadi Council figures, unit heads and strategic advisers, supported by Arabic primary documents, providing rare longitudinal insight into doctrine, decision-making, operational adaptation and acknowledged failure. These sources, treated analytically rather than descriptively, provide a longitudinal understanding of Hezbollah's strategic evolution. This methodological design enables the thesis to connect conceptual analysis with empirical dynamics.

The research advances four central findings that together constitute an original contribution to knowledge in conflict studies and Middle Eastern politics. While existing scholarship addresses elements of these themes, it has not integrated them into a unified explanatory framework. First, it reconceptualises defeat in hybrid warfare as a multidimensional process in which political legitimacy and social rootedness can outweigh battlefield outcomes. Second, it challenges the proxy narrative by demonstrating that Hezbollah exercises strategic autonomy even while remaining ideologically and financially aligned with Iran. Third, it highlights the limits of conventional military power: Israel's repeated inability to dismantle Hezbollah demonstrates the difficulty of defeating a non-state actor embedded in its community. Fourth, it introduces a new framework for understanding alliances among such

actors, arguing that the so-called '*Axis of Resistance*' functions less as a centralised military bloc than as a virtual deterrence alliance sustained by narrative, symbolism, and performative solidarity. Together, these findings are theorised through three interrelated concepts developed by the thesis: embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience and deterrence by narrative.

This theoretical and methodological innovation moves conflict analysis beyond its traditional concern with states and armies. Hezbollah's trajectory shows that as long as power asymmetries persist and the Lebanese state fails to protect its citizens, resistance will depend on legitimacy, endurance, and the ability to outlast materially stronger adversaries.

Declaration of Originality

I hereby certify that all material in this thesis drawn from other sources has been identified as such in the references, and all remaining content is the outcome of my own field research conducted over nearly four decades of professional work and writing.

Signature:

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

This thesis is submitted in accordance with Liverpool John Moores University's Academic Integrity and Academic Misconduct Regulations. The work presented constitutes the independent scholarly research of the author.

Generative Artificial Intelligence tools were used only for limited editorial support during the drafting process. Their use was confined to language refinement, grammar correction, and stylistic clarification. All research design, data collection, analysis, theoretical development, interpretation of findings, and substantive argumentation were undertaken solely by the author.

All intellectual judgements and conclusions expressed in this thesis are the author's own. Full responsibility for the content rests with the author.

This limited use was discussed with and approved by my supervisor.

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Preface

Statement of Clarifications and Methodological Enhancements

(Supplementary Document Submitted with Doctoral Thesis)

This document summarises the clarifications and methodological elaborations incorporated into the final submitted thesis in order to strengthen conceptual sequencing, analytical precision and evidentiary transparency.

1. Clarification of Confidential Interviews and First-Hand Testimony

The thesis now provides explicit justification for the use of confidential, unrecorded interviews in a legally sensitive and high-risk research environment. Section 2.4 explains the ethical and practical constraints that shaped data-collection procedures.

To ensure evidentiary rigour, the thesis sets out a structured validation process involving:

- triangulation with primary documents, OSINT artefacts, UN records and archival material;
- cross-checking between role-differentiated interlocutors;
- temporal triangulation where multiple engagements occurred;
- the treatment of contemporaneous field notes as empirical data subject to identical scrutiny.

Appendices A–C supply the audit trail, coding schema, decision rules and anonymised interview dossier.

2. Sequencing and Definition of Core Concepts

Key analytical concepts—endurance, legitimacy, resilience, embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience and deterrence by narrative—are defined prior to analytical deployment. A dedicated clarification paragraph now outlines their distinct roles and points of interaction. This improves theoretical coherence and reduces premature conceptual layering.

3. Structural Refinement and Pacing Adjustments

Transitions within the introduction and literature review have been strengthened. Long compound sentences have been simplified, and multi-claim paragraphs have been separated where appropriate to support readability. The discussion of three main scholarly approaches to Hezbollah has been restructured to minimise repetitive phrasing and to clarify their analytical distinctions.

4. Reduction of Redundant Terminology

Instances of repetitive causal phrasing and duplicated terminology have been refined to create a more balanced prose rhythm. Technical terms are now used consistently and only after formal definition, reducing rhetorical redundancy.

5. Enhanced Methodological Transparency

The revised methodology chapter now includes expanded detail on sampling strategy, access pathways, coding procedures, and inferential logic. Ethical considerations, anonymisation protocols and data-security measures are documented in accordance with best practices in conflict ethnography and qualitative security research.

This supplementary document accompanies the final thesis to provide a concise overview of the clarifications and methodological enhancements integrated into the manuscript.

Introduction

A strategic puzzle lies at the heart of Hezbollah's trajectory and the ways scholars have struggled to explain it. Martin Kramer (1987, p. 156) analyses the evolution of Muslim Shia political movements, including Hezbollah, and their role in resistance and post-conflict dynamics in Lebanon and the wider Middle East. Kramer argued that the Islamist movement would be excluded from Lebanon's post-war order and would prove incapable of expelling Israeli political and military influence from the south. How can a non-state actor born out of occupation and crisis adapt to challenges, become part of the state without replacing it, survive, and avoid decisive defeat despite over four decades of intense military, economic, diplomatic, and psychological pressure from materially superior state adversaries? Why do conventional theories of war, power, and sovereignty fail to explain this anomaly, and what new conceptual tools are required to do so? These questions lie at the heart of this thesis. Hezbollah's endurance is more than a regional curiosity or a simple proxy in the hands of a state sponsor. It exposes fundamental gaps in the way strategic studies, international relations, and security theory conceptualise defeat, deterrence, and legitimacy in the twenty-first century.

A brief conceptual orientation is therefore necessary before the argument proceeds further. Since its emergence in the early 1980s, Hezbollah has survived repeated attempts at eradication. Israel, a highly sophisticated military power financed and supported by the United States, has launched several large-scale military campaigns against it. These operations have included targeted assassinations, sabotage and decapitation strikes against Hezbollah's leadership, as well as sustained information and psychological warfare. They have been accompanied by unprecedented diplomatic and economic sanctions intended to isolate and weaken the movement and turn the population against it.

Western governments have devoted enormous intelligence and financial resources to dismantling the group's networks. Yet Hezbollah has neither collapsed nor retreated into irrelevance. Instead, it remains a central political actor in Lebanon, a significant player in regional security calculations, and an enduring source of deterrent pressure against materially superior adversaries (Biddle, 2021; Anderson, 2023). This thesis takes as its starting point the paradox that a sub-state actor without sovereign territory to defend, sovereignty to claim, or conventional military superiority can nonetheless use deterrence to shape the strategic environment.

Research Question, Aim and Objectives

The central research question guiding this thesis is: How and why has Hezbollah remained undefeated despite sustained military, political, economic and informational pressure, and what does its endurance reveal about the limitations of conventional understandings of defeat, deterrence, sovereignty and proxy relations? The corresponding aim is to explain Hezbollah's endurance under pressure from materially superior adversaries by examining how ideology, organisational adaptation, social embeddedness and changing understandings of victory and defeat interact over time.

The research design operationalises the three research objectives through complementary methods. Objective 1 is addressed through longitudinal fieldwork and process tracing of the ideological, organisational, political, social and military mechanisms that sustain endurance. Objective 2 is addressed through discourse analysis and participant testimony examining how

material loss, sacrifice and strategic defeat are interpreted and narrated. Objective 3 is addressed through evidence concerning social embeddedness, institutional participation, autonomous agency, legitimacy and the performance of functions associated with sovereignty.

This thesis pursues the following research aim: to explain how and why Hezbollah has remained undefeated despite sustained pressure from materially superior adversaries. It examines how ideology, organisational adaptation, social embeddedness and an unconventional understanding of victory and defeat contribute to Hezbollah's capacity to absorb material losses and interpret them as sacrifices without necessarily conceding strategic defeat. It also considers Hezbollah's capacity to recalibrate its strategic priorities in response to changing conditions, including a possible movement from expansive regional ambitions towards more achievable domestic objectives. In doing so, the thesis develops three interrelated concepts, deterrence by resilience, deterrence by narrative and embedded sovereignty, as a framework for understanding Hezbollah's endurance, agency and deterrent capacity.

To fulfil this aim, the thesis pursues three research objectives:

1. To identify and analyse the ideological, organisational, political, social and military factors that have enabled Hezbollah to absorb sustained pressure, preserve organisational continuity and remain strategically undefeated, thereby developing the concept of deterrence by resilience.

2. To examine how Hezbollah's ideology and narrative distinguish material loss and sacrifice from strategic defeat, sustaining mobilisation and deterrent credibility through what this thesis conceptualises as deterrence by narrative.

3. To analyse how Hezbollah's social embeddedness and participation in Lebanese institutions sustain its autonomous agency, legitimacy and performance of sovereignty functions, thereby developing the concept of embedded sovereignty.

This research has significance beyond the Lebanese context. As contemporary conflict increasingly involves hybrid and non state actors embedded within the population, understanding why such movements endure despite overwhelming pressure is important for both theory and policy.

These empirical outcomes raise broader theoretical questions that conventional strategic thought has struggled to address. Traditional strategic thought, grounded in Clausewitzian[1] notions of decisive battle and state-centric models of sovereignty, assumes that wars end when enemy forces are destroyed, territory is occupied, or political authority collapses

[1] The Clausewitzian *logic of decisive battle* derives from Carl von Clausewitz's conception of war as a contest of wills in which the swift and concentrated destruction of the enemy's main force (*Schlachtentscheidung*) can compel political submission and achieve the war's objectives. This approach, which reflects the Napoleonic era's preference for climactic force-on-force engagements, is grounded in the belief that the annihilation of the adversary's organised military capacity offers the most direct route to strategic success. It assumes a state-centred model of warfare in which sovereign entities possess standing armies, defined political leadership, and control over territory — a framework aligned with the Westphalian notion of sovereignty as the supreme authority exercised by a state within a defined territorial order. Within this paradigm, war is an instrument of state policy, and the relationship between *ends,* political objectives, and *means,* military force, is linear and hierarchical. Hezbollah's invocation of a 'trinity' comprising the people, the armed resistance, and the political leadership deliberately mirrors this classical model, while simultaneously shifting it by embedding non-state legitimacy, hybrid warfare, and social mobilisation within a framework traditionally reserved for state actors.

(Clausewitz, 1976; Howard, 1976). These assumptions underpin much of modern war termination theory and alliance analysis. However, they fail to explain the persistence of actors such as Hezbollah, the Taliban, or Yemen's Ansar Allah, which continue to operate effectively despite catastrophic losses and systemic pressures (Arreguín-Toft, 2001; Kilcullen, 2020). They also overlook the ways in which legitimacy, ideology, and narrative interact with material power to shape strategic outcomes. This study argues that Hezbollah's endurance is best understood as the product of three interlocking mechanisms: embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience, and deterrence by narrative. Together, these mechanisms redefine what 'defeat' means for non-state actors.

The academic literature on Hezbollah illustrates the limitations of these prevailing frameworks. One dominant approach situates Hezbollah within the logic of proxy warfare, portraying it as an extension of Iranian foreign policy and a tool for Tehran's regional ambitions (Ranstorp, 1997; Byman, 2005; Levitt, 2013). Grounded in principal-agent theory, this view presents Hezbollah as a dependent actor whose strategic decisions are largely dictated by its patron (Mumford, 2013; Krieg and Rickli, 2018).

While this perspective captures important elements of Iranian support, including financial, logistical, and ideological backing, it underestimates Hezbollah's agency. In several key episodes — most notably during the 2023–2025 conflicts, Hezbollah calibrated its responses to prioritise Lebanese domestic constraints, even when these diverged from Tehran's preferences. Its absence of active support for Iran during periods of intense Israeli bombardment exposed the fragility of the long-standing proxy narrative that has dominated much of the scholarship on the movement. Such behaviour demonstrates a pattern of conditional alignment rather than principal–agent obedience. The limitations of the proxy paradigm become clearer when contrasted with research that interprets Hezbollah primarily through its sectarian and domestic role.

A second strand of scholarship conceptualises Hezbollah as a sectarian militia, emphasising its role as a Shia mobilisation project embedded within Lebanon's confessional political system (Suechika, 2025). This approach helps explain Hezbollah's legitimacy within its community and the organisational networks that sustain its support base. However, it tends to marginalise the group's strategic decision-making and transnational reach, portraying it as a parochial actor rather than a regional power broker capable of projecting influence beyond Lebanese borders. Beyond sectarian mobilisation, other scholars have sought to capture Hezbollah's dual political–military character through the concept of hybridity.

A third approach treats Hezbollah as a hybrid actor that merges attributes of state and non-state authority, coercion and governance, ideology and pragmatism (Gleis and Berti, 2012; Saouli, 2019). This literature acknowledges the organisation's complexity but often lacks the conceptual precision to explain its extraordinary longevity. It describes Hezbollah's structure and activities but does not theorise the mechanisms that enable it to adapt to systemic shocks, including leadership assassinations, cyber operations, and devastating wars, through which Hezbollah preserved its legitimacy and operational capabilities.

These gaps in the literature underscore a broader problem: existing theories of conflict and alliance behaviour are ill-equipped to account for the endurance of population-embedded non-state actors. The persistence of groups such as Hezbollah suggests that conventional definitions of victory and defeat, based on territorial control, regime change, or unconditional surrender, are analytically inaccurate (Reiter, 2009; Kilcullen, 2020). Such actors are not

easily defeated through conventional means because their power does not rest on the conventional metrics of statehood.

Instead, their survival depends on their ability to interpret sacrifice differently from defeat, embed themselves within socio-political structures, adapt organisationally to external shocks, and sustain ideological legitimacy even when facing material setbacks. Addressing these theoretical blind spots requires a framework that links organisational behaviour, legitimacy, and strategic adaptation.

Endurance, legitimacy, and resilience are treated in this thesis as analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing dimensions of non-state power. 'Endurance' refers to an actor's sustained ability to absorb shocks and remain operationally relevant over time. 'Legitimacy' denotes the political and social consent that enables continued mobilisation, authority and community protection. 'Resilience' captures the capacity to adapt organisationally, redistribute costs, and reconstitute capabilities after losses or strategic disruption. While these dimensions interact, they are not interchangeable. Distinguishing them clarifies how non-state actors survive cumulative pressure and why conventional metrics of victory and defeat fail to capture their strategic behaviour.

This thesis reconceptualises defeat not as a singular event but as a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of operational, political, and ideological dynamics. Conventional definitions, rooted in interstate war, equate victory with territorial conquest, the destruction of enemy forces, regime overthrow, or unconditional surrender (Howard, 1976; Reiter, 2009). Such criteria are poorly suited to asymmetric conflicts, where non-state actors often lack territory to seize, armies to defeat, or governments to overthrow. They also overlook the enduring significance of legitimacy, ideology, and organisational adaptability.

The framework advanced here identifies three interdependent dimensions through which the defeat or survival of population-embedded actors must be understood. The first is operational capacity: the ability to maintain core functions such as command and control, deterrent credibility, and the power to impose costs on an adversary, preventing it from achieving its objectives. A movement is not defeated if it retains the capacity to inflict damage, deter aggression, or shape enemy decision-making, even when suffering tactical setbacks.

The second is political and social legitimacy, defined by the extent to which the organisation continues to command authority and consent within its constituency. For actors such as Hezbollah, this legitimacy is grounded not only in resistance narratives but also in the provision of social services, welfare networks, community protection, and participation in parliamentary elections (Harb and Leenders, 2005; Alagha, 2006). The third is ideological coherence, or the capacity to sustain narratives, beliefs, and symbolic frameworks that justify mobilisation and resistance. As long as a movement retains ideological coherence, it can reframe losses as part of a broader struggle and maintain mobilisation even under severe pressure.

These three dimensions—operational, social, and ideological—are mutually reinforcing. Operational capacity enables continued resistance, which sustains legitimacy; legitimacy reinforces ideological coherence; and ideology justifies continued operations. Defeat, in this framework, is not achieved through battlefield losses alone but through the cumulative erosion of all three dimensions. If a non-state actor preserves them, it cannot meaningfully be said to have been defeated. This reconceptualisation provides a more precise analytical tool

for understanding why contemporary conflicts rarely end with decisive outcomes and why actors such as Hezbollah persist despite overwhelming adversarial superiority.

Original Contribution and Significance

This thesis advances four main contributions to the fields of security studies, strategic theory, and Middle Eastern politics, each of which builds directly on the conceptual innovations outlined above.

First, it reconceptualises defeat in asymmetric and hybrid conflict. By shifting the analytical focus from decisive events to multidimensional processes, the study explains why movements like Hezbollah, Hamas, or the Taliban endure despite overwhelming conventional power. It also provides policymakers with a more nuanced framework for assessing conflict outcomes, recognising that tactical successes mean little if an adversary retains operational capacity, legitimacy, and ideological cohesion.

Second, the thesis challenges reductionist accounts of proxy warfare. Conventional literature tends to portray Hezbollah as a passive instrument of Iranian strategy (Ranstorp, 1997; Levitt, 2013). Yet its behaviour during the 2023–2025 conflicts demonstrates a significant degree of strategic autonomy. By conceptualising embedded sovereignty — the capacity of non-state actors to define and pursue their objectives within the constraints of state structures and patron relationships — this thesis provides a more accurate account of agency within asymmetric alliances (Byman, 2005; Hughes, 2012).

Third, the research makes an original empirical contribution. Drawing on nearly four decades of fieldwork, including confidential interviews with Hezbollah officials, cadres, and affiliates conducted between 1985 and 2025, it offers unique insights into the organisation's internal deliberations, doctrinal evolution, and strategic recalibrations. This primary material enriches the empirical foundations of the literature and allows for a more granular analysis than previous studies, which often relied on secondary sources and speculative interpretations. While early policy reports and preliminary analyses have addressed aspects of Hezbollah's post-2023 posture, no peer-reviewed work has yet offered a sustained, theory-driven framework for interpreting these developments.

Fourth, the study provides the first systematic academic analysis of Hezbollah's post-2023 transformation. Few works have examined how the Gaza war, Israel's 2024 campaign in Lebanon, and the 2025 United States–Israeli confrontation with Iran reshaped Hezbollah's strategy. By introducing the concepts of deterrence by resilience and virtual deterrence alliance, the thesis shows how non-state actors adapt to systemic shocks and shifting regional dynamics. These contributions also extend into debates on alliance behaviour, where conventional assumptions about cohesion and hierarchy sit uneasily with the empirical patterns observed since 2023.

Challenging Alliance Theory: The Virtual Deterrence Alliance

This thesis also intervenes in debates on alliance politics by rethinking the nature of the so-called '*Axis of Resistance*'. For many decades, the literature treated this Axis as a cohesive coalition united by ideology, military coordination, and strategic purpose (Goodarzi, 2019; Steinberg, 2021; Mabon, 2023; Wastnidge and Mabon, 2023). This thesis challenges that view, conceptualising the Axis instead as a virtual deterrence alliance, a fluid assemblage of

actors linked by narrative coordination, symbolic performance, and rhetorical solidarity against common enemies rather than by integrated command structures.

Although some recent scholarship has hinted at internal tensions within the Axis, these insights remain conceptually underdeveloped and empirically fragmented. This framework explains why strategic divergence among Hezbollah, Hamas, Iran, the Iraqi resistance, and the Yemeni Ansar Allah (Houthis) coexists with a certain degree of ideological affinity, and why narrative synchronisation can generate deterrent effects even in the absence of coherent alliance planning. Understanding the Axis in these terms provides a more accurate account of contemporary coalition dynamics and offers new insights into how non-state actors construct deterrence collectively.

Thesis Structure and Roadmap

The remainder of the thesis develops these arguments across eight chapters. Together, the chapters address the three research objectives through a cumulative analysis of Hezbollah's endurance, its interpretation of material loss and strategic defeat, and the relationship between its social embeddedness, autonomous agency and performance of functions associated with sovereignty.

Chapter 1 situates the study within the literature on Hezbollah, proxy framing, hybrid actors, insurgent decision-making and narrative power. It identifies the research gap and establishes why the thesis offers a distinctive empirical window, particularly in relation to strategic thinking after 2023. It provides the theoretical foundations for all three research objectives, including Objective 3 through its examination of interpretations that reduce Hezbollah to an instrument of Iranian policy.

Chapter 2 sets out the methodological framework and epistemological commitments, explaining the multiple method design, triangulation procedures, reflexive controls and how the research handles access constraints, structural opacity and longitudinal instability. It explains how the evidence used to address all three research objectives was collected, evaluated and triangulated.

Chapter 3 develops the thesis's foundational causal argument. It traces how doctrinal resources and lived occupation dynamics generated the organisational conditions for embedded sovereignty, then follows the institutionalisation of resistance after 2005 and the partial portability of the model through regional projection. Across these developments, the chapter establishes the early formation of deterrence by narrative and deterrence by resilience as organisational mechanisms rather than slogans. It therefore addresses all three research objectives by connecting ideology and organisational adaptation to endurance, narrative interpretations of sacrifice and the development of embedded sovereignty.

Chapter 4 analyses Hezbollah's doctrine of deterrence, explaining how strategy, weaponry and diplomacy evolved together from guerrilla resistance into a more formal deterrent posture. It also examines Israeli counterstrategies, intelligence penetration and the organisational learning that sustains deterrent credibility over time. The chapter principally addresses Objectives 1 and 2 by examining the military and organisational sources of Hezbollah's endurance and the relationship between resilience, narrative and deterrence.

Chapter 5 interrogates the fragmentation and myth of the '*Axis of Resistance'*. It evaluates the gap between rhetorical cohesion and operational divergence and draws out the theoretical implications for alliance thinking, including the thesis's concept of a virtual deterrence alliance. The chapter contributes principally to Objectives 1 and 3 by examining Hezbollah's autonomous strategic agency and challenging the assumption that its conduct is determined by Iran.

Chapter 6 examines Hezbollah during the period from 2023 to 2025 as a stress test of the thesis's claims. It traces the shift from deterrence to strategic discipline, doctrinal adaptation under pressure, leadership decapitation shocks, communications and intelligence breaches, and the organisational learning that underpins resilience and narrative repair. It principally addresses Objectives 1 and 2 by examining how Hezbollah responded to severe material losses without necessarily conceding strategic defeat.

Chapter 7 provides the synthetic explanation of why Hezbollah has not been defeated through conventional means. It consolidates the thesis's mechanism based account of resilience grounded in population embeddedness, hybrid authority and state incapacity, while revisiting the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah and the international constraints under which they operate during wartime. The chapter brings all three research objectives together by explaining the interaction among organisational endurance, narrative interpretations of sacrifice and defeat, and embedded sovereignty.

Chapter 8 concludes by drawing out what the argument implies for the future of resistance without an axis. It synthesises the findings relating to all three research objectives, summarises the thesis's contributions, develops their implications for theory and policy, and offers recommendations grounded in the empirical and methodological logic established across the study.

Together, these chapters evaluate three central propositions that structure the thesis:

1. Embedded sovereignty contributes to the endurance of hybrid and/or non state actors under sustained pressure across multiple domains.
2. Deterrence by resilience enables such actors to offset material inferiority and sustain strategic relevance.
3. Deterrence by narrative shapes adversarial perceptions, influences escalation dynamics and helps preserve internal consent.

In advancing these propositions, the thesis seeks not only to explain Hezbollah's persistence but also to reframe how scholars and policymakers understand power, legitimacy and defeat in contemporary conflict. It argues that endurance, understood as the capacity to survive, adapt and continue imposing costs, has become the defining strategic objective of non state actors, and that any theory of conflict that fails to account for this remains incomplete.

Chapter 1

Literature Review – Hezbollah Between Proxy, Resistance, and Hybrid Actor

1.1 Introduction: Beyond Labels and Proxies

Scholarly work on Hezbollah has produced a substantial yet fragmented body of research reflecting the organisation's complex and evolving character. Researchers have approached it through multiple disciplinary lenses, including international relations, terrorism and counter terrorism, political sociology, comparative politics, and security studies, producing diverging interpretations shaped by theoretical commitments and geopolitical vantage points. This variety reveals not only the complexity of this armed and socially engaged non-state actor but also the theoretical fault lines that this chapter seeks to clarify.

A particularly dominant current in Western academic and policy literature casts Hezbollah primarily as an extension of Iranian strategic interests (Dilegge, Keshavarz and Bunker, 2016). This proxy framework highlights Hezbollah's military alignment with Tehran, its involvement in regional theatres such as Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, and its contribution to sustaining Iran's deterrence narrative against Israel and United States policy in the Middle East (El-Husseini, 2012; Levitt, 2013).

While this reading captures part of the story, it risks overlooking Hezbollah's own priorities, including countering regional security threats and defending Lebanese sovereignty. A growing body of scholarship, including Harik (2004) and Norton (2014), analyses Hezbollah's transition from clandestine militia to formal political actor, explaining how political integration, welfare networks, and social legitimacy have enabled it to move beyond early reliance on Iranian sponsorship. This perspective situates the movement within Lebanon's confessional system and the long history of Shia marginalisation (Munzer, 2024), while recognising that the 1982 Israeli invasion catalysed its emergence.

In this interpretation, Hezbollah's raison d'être lies in the historical context of repeated Israeli invasions, continuing occupation of Lebanese territory, and the Lebanese state's persistent failure to defend its sovereignty. Its armed struggle cannot be understood solely as an extension of Iranian ambitions. Acknowledging Hezbollah's autonomy does not, however, deny the ideological affinity it shares with Iran, including a common Shia worldview and opposition to Israel and the denial of Palestinian self-determination.

Alongside these debates, another strand of literature highlights Hezbollah's hybrid nature: a political party represented in parliament and government, a social movement with deep community networks, and an armed resistance force (Jaber, 1997; Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002; Hamzeh, 2004; Norton, 2014; Marcus, 2018). These studies underscore Hezbollah's adaptability and its capacity to cultivate a durable constituency within Lebanon's sectarian order, stressing responsiveness to domestic dynamics rather than dependence on Tehran.

Further research examines Hezbollah's symbolic and media strategies. Khatib (2013) analyses how visual imagery and narratives of resistance, martyrdom, and legitimacy consolidate popular support. Such cultural practices are central to Hezbollah's self-presentation and mobilisation. As field evidence shows, this dimension was tested in 2024 when Israeli intelligence sabotaged Hezbollah's media networks, limiting its ability to project narratives of success (author's confidential interviews). This episode, absent from existing

scholarship, underscores the operational role of narrative and the vulnerability created when that narrative infrastructure is disrupted.

Debate continues over Hezbollah's place in the so-called '*Axis of Resistance*', a loose constellation comprising Iran, the Assad ruling in Syria, Iraqi Shia paramilitaries, Yemen's Ansar Allah (Houthis), and Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Some scholars cast it as a coherent ideological front (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2019), while others see a pragmatic, fluid alignment shaped by shifting priorities and divergent national interests (Ali-Khan and Cambanis, 2025). The wars of 2023–2025 in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran revealed this fragmentation, but also the potential for future coordination and reorganisation under existential threat.

This thesis engages critically with these interpretations, acknowledging their insights while identifying their blind spots, above all, the persistent binary of 'proxy' versus 'resistance'. By situating Hezbollah as a historically embedded, ideologically driven, and strategically autonomous hybrid actor, it contributes to reframing how non-state armed groups are analysed. The following sections trace how these scholarly strands illuminate Hezbollah's evolution and where they fail to explain its adaptability.

Rather than merely mapping prior research, the chapter establishes the conceptual foundations for the thesis. By foregrounding embedded sovereignty, deterrence by narrative, and the post-2023 strategic recalibration that triggered deterrence by resilience, it moves beyond description to propose an analytical framework for understanding the behaviour, resilience, and strategic evolution of non-state armed actors. This framework provides the basis for the central question of the study: how Hezbollah has managed to endure and adapt despite sustained efforts by powerful adversaries to defeat or disarm it. Current literature oscillates between dependency and autonomy frameworks, leaving scope for a more integrated theory of embedded sovereignty and adaptive deterrence.

In relation to the research objectives established in the Introduction, this chapter identifies three corresponding gaps in the literature: the absence of an integrated explanation of the factors enabling Hezbollah's endurance; insufficient attention to how its ideology and narrative distinguish material loss and sacrifice from strategic defeat; and the tendency of reductive proxy interpretations to obscure how domestic embeddedness generates autonomous agency, legitimacy and functions associated with sovereignty. Addressing these gaps provides the conceptual foundation for the three research objectives pursued in the empirical chapters.

1.2 Decision-Making Frameworks and Their Limits for Insurgent Organisations

Classical decision-making models (Eisenhardt, 1998; Kahneman, 2003; Camerer, 2004) conceive strategy as purposive action under constraint, tempered by bounded rationality and risk framing.

Several scholars have examined Hezbollah's strategic behaviour through the broader lens of decision-making theory. Rosati (1981), Afinotan (2014), Preston and 't Hart (1999), Ball (1974) and Welch (1992) argue that bureaucratic politics theory reframes foreign-policy decision-making as a process shaped by intra-organisational bargaining, institutional routines, and competing procedures rather than by a unitary rational actor. This highlights how

factionalism, institutional culture, and leadership rivalries can mediate strategic choice, an insight relevant to Hezbollah's navigation between party, militia, and state institutions.

Price and Reus-Smit (1998), Hopf (1998) and Barkin (2003) emphasise constructivism's claim that social structures and collective identities shape the preferences and perceived options of actors. Hua Liu and Matthews (2005) show that constructivist approaches illuminate how meaning-making informs behaviour. Together, these works reveal how decision-making and identity formation interact within complex organisations, a dynamic central to Hezbollah's strategic autonomy under constraint. These perspectives underpin this thesis's argument that Hezbollah's endurance stems from negotiated, meaning-based, and institutionally mediated agency rather than direct external control, a logic developed further through embedded sovereignty and deterrence by resilience in later chapters.

These limits explain why insurgent organisations, operating clandestinely with compartmentalised information and doctrinal filters, require process tracing of how ideology structures perception and narrows option sets over time. While canonical models illuminate elements of elite decision-making, they under-specify ideology's constitutive role in insurgent settings. Addressing this limitation requires process tracing of interpretive frames and organisational filters, supported by elite interviews and Arabic-language sources revealing how Hezbollah's leadership links doctrine to threat perception. These theoretical gaps justify an interpretive, multi-method approach capable of tracing how meaning, ideology, and institutional context shape strategic choice under constraint, a logic underpinning the constructivist–critical realist framework developed in Chapter 2.

1.3 Hezbollah in the Literature: Between Militia, Movement, and Proxy

The academic literature on Hezbollah spans multiple disciplines, from international relations and political sociology to security studies and Middle Eastern politics. Early foundational texts established the groundwork for understanding the organisation as a doctrinally and ideologically coherent actor. Saad-Ghorayeb (2002), in Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion, offered one of the first systematic examinations of Hezbollah's theological foundations and its mobilisation around jihad and martyrdom. Drawing on extensive interviews with members of the politburo and close readings of internal publications, Saad-Ghorayeb depicted Hezbollah as a movement deeply rooted in revolutionary Shi'a (or Shia) thought and committed to resistance. Subsequent scholarship has criticised this portrayal for underplaying the extent of the group's transnational entanglements, particularly its strategic coordination with Iran.

Palmer Harik (2004), in Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism, traced the movement's transformation from clandestine militia to recognised political actor, focusing on its electoral strategies and grassroots legitimacy. The work remains central for understanding Hezbollah's integration within Lebanon's sectarian system and its evolution beyond a purely militant identity, although critics argue that it underplays coercion and external sponsorship.

Norton (2014), in Hezbollah: A Short History, offers a balanced account of the movement's rise, attending to both its ties with Iran and its anchoring in Lebanese social life. Blanford's Warriors of God (2011) emphasises the group's early traditional combat training and field experience, while Hamzeh (2004) offers a more structural analysis of Hezbollah's governance mechanisms. Jaber (1997), drawing on initial and rare access to senior figures, provides detailed narrative accounts which, while journalistic, preserve immediacy and

valuable first-hand detail. These studies collectively contribute empirical depth but most remain primarily descriptive, leaving Hezbollah's strategic decision-making only partially theorised in its early phase.

At the other analytical extreme, scholars such as Levitt (2013) foreground Hezbollah's ties to Iran and its extra-Lebanese operations. Drawing on declassified intelligence and policy reports, Levitt portrays Hezbollah as an instrument of Iranian foreign policy involved, he argues, in activities ranging from 'international terrorism to illicit financing.' This perspective has strongly influenced Western policy discourse but has also been criticised for downplaying Hezbollah's domestic political agency and for relying on secondary rather than field-based sources. Israeli analysts such as Yaari (2025) and Zisser (2020) broadly reinforce this state-centric interpretation, grounding their analyses in strategic frameworks closely aligned with national security paradigms.

Early access based scholarship provides an important historical counterpoint to the proxy interpretation. Although published in 1997, Jaber's study draws on direct access to Hezbollah's senior leadership and organisational milieu during an earlier phase of the movement's development. Its analytical value lies partly in this historical proximity. It provides a contemporaneous baseline against which Hezbollah's subsequent ideological, political and organisational adaptation can be assessed. Without access to such earlier accounts, claims concerning adaptation would risk projecting the organisation's later institutional coherence retrospectively onto its formative period.

Jaber's account is therefore used critically and in conjunction with later scholarship, not as recent research or as a definitive organisational history. More recent scholarship has further challenged reductive proxy interpretations. Saouli (2019), for example, understands Hezbollah as an autonomous actor within a strategic alliance with Iran, structured by ideological affinity and shared strategic interests rather than a simple hierarchy of command.

The resulting scholarly landscape is diverse yet fragmented, reflecting both the richness and the limitations of existing academic access. Much of the literature relies on open-source material and interpretive analysis, producing valuable insights but often lacking granular understanding of Hezbollah's military and doctrinal structures. Some studies prioritise its external alliances or military capability, while others emphasise its domestic legitimacy and social embeddedness. Western policy analyses remain heavily shaped by the proxy paradigm, yet this lens alone cannot explain the organisation's evolution.

The conceptual diversity is important to map clearly, as later sections distinguish these strands more explicitly. The following subsection critically interrogates the proxy model and its conceptual limits. Building on these discussions, the thesis draws on first-hand testimony and confidential interviews, offering particular insight into how Hezbollah itself conceptualises autonomy and dependency in strategic decision-making.

1.3.1 Autonomy and Resistance: Alternative Readings

A growing strand of scholarship emphasises Hezbollah's rootedness in Lebanon's socio-political fabric, presenting it as a resistance movement shaped by local history and marginalisation rather than as a mere extension of Iranian policy. These readings highlight the organisation's capacity to combine external alliances with strategic independence and a distinctly Lebanese identity.

Saad-Ghorayeb draws on extensive interviews and primary sources to argue that Hezbollah's ideology and strategic conduct cannot be reduced to Iranian command. Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) interprets the group's adherence to *wilāyat al faqīh* as flexible rather than binding and locates Hezbollah's legitimacy primarily in its resistance to Israeli occupation and its social provision for marginalised Shi'a communities. Harik (2004) develops this perspective by tracing the organisation's integration into Lebanon's formal political system and its evolution from clandestine militia to political party with parliamentary and municipal representation, stressing a long-term project to shape the Lebanese state from within. Yet, as Kanaaneh (2023) and Deeb (2006) observe, these sympathetic readings can underplay Hezbollah's coercive dimensions, external dependencies, and the risks created by its regional entanglements. Norton (2014) adopts a similarly balanced stance, situating Hezbollah within Lebanon's social landscape and showing how its welfare institutions and political strategies respond to state weakness, although some argue he underestimates its growing military reach.

Other contributions refine this picture. Hamzeh (2004) analyses Hezbollah's internal governance, portraying it as ideologically consistent and institutionally structured, while Jaber (1997) offers valuable insights into its formative years in an account reviewed by senior leadership. Taken together, these studies frame Hezbollah as an ideologically driven and politically adaptive actor, deeply embedded in Lebanon's plural political order while maintaining an external alliance with Iran. This hybridity enables Hezbollah to balance local responsibilities with regional commitments, aligning with Tehran without forfeiting domestic legitimacy.

Hezbollah's relationship with Iran is therefore better understood as a convergence of historical grievances and shared strategic visions rather than a rigid chain of command. The concept of hybridity provides a useful framework for understanding Hezbollah's dual identity as both political actor and military force, a theme developed further in the next section. This hybridity is central to explaining how Hezbollah sustains legitimacy, strategic autonomy, and endurance under sustained pressure.

Accounts foregrounding autonomy and resistance therefore capture Hezbollah's domestic legitimacy and adaptive agency more accurately than principal–agent models. Analytically, they recast the Iran–Hezbollah nexus as conditional alignment rather than command compliance and stress that the doctrinal tie to wilāyat al-faqīh[2] is more nuanced than commonly portrayed. Methodologically, they justify the use of field interviews and Arabic-language sources to trace decision-making from within.

1.3.2 Hezbollah as a Hybrid Actor

The concept of hybridity has become central to the study of armed non-state actors, describing their capacity to operate simultaneously across military, political, social, and

[2] Wilāyat al-faqīh (Arabic: ولاية الفقيه, 'Guardianship of the Jurist') designates the doctrine in Twelver Shiʿi jurisprudence that grants qualified jurists (fuqahāʾ) authority to exercise certain aspects of governance during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam. Rooted in classical formulations of juristic deputyship (al-niyāba al-ʿāmma), the principle evolved over centuries from limited legal and communal oversight to, in its modern elaboration, the assertion that a just and learned jurist may assume comprehensive political authority on behalf of the Hidden Imam. Systematised by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Ḥukūmat-e Islāmī (1970/1979), it became the constitutional foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, yet remains interpreted variously across the Shiʿi world, as both a spiritual principle of moral guidance and, in some contexts, a theory of clerical sovereignty.

ideological domains while exploiting weak state structures and filling governance vacuums. These dynamics are most visible in fragmented states where authority is contested and state capacity limited.

Hezbollah is widely regarded as a paradigmatic hybrid actor. It has evolved from a revolutionary militia into a multifaceted organisation that commands a powerful armed wing, participates in parliament, provides extensive social services, and acts as a regional player aligned with Iran. This combination allows it to project influence across different arenas of power and sustain itself under external pressure. As Schroefl and Kaufman (2014) note, hybrid actors blur the line between conventional and irregular warfare, combining coercion with ideological narratives, political participation, and economic activity; Hezbollah's trajectory exemplifies this logic.

The literature on insurgent governance further illuminates this hybridity. Kalyvas (2012) shows how armed groups maintain civilian support by calibrating violence and governance. Hezbollah's selective use of force within its constituencies, typically against perceived internal threats, reflects this logic. Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly (2015) demonstrate how rebel organisations build parallel governance systems to consolidate legitimacy; Hezbollah's network of schools, hospitals, and charitable foundations provides a textbook case. Staniland (2014) underscores the role of organisational cohesion and alliance management in insurgent survival, evident in Hezbollah's capacity to maintain unity and negotiate alliances across Lebanon's sectarian landscape.

Recent studies, including Hage Ali (2025) and Khatib (2015), depict Hezbollah as Lebanon's dominant political actor, able to manipulate state institutions while retaining operational autonomy. Cambanis (2011) illustrates how its military deterrence depends on its social and welfare infrastructure, while Daher (2019) argues that its governing legitimacy now rests as much on welfare delivery as on resistance credentials. Cammett and Jones Luong (2014) link welfare provision to the political legitimacy of non-state actors, and Hoffman (2007) identifies Hezbollah as a prototype of the hybrid threat. Berti (2013) highlights how this dual status complicates Lebanon's sovereignty and monopoly on violence.

One of the most significant consequences of hybridity is Hezbollah's ability to exploit the weaknesses of the Lebanese state. Chronic governance deficits and institutional fragmentation have enabled it to embed itself within the state apparatus while presenting itself as an indispensable alternative. This dual posture has produced what this thesis terms embedded sovereignty, a condition in which a non-state actor exercises effective authority and provides governance within a defined territory without seeking formal statehood. By operating both inside and outside the state, Hezbollah shapes legislation and policy through alliances while retaining strategic control over its military activities.

This literature shows that hybridity is a central explanatory variable in Hezbollah's endurance. The fusion of coercive power, political participation, social legitimacy, and ideological mobilisation allows it to recalibrate strategy, outlast stronger adversaries, and preserve authority under pressure. Hybridity is therefore a deliberate and adaptive strategy that transforms structural weakness into political opportunity. By embedding itself within state institutions while operating beyond them, Hezbollah has secured a position that is resilient, flexible, and difficult to dislodge.

A broader conceptual question follows: how do non-state actors institutionalise authority and legitimacy without formal statehood? The concept of embedded sovereignty, developed later in this thesis, builds on the hybridity framework to address precisely this question, showing how Hezbollah's governance functions, coercive capacity, and ideological narratives converge to produce durable authority within a weak-state system.

1.3.3 Elite Selection and the Loyalty–Competence Trade-off in Decision-Making

Before examining Hezbollah's ideological formation, governance strategies, and regional engagements, it is essential to consider how political leaders structure their inner circles of authority. This foundational question, how elites balance loyalty and competence, offers a comparative lens through which Hezbollah's leadership model can be understood.
The extensive literature on this trade-off provides a basis for analysing Hezbollah's leadership structure and strategic evolution. Studies of elite selection show how decision-makers across systems prioritise loyalty, ideological fidelity, or technical competence, revealing when cohesion is valued over performance. Hezbollah's leadership model, centred on a small cadre whose authority derives from allegiance to the Secretary-General and shared religious commitments, sometimes to an exaggerated degree, reflects dynamics typical of highly centralised and security-conscious regimes. Incorporating this scholarship situates Hezbollah not as an anomaly but as a patterned outcome of enduring logics of political survival.

The central dilemma in elite formation, whether to prioritise competence or loyalty, varies across regimes and threat environments. Over recent decades, theoretical and empirical research has explored how decision-makers navigate this dilemma. Understanding the resulting trade-off is essential for interpreting Hezbollah's leadership, which represents an extreme case of loyalty-centred elite formation.

Centralisation and the Small Elite Core

In examining Hezbollah's elite composition, this subsection applies insights from regime theory to show how small, centralised leadership structures shape organisational survival under high-threat conditions. Hezbollah's decision-making architecture is defined by pronounced centralisation. Authority rests with the Secretary-General and a top echelon of fewer than eight senior commanders who collectively oversee strategic military direction and planning, while the Shura Council offers political coordination and general strategic plans. The small military coalition heightens the cost of incompetence or betrayal by any member, increasing the incentive to select for loyalty. As Egorov and Sonin (2011) predict, in a narrow elite structure, the loss or disloyalty of one actor has disproportionate consequences, making reliability paramount.

This pattern is reinforced by Hezbollah's security environment. As a non-state actor engaged in asymmetric conflict, the organisation faces simultaneous threats: external military pressure from Israel, regional rivalries, domestic political contestation, and international sanctions. Such persistent danger amplifies the loyalty bias described by Zakharov (2014) and Quinlivan (1999). When survival is continually at stake, the risks of internal unreliability outweigh the benefits of higher technical competence.

A distinctive feature of Hezbollah's leadership formation is the integration of religious fidelity into the definition of loyalty. Subordinates are expected to show personal allegiance

to the Secretary-General and doctrinal conformity with the organisation's ideological principles, notably *wilāyat al-faqīh* (the guardianship of the Islamic jurist), which links Hezbollah's authority to the Iranian Supreme Leader (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002; Hamzeh, 2004). This embeds religious legitimacy directly into the selection process, filtering candidates for ideological purity as well as political reliability.

Such screening parallels the patterns identified by Svolik (2012) and Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018) in personalist regimes, where ideological conformity underpins loyalty. It also echoes Baturo, Khokhlov and Tolstrup's (2024) finding that elites signal dependability through public displays of ideological commitment. In Hezbollah's case, religious credentials serve both as loyalty signals and as gatekeeping criteria, ensuring that those promoted are immersed in the movement's doctrinal project.

Taken together, these patterns illustrate how Hezbollah's elite structure aligns with broader theories of organisational survival, in which tight centralisation, loyalty screening, and ideological coherence reduce internal risk and support long-term endurance under external threat.

Information Control and Internal Discipline

The literature on information distortion in autocratic systems (Putkaradze, 2023; Chen and Hong, 2021) illuminates Hezbollah's tight control of decision-making. By restricting authority to a small, ideologically homogeneous group, the Secretary-General reduces risks of disinformation, manipulation, or factionalism. The trust generated by shared conviction and personal allegiance decreases the need for extensive monitoring and enables the secrecy and operational discipline vital to a clandestine organisation.

However, this configuration carries trade-offs. As Brown, Fariss and McMahon (2015) and Pilster and Böhmelt (2011) show, loyalty-centred systems can suffer performance deficits. For Hezbollah, these may manifest as bureaucratic inertia, slower decision-making, or reduced innovation. Nonetheless, the organisation accepts such costs in exchange for cohesion and security. This aligns with Reiter's (2020) coup-proofing dilemma, in which preserving internal unity is preferable to risking capable but potentially unreliable actors.

The preference for loyalty is also embedded in Hezbollah's strategic culture. Its historical trajectory, from its formation during the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon to its evolution into a regional actor in Syria and Iraq, has reinforced the primacy of internal unity and doctrinal consistency (Norton, 2014; Alagha, 2006). Hezbollah's legitimacy among its base rests on its image as disciplined and incorruptible. Any sign of corruption or disloyalty would undermine both its political credibility and deterrent effect.

Accordingly, Hezbollah promotes from within rather than recruiting external technocrats. Internal advancement sustains loyalty norms and preserves ideological continuity. Even when specialised expertise is required in media, finance, or cyber operations, external candidates are vetted for religious and political commitment before technical competence. This ensures that ideological alignment remains the ultimate qualification criterion.

Situating Hezbollah within the loyalty–competence framework underscores how it aligns with theoretical expectations. Like personalist dictatorships (Svolik, 2012; Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018), Hezbollah operates a highly centralised hierarchy in which loyalty

outweighs performance. Like regimes facing persistent coup risk (Quinlivan, 1999; Egorov and Sonin, 2011), it trades some operational efficiency for security. Like ideological single-party systems (Bueno de Mesquita *et al*., 2003), it embeds doctrinal screening into selection. Moreover, like coup-proofed militaries (Brown, Fariss and McMahon, 2015; Talmadge, 2015), it accepts loyalty dominance as the price of cohesion.

Hezbollah's model, however, diverges in two respects. First, its loyalty criteria extend beyond political allegiance to encompass religious identity, introducing a distinct theological dimension. Second, as a hybrid non-state actor, Hezbollah is unconstrained by institutional or electoral pressures that occasionally push states towards competence. This permits an unusually pure form of loyalty bias, producing a leadership circle that is ideologically uniform, personally loyal, and organisationally cohesive, even if not optimally efficient.

Hezbollah therefore represents a paradigmatic case of a loyalty-driven enclave, a tightly centralised leadership nucleus designed to maximise regime security, ideological consistency, and internal cohesion at the expense of bureaucratic flexibility. Its experience extends the insights of the loyalty–competence literature, demonstrating that these dynamics apply not only to states but also to non-state organisations operating under conditions of existential threat and doctrinal imperative.

The loyalty–competence trade-off is one of the most enduring dilemmas of political organisation, shaping decisions from imperial courts to modern bureaucracies. Hezbollah exemplifies how this logic functions under extreme conditions of threat, mobilisation, and secrecy. By prioritising loyalty, religious commitment, and ideological coherence over technical capacity, Hezbollah secures internal trust and leadership stability even amid sustained external shocks. Consequently, frameworks developed for state politics can be applied analytically to non-state movements. Hezbollah's endurance derives less from bureaucratic sophistication than from cohesion and shared belief, from a leadership model that prizes loyalty as both shield and cement.

This section therefore shows that the loyalty–competence trade-off, developed in state-centric literatures, applies directly to non-state actors under high threat. Conceptually, it offers a comparative lens through which to interpret Hezbollah's centralised yet cohesive leadership, tested in later chapters against operational outcomes. The model's limitation, that it does not directly measure battlefield efficiency losses, is addressed in later Chapters through process tracing and operational indicators.

1.3.4 From Resistance to Quasi-Army: Transnational Networks and Regional Projection

A further strand of scholarship situates Hezbollah within a broader transnational field. This perspective views the organisation as a Lebanese actor inside a multi-scalar network of armed movements, alliances, and deterrence architectures that extend beyond Lebanon's borders. This approach reframes Hezbollah as a regional actor whose strategic behaviour, capabilities, and identity are shaped as much by cross-border interactions as by domestic imperatives. While earlier literature focused on Hezbollah's emergence in response to Israeli occupation and its integration into Lebanon's sectarian system, more recent work emphasises its transformation into a transnational actor that both shapes and is shaped by a shifting regional order.

Scholars of proxy warfare and transnational insurgency have long debated Hezbollah's role within Iran's strategic ecosystem. Many contend that it operates as a central pillar of Iran's 'forward defence' doctrine, projecting deterrence across multiple theatres to offset asymmetries with Israel and the United States (Jones, 2019; Şimşek, 2025; Olson, 2016; Tabatabai and Esfandiary, 2018). The 2013 intervention in Syria, for instance, has been interpreted not only as a defensive manoeuvre to secure the corridor linking Tehran to the Levant but also as evidence of Hezbollah's growing expeditionary competence and ability to operate effectively beyond its home theatre (Phillips, 2016).

Armenak Tokmajyan (2014) challenges the widespread view that Hezbollah's Syria intervention was driven primarily by religious duty. He shows that sectarian and religious rhetoric was used mainly to mobilise domestically, not to dictate deployments. Drawing on empirical evidence, he argues that the underlying logic was political and geostrategic: Hezbollah concentrated forces along corridors linking Syria to Lebanon rather than at sites of purely symbolic religious value. This positioning reveals a rationale centred on logistics, regional power projection, and the preservation of strategic depth. Although Hezbollah often frames its intervention as protecting Shi'a communities or defending sacred sites, Tokmajyan contends that such justifications function as secondary narratives serving political ends.

Joseph Daher (2017), writing for the *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, analyses the domestic and regional repercussions of Hezbollah's intervention, focusing on its impact on Lebanese Shi'a communities, the organisation's legitimacy within Lebanon's plural society, and its relationship with Israel. He notes that while the intervention bolstered Hezbollah's military standing, it also generated significant political costs, including heightened sectarian tensions and reputational damage.

Hadi Wahab (2022) offers a critical perspective by framing Hezbollah's involvement as part of its evolution from domestic movement to regional armed non-state actor. He argues that the group's deployments institutionalised sectarian identity from the top down, embedding Hezbollah within the core security architecture of the Assad regime. As Wahab puts it, Hezbollah's operations in Syria represent 'a politicisation of sectarian identity through top-down dynamics', rather than grassroots mobilisation or religious duty.

Other scholars reject portrayals of Hezbollah as a simple proxy, arguing that its regional participation reflects strategic agency and independent decision-making (Saouli, 2019; Cambanis, 2011). Hezbollah's advisory and logistical support to Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces, its training of Yemen's Ansar Allah, and its coordination with Palestinian groups often occur on a partnership basis rather than through a strict command hierarchy. This negotiated alignment points to strategic convergence and mutual benefit, in which Hezbollah leverages Iranian support but retains discretion over timing, tactics, and scope. The organisation's cultivation of horizontal relationships with other armed non-state actors enhances its strategic depth while simultaneously reinforcing Iran's deterrent posture.

The literature on transnational militancy further illustrates this dimension. Byman (2019) shows how Hezbollah functions as both mentor and multiplier, exporting its organisational model, ideological framing, and tactical expertise to allied movements. This diffusion of knowledge extends its reach well beyond Lebanon, embedding it in a wider ecosystem of insurgent governance and resistance. The result is a form of strategic resilience that does not rely solely on domestic infrastructure; even if its local base were compromised, Hezbollah's alliances would continue to project influence regionally.

Wastnidge and Mabon (2023) explore how Hezbollah and fellow members of the Resistance Axis, such as Iran, Syria under Assad, and allied militias, help constitute an alternative normative order in the Middle East that challenges the fragile Westphalian paradigm. They argue that these actors deploy symbols of nomos (normative order), spatial claims, and discursive framing to oppose Western dominance and Israeli occupation. Hezbollah's transnational engagements therefore form part of a wider project of reordering the region's ideological and spatial logics.

This outward reach reciprocally affects domestic legitimacy. By linking Lebanese sovereignty to broader regional struggles, from the Palestinian question to resistance against United States occupation in Iraq, Hezbollah presents its actions as part of a larger anti-imperialist project that opposes Israel's occupation. This dual register, national and transnational, reinforces domestic legitimacy while mobilising solidarity beyond the Shi'a constituency. However, it also creates risks of overstretch and backlash when regional priorities diverge from local concerns. The Syrian intervention, for instance, initially damaged Hezbollah's image domestically and regionally as a purely Lebanese resistance force and complicated its standing among Sunni audiences (Phillips, 2016; Salloukh, 2016).

This scholarship shows how Hezbollah's transnational engagements challenge conventional understandings of non-state agency. The organisation increasingly behaves less like a sub-state militia and more like a quasi-sovereign actor that forges alliances, shapes regional security, and influences conflicts beyond Lebanon's borders (Berti, 2013) and driving it towards more centralised body and away from a de-centralised resistance. This evolution broadens the analytical vocabulary: Hezbollah should be understood not only as a 'hybrid actor' operating inside and outside the state but also as a 'networked actor' whose authority and influence are constituted through relations with other armed groups, state patrons, and ideological movements.

These dynamics have generated new conceptual tools for understanding Hezbollah's regional role. One is the notion of a 'virtual deterrence alliance', capturing how Hezbollah and other members of the Resistance Axis coordinate symbolically and operationally to produce cumulative deterrent effects even without formal command structures. Another is 'performative solidarity under constraint', describing how Hezbollah deploys symbolic acts of support, calibrated escalation, and strategic ambiguity to balance regional commitments with domestic vulnerabilities, sustaining deterrence without inviting uncontrollable escalation.

This transnational turn in Hezbollah studies reveals that the organisation's endurance derives not only from domestic embeddedness or hybrid structure but also from its capacity to project influence beyond Lebanon and entrench itself within regional and ideological networks. These alliances amplify deterrent power, complicate adversaries' strategic calculations, and embed Hezbollah's struggle within a broader geopolitical narrative. Understanding this dimension is essential to explaining Hezbollah's transformation into a strategic actor operating simultaneously within the Lebanese state, across regional alliances, and in a global field of contestation. This outward-facing dimension also provides crucial context for section 1.5, which examines how these regional entanglements are communicated, legitimised, and contested in the information domain.

1.3.5 Ideology in Insurgency: Malleability, Mobilisation, and Adaptation

This section demonstrates that ideology in insurgencies functions not as static rhetoric but as a strategic, malleable resource that binds cadres, legitimises risk and sacrifice, and enables adaptation, challenging grievance–opportunity–greed accounts that marginalise doctrinal change.

Ted Robert Gurr (1970) explains armed mobilisation as a response to grievances rooted in marginalisation and repression. Fearon and Laitin (2003) shift attention to opportunity structures, such as state weakness, difficult terrain, and large populations, while downplaying ideology. Political economy approaches by Collier (1999), Berdal and Keen (1997), and Keen (1998) emphasise resource opportunities and the 'economy of violence'. These models correlate with conflict onset and duration but tend to treat ideology as static rather than dynamic.

By contrast, Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood (2014) argue that ideology is both instrumental, prescribing institutions and strategies for collective action, and normative, because leaders and followers genuinely commit to doctrinal claims. James C. Scott (1979) distinguishes between elite doctrinaires and mass actors but still places ideology at the centre of insurgent projects. Sanín and Giustozzi (2010) show that even religious insurgencies blend absolutist rhetoric with pragmatic flexibility. Frisch (2012) similarly concludes that adaptability determines effectiveness.

Historical cases illustrate the capacity of armed organisations and their leaders to move between clandestine violence and institutional politics. In Mandatory Palestine, the Irgun and Lehi were led respectively by Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir. Both men were defined as terrorists and wanted by the British authorities, while their organisations were treated as terrorist organisations. Both subsequently became prime ministers of Israel. Their trajectories demonstrate that participation in political institutions can follow clandestine violence, although this transition does not necessarily entail the abandonment of earlier ideological commitments (Hoffman, 2006; English, 2016). The Taliban's movement from insurgency to government likewise involved adjustments in its ideological presentation and administrative practices (Abbas, 2023).

Yet the broader trajectory remains paradoxical. A military campaign shaped by culturalised representations of Islam removed the Taliban from power in 2001 (Mamdani, 2004), but failed to achieve its lasting organisational or ideological defeat (Malkasian, 2021). Following the withdrawal of United States forces twenty years later, the Taliban returned to government with many of its fundamental ideological commitments intact, despite changes in its leadership, political presentation and administrative experience (Abbas, 2023). Syria's trajectory under President Ahmad al Sharaa offers a more recent example of a former insurgent ISIS and later al-Qaeda leader seeking political legitimacy through institutional authority.

These cases demonstrate that ideology is malleable and can be strategically redeployed (Heller, 1995; Keen, 1998; Rapoport, 2004; Bloom, 2005; Giustozzi, 2019; English, 2016; Juergensmeyer, 2017). For comparative assessment, English (2016) shows how organisations from Irgun and Lehi to the IRA and ETA reframed doctrine to transform coercion into political leverage, challenging his argument that terrorism can, in some cases, be rewarding and reach power.

Taken together, this discussion shows that grievance, opportunity, and greed literatures understate the flexibility of ideology and its importance in sustaining mobilisation under pressure. Analytically, insurgent leaders reinterpret doctrine to align tactics with legitimacy. Methodologically, comparative cases and primary interviews trace how doctrine adapts over time.

If ideology is strategically malleable, then efforts to defeat insurgent organisations by targeting fixed doctrinal commitments or single domains of activity are self-limiting. Actors adapt by reframing doctrine to sustain mobilisation, substituting across domains, military, welfare, political, and narrative, and recoding losses as sacrifice. In Hezbollah's case, doctrinal flexibility interacts with organisational embeddedness to absorb shocks, conserve consent, and reconstitute capabilities even under sustained external pressure.

1.3.6 Hezbollah's Evolution: Lebanonisation, Resistance, and Alignment with Iran

Harik and Hamzeh (2004) argue that Hezbollah's participation in post-Taif politics and its expansion of welfare services marked a deliberate process of 'Lebanonisation', postponing the movement's theocratic ambitions in favour of domestic legitimacy. Norton (2014) likewise situates Hezbollah within Lebanon's plural political system, showing how it balances resistance with governance and community representation. Khatib (2011) reads the 1985 *Open Letter* and 2009 manifesto as evidence of enduring regional ambitions anchored in *wilāyat al-faqīh*, with rhetorical adjustments for domestic appeal. Høigilt (2007) notes the tension between Hezbollah's participation in Lebanese institutions and the continuing centrality of Palestine to its legitimacy.

On external alignment, De Vore and Stähli (2015) document how Iranian funding, training, and ideological guidance expanded Hezbollah's strategic capacity and helped it absorb battlefield losses. Deeb (1988) traces the formative influence of revolutionary ideology and the organisational model introduced by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. Saouli (2011) argues that Hezbollah's leadership has exercised doctrinal self-restraint, adapting objectives and sequencing priorities to safeguard legitimacy, a pattern of conditional rather than mechanical alignment.

Saouli (2019) also contends that scholarship has been constrained by conceptual binaries separating ideology from politics and politics from violence, obscuring the principal force driving Hezbollah's evolution. For him, the persistent preparation for, and engagement in, war against Israel constitutes the movement's organising principle. He suggests that Hezbollah's political and ideological spheres are subsumed under armed resistance, rendering distinctions between 'political actor' and 'militant organisation' analytically redundant.

While this reading captures one dimension of resilience, it risks overstating the explanatory power of warfare and underestimating the strategic calculus underpinning survival. Resistance and armed capability have been central to Hezbollah's legitimacy and deterrence posture, yet they function as instruments within a broader repertoire of survival strategies. Foundational texts such as the 1985 *Open Letter* and 2009 *Manifesto* situate resistance within a wider political project: claiming to defend Lebanese sovereignty, consolidating communal legitimacy, deterring adversaries, and constructing a credible political presence within state institutions (Alagha, 2011; Qassem, 2002). The persistence of armed struggle cannot fully explain endurance without considering its interaction with political, social, and ideological mechanisms.

The relationship between ideology and political practice, rather than collapsing into one as Saouli suggests, is more accurately understood as a deliberate organisational strategy. Hezbollah's careful modulation of its ideological discourse, including the omission of explicit references such as *wilāyat al-faqīh* in 2009, reflects an effort to broaden its coalition base, mitigate sectarian sensitivities, and strengthen institutional integration (Norton, 2014). This strategic compartmentalisation does not signify abandonment of ideology but adaptation to context, preserving core principles while recognising that the conditions for an Islamic state are absent in Lebanon.

Politics and violence are closely intertwined in Hezbollah's repertoire, but their interaction, rather than conflation, explains long-term resilience. Political participation since 1992 has enabled access to state resources, influence over policymaking, and leverage on the national security agenda, all reinforcing its military posture. At the same time, credible armed capacity protects these political gains. It is this interplay between ideological commitment, political engagement, social legitimacy, and military capability that accounts for Hezbollah's ability to withstand sustained pressure and avoid defeat. By overemphasising war-making alone, Saouli's approach overlooks the multidimensional logic of resilience, a gap this thesis addresses by analysing Hezbollah as a strategically adaptive actor operating across interlinked domains of power.

Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian conflict added a further layer of complexity to interpretations of its ideological evolution. Critics portrayed its decision to back the Assad ruling as inconsistent with its narrative of local resistance to oppression and foreign domination. From this perspective, its involvement and silence on state violence suggested that Lebanonisation was rhetorical, confirming close alignment with Iran and to less extend Syria's Alawite leadership (Saouli, 2019). Some, such as Sadiki (2016), argued that resistance movements lose credibility when they refuse to support popular uprisings against authoritarian rule.

However, this interpretation underestimates the strategic considerations behind Hezbollah's decisions in Syria. As Saad-Ghorayeb shows, the organisation justified its involvement within the broader '*Axis of Resistance*', framing it as a defensive measure to preserve strategic depth. Operationally, its choices were guided by the need to safeguard logistical networks, maintain deterrence, and reinforce the alliance structure upon which its security and political leverage depend.

Taken together, this scholarship reveals a consistent pattern: Hezbollah adapts pragmatically within a stable ideological framework. Its alliance with Iran is genuine yet shaped by Lebanese coalition politics and domestic legitimacy. Resistance narratives remain central but are redeployed strategically to justify restraint or escalation when required. This provides the context for the thesis concepts of embedded sovereignty, the fusion of welfare provision, political leverage, and coercive capacity within a weak-state environment, and deterrence by narrative, the use of symbolic language and strategic messaging to shape adversary expectations and sustain popular consent.

This section shows that arguments stressing either complete Lebanonisation or unchanging revolutionary rigidity fail to capture Hezbollah's conditional alignment and legitimacy-centred pragmatism. Analytically, the movement is best understood as a hybrid actor whose ideology functions as both resource and constraint, shaping strategic choices while adapting to political realities. Methodologically, this supports the use of post-2023 anonymised

interviews and Arabic sources to examine the balance between autonomy and external influence.

Synthesis

The literature points to conditional alignment with Iran, hybrid governance rooted in Lebanon's political economy, loyalty-centred leadership prioritising cohesion under threat, and malleable ideology redeployed to conserve mobilisation and legitimise both restraint and escalation. Analytically, this motivates the thesis's core lenses: embedded sovereignty, how welfare, political leverage, and coercive capacity co-produce authority, and deterrence by narrative, how symbols and scripts shape adversary expectations and insulate constituencies, alongside deterrence by resilience. The next section operationalises embedded sovereignty through bureaucratic intimacy, interoperable infrastructures, and legal–political shielding inside the Lebanese state.

1.4 Institutional Alignment and Embedded Sovereignty

Hezbollah's hybridity is not only a description of multiple roles; it is also a strategy of institutional alignment that produces what this thesis terms embedded sovereignty. In weak or fragmented states, armed movements can normalise their presence by entering the institutions that are meant to constrain them, while simultaneously substituting for absent state functions through welfare, dispute resolution, and reconstruction (Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly, 2015; Staniland, 2014). The result is neither secession nor takeover but co-located authority: the movement operates inside the state, around the state, and, where the state is powerless, instead of it.

This thesis proposes embedded sovereignty as a theoretical contribution: a form of authority produced through institutional penetration, welfare provision, and coercive capacity that coexist rather than compete. Comparative work on rebel governance has long shown that provision, such as schools, clinics, cash assistance, and reconstruction, generates legitimacy that coercion cannot secure alone (Mampilly, 2015; Huang, 2016). In Lebanon, this logic is magnified by chronic fiscal crises, patronage cycles, and uneven service delivery. Hezbollah's welfare infrastructure does more than alleviate scarcity; it cements reciprocal obligations between movement and constituency, producing loyalty that persists even when strategy is contested (Cammett, 2014).

In practice, this embeddedness means three things. First, bureaucratic intimacy. Presence inside ministries, municipal councils, and state companies gives access to information, budgets, and decision points. This proximity allows Hezbollah to influence policy outcomes rather than merely react to them. Unlike episodic coalition bargaining, bureaucratic intimacy generates a continuous veto capacity against initiatives that could threaten the movement's autonomy while enabling targeted delivery to constituencies that underpin its legitimacy (Leenders, 2012).

Second, parallel infrastructures interoperable with the state. Hospitals, schools, reconstruction bodies, and charitable networks dovetail with official frameworks when advantageous, such as through permits, public funds, or regulatory cover, and operate autonomously when necessary for speed, secrecy, or responsiveness (Harb and Leenders, 2005; Flanigan and Abdel-Samad, 2009). This dual-track governance multiplies coercive power: any attack on Hezbollah would also degrade services on which civilians depend. In Lebanon's political

economy of scarcity, that coupling of welfare and deterrence is decisive. Nilsson (2020) analyses Hezbollah as a holistic actor in which social services, political participation, and armed resistance are interlinked components of *muqawama* (resistance).

Third, legal–political shielding of the armed wing. Participation in cabinets and parliament does not demilitarise Hezbollah; it provides institutional shields and procedural leverage. Legislative presence can blunt sanctions domestically, shape security-sector priorities, and manage relations with the judiciary and army. It also creates symbolic cover: the movement can frame armed preparedness as a national safeguard rather than a sectarian asset, especially while border violations and unresolved territorial disputes persist.

This is neither a conventional monopoly of violence nor open dual power. It is a hybrid sovereignty in which the state's legal shell and the movement's social–military substance are interlocked. Deterrence and legitimacy converge: the same structures that care for communities, such as salary support during currency collapse, health services in neglected districts, life compensation for the martyr's families and rapid post-strike reconstruction, also anchor the armed wing in a moral economy of protection and endurance (De Vore and Stähli, 2015). Rather than existing in tension, social provision and coercive capacity become mutually constitutive.

The literature has often treated politics, welfare, and security separately, yet in Hezbollah's case they co-produce authority. The movement's armed posture is tolerable to its base because it is embedded in a visible economy of care; its political authority is durable because it is underwritten by coercive credibility; and its welfare legitimacy endures because organisational depth minimises the risk of abandonment. This braided structure makes simple disarmament demands analytically thin, as they target the weapon while ignoring the ecology that sustains it (Berti, 2013).

Finally, embedded sovereignty explains why international pressure often recycles rather than resolves Lebanon's governance problems. External actors can freeze funds or press for demilitarisation, but unless the state can replace what Hezbollah provides, including security in exposed border areas and complete sovereignty, coercion risks deepening the dependencies it seeks to break (Haddad, 2020). Hezbollah's alignment with institutions is not transitional but a governance technology that structures incentives, buffers shocks, and entrenches endurance. This dynamic has direct implications for international policy: disarmament or sanctions strategies that target Hezbollah's weapons in isolation fail to account for the structural entrenchment of its governance functions within Lebanese society.

1.5 Political Tensions and Contestation

While Hezbollah's hybrid character has enabled it to consolidate power and embed itself within both state and society, this dual identity has also generated enduring political tensions internally within Lebanon and externally among regional and international actors. Central to these tensions is Hezbollah's retention of an independent military force alongside its formal role in the Lebanese state. For critics, this represents a fundamental challenge to sovereignty, legality, and national unity. Yet critics rarely specify an alternative security arrangement capable of addressing Lebanon's exposure to Israeli military pressure.

Domestically, Hezbollah's opponents, particularly those associated with the 14 March Alliance (Kayssi, 2025) and prominent Sunni, Druze, and right-wing Christian factions, have

rejected the right to bear arms outside state authority (El Kari, 2024; Young, 2024; Bel Moubasher, 2020; Wenger, 1990). They contend, however, that Hezbollah's heavily armed wing undermines the (ill-equipped) army and entrenches a parallel security structure unaccountable to democratic institutions (Hamzeh, 2004). This dynamic has fuelled political polarisation during crises such as the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri, the 2006 war with Israel, and the 2008 clashes in Beirut. In each case, Hezbollah's simultaneous role as government participant and armed actor provoked accusations of coercion and extra-legal dominance.

Hezbollah's military capabilities, linked to confronting Israel's occupation, deterring infiltration, and safeguarding its units, have also attracted international pressure. Several Western and Gulf states have proscribed the group in part or in full. In 2013, the European Union designated Hezbollah's military wing as a terrorist entity, while the United States, Canada, and several Arab states proscribed the movement entirely (Norton, 2014).

Despite these designations, Lebanon's fragmented political system has prevented direct isolation. Most parties maintain competing alliances with domestic and external actors, reflecting the country's sectarian balance of power. Hezbollah's continued participation in cabinets and its alliances with the Shi'a Amal and, at times, the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, allow it to remain pivotal in policymaking.

Hezbollah has consistently defended its armed status as a necessity for national defence and as the only force capable of confronting Israel's occupation, its repeated violations of sovereignty, and the army's limited capacity. The organisation frames its military wing as a corrective to state weakness and as a legal and moral extension of Lebanon's right to resist.

Internationally, however, this narrative is less persuasive. Hezbollah's prolonged military involvement in Syria and Iraq, its role in countering al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State, and its links with Yemen's Ansar Allah have reinforced perceptions of the group as a destabilising regional actor aligned with Iran. Foremost, for many Western and regional governments, Hezbollah represents not merely a Lebanese faction but a strategic threat to Israel's authority and to United States influence and military presence in the Middle East, reflecting wider anxieties regarding the erosion of Western influence and the assertiveness of Iran and its allies (Wastnidge and Mabon, 2023).

These tensions translate into governance challenges inside Lebanon: cabinet deadlocks, sectarian polarisation, and conditionalities attached to international aid. Donors and partners frequently cite Hezbollah's role as a reason to withhold investment, exacerbating economic fragility, conditions that paradoxically sustain Hezbollah's relevance. These tensions are not only political but strategic, shaping Hezbollah's calculus of confrontation and explaining why, since 2006, it has generally avoided full-scale war despite provocations, preferring calibrated deterrence that preserves domestic legitimacy.

Understanding these tensions is essential for assessing Hezbollah's position within the Lebanese state. They reveal both the limits and the durability of the hybrid model: the group's capacity to operate across military, political, and social spheres is its greatest strength yet also the root of persistent controversy. Moving beyond existing literature, this thesis examines how such tensions inform Hezbollah's strategies for survival in a context where adversaries seek to end its role without offering credible alternatives for Lebanon's defence.

1.6 Media, Narrative, and Discursive Power

Hezbollah's media strategy forms a central pillar of its organisational architecture, serving not only as a tool of communication but also as an instrument of power. In contemporary asymmetric warfare, discursive capacity has become as vital as military force. By shaping interpretation, defining legitimacy, and framing the meaning of conflict, Hezbollah's media operations enable it to contest adversarial narratives, reinforce domestic consent, and situate its struggle within a broader historical and ideological framework.

The origins of this strategy lie in the establishment of Hezbollah's Military Media Unit in the 1980s, tasked with documenting and framing the organisation's armed struggle against Israel's 18-year occupation of southern Lebanon (1982-2000). Through carefully curated footage of ambushes, martyrdom videos, and commemorative productions, Hezbollah constructed a narrative of righteous resistance and communal defence, embedding the ethos of sacrifice and steadfastness into public memory. The unit's work transformed military acts into political messages and normalised the idea of armed resistance as a legitimate response to occupation.

This communicative strategy deepened with the launch of Al-Manar TV in 1991, which became the organisation's flagship broadcaster and ideological amplifier. As Khatib (2013) and Harb (2015) note, Al-Manar fused religious, political, and cultural programming into a coherent narrative that framed Israel and the United States as aggressors and Hezbollah as both defender and avenger. Khatib (2013) argues that this dual portrayal cultivated emotional identification among its audience and bolstered Hezbollah's claim to moral authority. By embedding resistance into everyday discourse, Al-Manar helped transform Hezbollah's image from insurgent militia to national political actor, highlighting Israel's vulnerability.

The media architecture expanded with Al-Mayadeen in 2012, which positioned itself – at least trying - as a counterweight to Western and Gulf Arab outlets such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. As Lynch (2013) observes, its pan-Arab reach provided a platform for alternative framings of the Syrian war, regional interventions, and Western policy. The creation of *The Cradle*, an English-language digital platform, further extended Hezbollah's communicative reach into global discourse, producing investigative content aligned with a resistance-oriented worldview and contesting dominant Anglo-American narratives. These adaptations illustrate Hezbollah's recognition that narrative must evolve alongside shifting informational environments.

Scholars have highlighted the pedagogical and strategic dimensions of this media system. Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) emphasises its role in transmitting religious and ideological values that inoculate Hezbollah's constituency against rival narratives, while Louër (2012) places it within a broader Shiʿa political-identity project aimed at normalising Shi'a political agency in a region historically shaped by Sunni state power and Western narratives. The result is not merely a media apparatus but a communicative order that converts symbolic capital into strategic leverage.

This strategic function is visible in how Hezbollah weaves battlefield imagery, cultural production, and political discourse into a coherent story of legitimacy. The group portrays itself as simultaneously militarily capable and morally righteous: a defender of sovereignty, a protector of the marginalised, and a continuation of historical resistance against occupation. Persistent Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty, including the failure to implement

United Nations Security Council Resolution 425 (1978) and the incomplete withdrawal demanded by UNSCR 1701 (2006), provide a narrative anchor for this framing (Berti, 2013). Such grievances reinforce Hezbollah's message that armed struggle is framed as an obligation rather than a choice, and that its mission transcends local politics.

Where earlier scholarship often conflated narrative with ideology, more recent work recognises its instrumental function in conflict. Hezbollah's media strategy does more than articulate grievances or mobilise identity; it actively shapes the strategic environment. It signals resolve to adversaries, defines thresholds for escalation, and sustains domestic resilience in the face of loss or pressure. It is precisely this dual role, as both a legitimising discourse and a strategic tool, that allows Hezbollah to wage a battle for perception alongside the physical battlefield.

Taken together, Hezbollah's media operations reveal that discursive power is not ancillary to its hybrid identity but central to it. Through platforms such as Al-Manar, Al-Mayadeen, *The Cradle*, and its Military Media Unit, Hezbollah has built a sophisticated communication apparatus that legitimises armed resistance, consolidates domestic support, and challenges dominant narratives that frame it primarily through terrorism. This architecture forms the basis for what the following section terms deterrence by narrative, the use of stories, symbols, and strategic communication.

1.6.1 Deterrence by Narrative

Hezbollah's media system does more than disseminate information; it is an active tool of strategic influence. This thesis conceptualises deterrence by narrative as the deliberate use of stories, symbols, and ritualised communication to shape adversaries' calculations, frame the political meaning of costs, and stabilise expectations among diverse audiences. Building on deterrence theory in asymmetric conflict (Sobelman, 2016; George and Smoke, 1974) and scholarship on Hezbollah's narrative power (Harb, 2015; Harb and Leenders, 2005), this concept extends classical understandings by demonstrating that deterrence is not solely a product of material capability. Narratives themselves, through repetition, framing, and symbolic action, can condition how power is perceived, how escalation is interpreted, and how endurance is measured.

This thesis introduces deterrence by narrative as an analytical category for understanding how non-state actors wield communicative power as a strategic asset. In Hezbollah's case, narratives function not as post-hoc justification for military behaviour but as part of the deterrent apparatus itself, signalling intentions, thresholds, and red lines in ways that shape adversary expectations and sustain domestic legitimacy (Alagha, 2011; Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002).

Three mechanisms illustrate how this operates. First, credibility through consistency. When narratives of protection, steadfastness, and calibrated response are repeated over decades and consistently matched by behaviour, they become predictive cues that adversaries rely on to anticipate Hezbollah's actions. Second, moral asymmetry. By embedding material losses within a language of sacrifice, dignity, and historical continuity, Hezbollah transforms tactical setbacks into strategic narratives of perseverance. Third, constituency insulation. Narrative saturates the domestic information space with meanings that pre-empt adversarial framings of events. Deterrence by narrative thus operates on two fronts: outwardly, by

shaping how enemies perceive costs and risks, and inwardly, by sustaining the societal resilience on which prolonged conflict depends.

1.6.2 The Semiotics of Restraint

A crucial dimension of deterrence by narrative is the communication of restraint, a strategic choice often misread as weakness but deliberately framed as discipline, proportionality, and guardianship. Hezbollah deploys a semiotic language to communicate its thresholds and intentions. Visual tropes, such as releasing limited footage of operations, convey that greater capacity exists than is shown. Lexical cues, including measured threats tied to specific conditions, delineate red lines without unnecessary provocation. Even the timing of commemorations or public statements is choreographed to reinforce narratives of deliberate, rule-bound conduct rather than impulsive aggression.

This performative signalling constructs the politics of enough, the idea that imposing sufficient damage to create costs, without triggering uncontrollable escalation, constitutes a strategic success. Domestically, restraint is framed as a protective act that preserves lives, livelihoods, and community resilience. Externally, it is presented as conditional and reversible, a warning that thresholds exist and will be crossed if deterrence fails. By transforming restraint into a communicative act, Hezbollah converts what might otherwise appear as strategic limitation into a demonstration of control, patience, build up of capabilities and credible threat. It signals to adversaries that escalation remains a choice, one that Hezbollah reserves, manages, and exercises on its own terms.

1.6.3 Narrative Vulnerabilities: 2024 as an Information Shock

Through a combination of cyber intrusions, hardware compromise, and pre-emptive strikes on broadcast assets, Israeli and allied operations severely degraded Hezbollah's ability to control the informational tempo of the war. Into this vacuum, adversaries' narratives of attrition, infiltration, and command paralysis quickly gained traction in international and regional media. The movement's traditional storyline of disciplined resistance and calibrated strength was, albeit temporarily, overshadowed by depictions of vulnerability and disarray.

This episode exposes a critical but under-theorised dimension of deterrence by narrative, its susceptibility to disruption. Narrative dominance is not guaranteed; it can be eroded by technological interference, strategic timing, and coordinated information operations. Kinetic pressure compounds this vulnerability. Targeted assassinations of key figures, for instance, disrupted and delay decision-making chains, creating message delays and moments of leadership silence that further undermined narrative coherence.

The 2024 case demonstrates that narrative, like material power, constitutes contested terrain, one that adversaries actively seek to search and identify the weaknesses, penetrate and degrade. It also underscores that discursive power depends not only on the content of messaging but also on the capacity to deliver it with speed, consistency, and authority. When those delivery mechanisms falter, even well-established narratives can be displaced, reinterpreted and shaked.

For Hezbollah, the incident served as a stress test of its information doctrine and a catalyst for adaptation. The group responded by decentralising elements of its media apparatus, strengthening cyber-defence protocols and communication, and experimenting with more

flexible modes of message dissemination, changes that subsequent chapters explore in detail. These adaptations highlight a broader theoretical point: deterrence by narrative is not a static capability but an evolving practice that must constantly adjust to technological change and adversarial innovation.

1.6.4 Synthesis: Deterrence by Narrative as Strategic Practice

Deterrence by narrative operates on multiple levels simultaneously. It shapes adversarial calculations, reframes material losses as moral victories, and fortifies domestic consent by embedding endurance within collective identity. The semiotics of restraint extends this logic, showing how even the absence of action can be narratively weaponised to manage escalation and preserve strategic flexibility. At the same time, the vulnerabilities exposed in 2024 demonstrate that narrative dominance is neither inevitable nor immune to disruption. It depends on technological resilience, organisational agility, and the capacity to contest meaning under pressure.

Understanding Hezbollah's discursive power in these terms is critical to explaining its longevity. Narrative does not merely follow strategy, it is strategy, shaping the environment in which military and political decisions are made. This recognition sets the stage for the next section, which examines how Hezbollah complements narrative power with institutional learning, technological innovation, and adaptive command structures to maintain its relevance and resilience within a changing strategic landscape.

1.7 Strategic Adaptation and the Sociology of War

Hezbollah's trajectory from a clandestine militia to a sophisticated hybrid actor exemplifies the strategic evolution of non-state armed groups operating under conditions of protracted conflict. Building on the discussion of hybridity and institutional alignment, this section focuses on how Hezbollah has developed the capacity to institutionalise learning, professionalise its military wing, and integrate technological and sociopolitical innovations. What emerges is an organisation that not only adapts tactically but also embeds adaptation within its identity, enabling it to endure despite sustained pressures.

a – Organisational Learning and Military Adaptation

Theories of military adaptation shed light on Hezbollah's resilience. Wood (2003) highlights how collective identity, social embeddedness, and internal legitimacy sustain insurgent mobilisation. As noted earlier in relation to Hezbollah's local legitimacy, these factors have underpinned cohesion in the absence of state protection. Biddle (2006) emphasises the importance of doctrinal innovation and operational proficiency. Marcus (2018), in his detailed study of Israel's long war with Hezbollah, portrays the organisation as a 'learning actor' with decentralised command structures, after-action reviews, and doctrinal experimentation. These attributes have enabled Hezbollah to adapt iteratively to Israeli campaigns, combining social embeddedness with tactical flexibility.

b – Training and Professionalisation

Adaptation has progressed alongside professionalisation. Drawing on Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) doctrines, Hezbollah has invested heavily in structured military training. Fighters rotate through facilities in Lebanon, Syria, and Iran, where they acquire

skills in urban warfare, anti-tank tactics, sniping, and intelligence gathering (Bunzel, 2015). The formation of elite Special Forces units such as the Radwan Force, named after the assassinated vice head of the jihadi Council, the highest military position in Hezbolah after the secretary general, Imad Mughniyeh (Bergman, 2018), marks a decisive shift. With age limits and service rotations designed to maintain performance standards, this unit exemplifies Hezbollah's evolution from a defensive guerrilla force to a formation capable of offensive deterrence and high-risk operations.

c – Technological Integration

Hezbollah has also demonstrated a readiness to integrate modern technologies into its doctrine. The use of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) for attacks, reconnaissance, secure communications networks to avoid Israeli interception, and adaptations of precision munitions highlight a sophisticated technological culture (Arjona *et al*., 2015). These developments echo broader theories of insurgent innovation introduced in section 3.2.2 but are here grounded in practical applications that aim to narrow asymmetry with technologically superior adversaries.

d – Military Lessons from the Syrian Conflict

As with other regional actors, the Syrian war became Hezbollah's proving ground. The scale of the conflict, around twenty times larger than Hezbollah's usual theatre in southern Lebanon, forced the organisation into new modes of operation, including coalition warfare alongside regular armies and irregular militias. Prolonged sieges, shifting alliances, and urban combat exposed Hezbollah to scenarios far beyond its traditional resistance role (Phillips, 2016). These experiences deepened its operational repertoire, granting experience in large-scale logistics, advanced weapons systems, and strategic urban warfare.

e – Institutionalisation of Experience

Unlike many insurgent groups, Hezbollah has developed mechanisms to institutionalise lessons. After-action reviews, doctrinal revisions, and structured debriefings are incorporated into training curricula and disseminated across command chains. This mirrors practices usually associated with state militaries, signifying Hezbollah's ambition to operate simultaneously as a decentralised resistance network and a centralised military institution.

f – Sociopolitical Adaptation and Integration

Hezbollah's adaptive strength rests not only on the battlefield but also in its integration within Lebanese society. Its welfare and governance structures have long reinforced its domestic legitimacy. Saouli (2019) argues that this dual identity, as military actor and sociopolitical institution, constitutes Hezbollah's unique resilience. By embedding adaptation within both military learning and social provision, Hezbollah ensures that its constituency perceives its struggle not as adventurism but as protection and continuity. This social contract cushions external shocks and provides a stable reservoir of legitimacy.

This relationship between protection and provision was already articulated before the Israeli withdrawal. A Unit Commander in South Lebanon explained: "In the south we are stronger than the quasi-absent state. Villagers look to us, not to the central government in Beirut, for protection. If the army cannot defend them, they will always come to us. For every rocket we

fire, we open a clinic; for every funeral, we fund a scholarship. People judge us not by speeches but by who stands with them when shells fall. Hezbollah is building a society in which the Shia no longer feel second class to others in Lebanon" (Appendix C, Entry 10, Unit Commander, South Lebanon, May 1999). This testimony provides early empirical evidence of embedded sovereignty: military protection, welfare provision and communal dignity were being presented as mutually reinforcing sources of authority rather than separate organisational activities.

Taken together, these dimensions of adaptation reveal an organisation that not only learns but institutionalises learning, embedding it in structures, doctrines, and social contracts. This capacity to evolve under pressure is central to Hezbollah's long-term durability and informs the broader conceptualisation of hybrid actors developed in this thesis.

g – Command, Control, and the Architecture of Organisational Learning

Strategic adaptation involves not only what organisations learn but also how they learn. In Hezbollah's case, the structure of command and control, particularly the interaction between the Secretary General, the Shura councils, and the Jihadi Council, is significant for three main reasons that inform the literature.

First, there is a combination of centralised direction and decentralised execution. Hezbollah couples firm doctrinal authority at the top with considerable tactical autonomy on the ground. This balance reduces coordination costs at the leadership level, ensuring a consistent message and clear strategic thresholds while allowing local commanders the flexibility to adapt to terrain-specific conditions and exploit opportunities swiftly. Organisationally, this represents a blend of mission command and political centralism: strategic goals and red lines are defined at the centre, but the choice of means and scope for improvisation are left to local units.

Second, Hezbollah has institutionalised feedback and learning. After-action reviews, doctrinal updates, and regular training revisions create a shared organisational memory. These processes are politically sanctioned rather than ad hoc or personality-driven, ensuring that lessons are systematically integrated and transferable across operational contexts, from urban sieges to counter-drone tactics or communications discipline. This institutionalisation also helps prevent the loss of knowledge when personnel rotate or leaders are assassinated.

Third, the organisation fuses political and military decision-making at the highest level. Strategic communications, political risk assessments, and military planning are not treated as separate stages but as interlinked components of a single process. This integration helps explain Hezbollah's ability to escalate or de-escalate in a calibrated manner: messaging, limited strikes, diplomatic signals, and mobilisation occur as coordinated elements of one strategy. For analysts accustomed to compartmentalised state institutions, this may appear improvised, but in practice it enables Hezbollah to adjust its strategy rapidly under pressure.

While existing scholarship acknowledges Hezbollah's capacity for learning, it often overlooks the institutional mechanisms that make it possible. This analysis suggests that the organisation's command architecture is designed to manage uncertainty: it enables reversible decisions, limits exposure through compartmentalisation, and contains failure through built-in redundancy. These structural features influence how Hezbollah absorbs shocks, such as assassinations, cyber intrusions, or supply-line disruptions, and how it reconstitutes its capabilities quickly. This approach aligns with broader debates on adaptation in insurgent and

counterinsurgent organisations (Kilcullen, 2010; Petraeus, 2006), but Hezbollah's integration of political and military learning distinguishes it from most state and non-state actors. Analysing this architecture contributes to theoretical discussions on non-state command structures by showing how hybrid actors institutionalise learning and embed political-military decision-making within their organisational design.

1.8 Identifying the Research Gap

To date, no peer-reviewed academic work has examined Hezbollah's post-2023 recalibration in sufficient depth, leaving the field reliant on policy briefs and open-source commentary that cannot capture internal debates or doctrinal shifts. The academic study of Hezbollah has developed into a substantial and diverse field over the past four decades. Yet it remains marked by interpretive polarisation and theoretical fragmentation, often lacking a precise understanding of the organisation's objectives, internal dynamics, and its capacity to adapt and evolve.

Existing scholarship is typically framed around two dominant paradigms: the Iranian-proxy model and the anti-Israel-resistance model. Each sheds light on important aspects of Hezbollah's identity but both contain analytical blind spots that distort the broader picture. The proxy paradigm tends to reduce Hezbollah to an instrument of Tehran, underestimating its local agency, whereas the resistance paradigm risks romanticising its legitimacy and overlooking its coercive practices. These shortcomings hinder a comprehensive understanding of Hezbollah's long-term trajectory, its capacity for strategic adaptation, and the implications of its embedded role in Lebanon's political and social order. This section reviews these limitations, drawing on the literature to identify key gaps that this thesis addresses.

The proxy paradigm has been particularly influential in Western policy and security studies. Works such as Levitt (2013) frame Hezbollah primarily as an operational extension of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Israeli analysts such as Yaari (2025) and Zisser (2020) similarly emphasise Hezbollah's role as Iran's regional arm, consistent with state-aligned strategic assessments. Such accounts are not without empirical foundation: Hezbollah's access to Iranian financial support, weaponry, and doctrinal guidance has been repeatedly documented. Yet this framework risks collapsing Hezbollah's autonomy into a simple function of Iranian patronage. It overlooks the organisation's locally embedded legitimacy, its independent decision-making in Lebanese politics, and its capacity to recalibrate strategy in ways not reducible to Iranian directives.

The resistance paradigm, by contrast, foregrounds Hezbollah's domestic roots and portrays it as a legitimate expression of Lebanese Shi'a mobilisation. Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) and Harik (2004) exemplify this approach, emphasising Hezbollah's provision of welfare, its integration into the confessional system, and its ideological legitimacy derived from resistance to occupation. Norton (2014) likewise highlights the group's embeddedness in Lebanese society, interpreting its evolution as a pragmatic response to marginalisation and state weakness. These works remain valuable correctives to securitised depictions, yet they face limitations. By stressing Hezbollah's rootedness and legitimacy, they risk downplaying its coercive practices, authoritarian tendencies, and its growing role as a regional military actor. Romanticising Hezbollah as a 'voice of the oppressed' can obscure its contribution to Lebanon's sectarian polarisation and its capacity to project conflict beyond national borders.

As Marcus (2018) notes in Israel's Long War with Hezbollah, scholarship often remains event-driven, treating episodes such as the 2006 war, the 2013 battle of al-Qusayr, or the Syrian intervention as discrete turning points. While such studies provide valuable snapshots, they rarely connect these episodes to broader processes of doctrinal evolution or institutional learning. The result is a fragmented picture that underestimates Hezbollah's ability to accumulate experience across conflicts and to translate battlefield lessons into long-term strategic adaptation.

Theoretical perspectives from military sociology and organisational learning also remain largely underexplored. Wood (2003) on insurgent collective action, Biddle (2006) on military effectiveness, and Staniland (2014) on networks of rebellion offer conceptual tools for understanding how armed groups maintain cohesion, innovate tactically, and adapt institutionally. Likewise, Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly (2015) illuminate how non-state actors construct welfare, justice, and public-order systems in contested environments. Yet these frameworks are rarely applied to Hezbollah, even though the organisation presents a rich empirical case of sustained learning, institutional memory, and governance-building embedded within Lebanese society.

This gap limits understanding of Hezbollah's evolution. It is not only a political party or a military force but a complex organisation capable of assessing its own errors, rethinking strategic priorities, and integrating warfare, welfare provision, and political negotiation into a coherent long-term project.

Hezbollah's media and discursive strategies, though widely recognised, remain insufficiently theorised in relation to deterrence and legitimacy. Khatib (2013) and Louër (2012) show how Hezbollah deploys visual imagery, symbolism, and Shi'a identity politics to consolidate its support base. Yet little scholarship has examined how narrative operates as a strategic instrument in itself, not merely reflecting events but actively shaping perceptions of victory, sacrifice, and endurance. Few analysts explore how Hezbollah reinterprets military losses as moral victories or frames restraint as evidence of strategic wisdom. This thesis addresses this lacuna by developing the concept of 'deterrence by narrative', building on perspectives such as Sobelman's (2016) work on deterrence in asymmetric conflict.

Hezbollah's engagement with Lebanese state institutions also remains understudied. While Harik (2004) and Hamzeh (2004) highlight its political integration, there has been little analysis of the Lebanese quasi-state's failure to assume full authority and, more importantly, how Hezbollah's institutional participation reinforces its hybrid identity and protects its military autonomy. Hezbollah's ministerial portfolios, welfare networks, and municipal influence enable it to entrench itself within the Lebanese state while sustaining a parallel armed structure.

Mampilly's (2015) comparative work on rebel governance offers a useful but underexplored framework for situating Hezbollah's state-like functions in health, education, and infrastructure provision. Yet few studies systematically analyse how these governance practices function as an additional shield for its military activities or how they reshape Lebanon's sovereignty.

Another critical gap concerns limited scholarly access to Hezbollah's internal military structures, commanders, and strategic planning processes. While many studies emphasise its social service provision or political integration, few have gained access to the organisation's

military core. Most analyses rely on political bureau members, open-source materials, Israeli intelligence leaks, or Western policy reports, which often frame Hezbollah exclusively through the lens of ‘terrorist threat’ or ‘proxy warfare’. This leaves unanswered questions about how military authority is exercised and how strategic decisions are made at the highest levels.

A remarkably underexplored aspect is the role of Hezbollah’s Jihadi Council, the organisation’s supreme military authority. In theory, the Council functions as a collective decision-making body overseeing operational planning, training, and the coordination of armed units. In practice, however, it has long operated under the guidance, and at times direct control, of the Secretary General. For more than two decades, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah has presided over and blindly trusted this structure, and accounts from within Hezbollah consistently affirm that the Shura Council has never contradicted his strategic directives.

This concentration of authority in one person has significant implications for how Hezbollah balances military autonomy with political engagement, yet it remains almost absent from academic analysis. Political decisions within Hezbollah are built on military capacity and confidence in its deterrent power against Israel. The absence reflects both the secrecy of Hezbollah’s internal mechanisms and the methodological difficulties scholars face in accessing reliable primary material.

This lack of transparency has major analytical consequences. Much Western scholarship continues to portray Hezbollah’s strategic decisions as dictated by Tehran, reducing the organisation to a passive proxy. In reality, however, military and political strategy are tightly integrated within Hezbollah’s leadership structure. The Secretary General, guiding the Jihadi Council and the Shura Council for over three decades, has retained ultimate authority over both domains. This concentration of decision-making power enables strategic coherence and allows rapid adaptation while maintaining internal unity under pressure or during crisis. The persistent neglect of this internal architecture leaves a substantial gap in understanding Hezbollah’s behaviour. This thesis addresses that gap through confidential interviews and field-based material offering rare insights into decision-making processes, insights largely absent from conventional accounts.

Academic research has also struggled to produce work of direct relevance to practitioners, whether military planners, diplomats, or policymakers. Much existing scholarship remains descriptive or theoretically oriented. While such studies have enriched conceptual debates, they often lack the empirical depth and operational specificity needed to inform real-world decision-making. Analysts within governments and security institutions frequently express frustration that academic work on Hezbollah offers limited practical insight: it may outline ideology, rhetoric, or historical trajectory but seldom examines how commanders exercise authority or how variations in competence shape battlefield outcomes. This gap became evident during the conflicts of 2023 and 2024, when command-level decisions had direct strategic consequences.

This disconnect reflects disciplinary boundaries and the barriers to accessing Hezbollah’s inner workings. However, it also reveals a space where academic research could make a unique contribution, bridging scholarship with the practical concerns of those engaging with Hezbollah as adversary, mediator, or subject of diplomacy.

A further underdeveloped dimension concerns Hezbollah's significant evolution after October 2023, a period largely absent from existing academic accounts. The wars of 2023–2025, including the destruction of much of Gaza, the September 2024 conflict in Lebanon and the bombing of Beirut, and a series of strikes reaching Damascus, Sanaa, Tehran, and Doha, as reported in the author's 2023–2025 interview corpus and fieldnotes (Appendices A–C), created an entirely new strategic environment for Hezbollah and Iran.

These events tested Hezbollah's deterrence doctrine, strained its regional alliances, and forced a recalibration of its posture between confrontation and strategic restraint. Yet most scholarly literature still focuses on earlier phases, such as the 1980s emergence, the 2000 Israeli withdrawal, the 2006 war, and the 2011 Syrian intervention. Very few works have begun to analyse Hezbollah's most recent adaptations, and none have systematically examined how the movement has redefined its strategy in response to these conflicts. This absence reflects the lag between unfolding events and the slower rhythms of academic publication, underscoring the need for new empirical research capturing Hezbollah's ongoing recalibration.

Equally neglected is the tension between Hezbollah's domestic entrenchment and its regional entanglements. While some scholars highlight its integration into the Lebanese state and others emphasise its alignment with Iran's regional strategy, few systematically analyse how the two dimensions interact. How does Hezbollah reconcile its need to preserve legitimacy at home with its commitments to regional theatres of war? How do its welfare networks and political alliances shield its military activities? Moreover, how does it recalibrate when overstretched, as after its extensive involvement in Syria and the changing dynamics in Damascus? These questions remain underexplored, leaving a gap this thesis seeks to fill by applying frameworks from military sociology, organisational learning, and discourse analysis.

Finally, the literature remains overly reliant on secondary materials, particularly policy reports and open-source media. While these sources provide valuable context, they lack the perspective of those within or closely associated with Hezbollah. Very few studies incorporate confidential interviews with Hezbollah-affiliated figures, especially in the aftermath of the 2023–2025 wars. Yet these perspectives are essential to grasp the organisation's internal logic, self-understanding, and evolving strategies. This thesis addresses this limitation directly by drawing on decades of fieldwork in Lebanon and, crucially, on a new corpus of interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025. These materials provide rare insights into Hezbollah's strategic recalibration, military decision-making, and continued resilience under unprecedented pressure.

Taken together, these gaps reveal the need for a more integrated and empirically grounded approach. The proxy and resistance paradigms have generated valuable insights but remain insufficient for explaining Hezbollah's long-term resilience and adaptability. The neglect of military sociology, organisational learning, and governance studies has obscured key dimensions of Hezbollah's durability. The absence of systematic analysis of the Jihadi Council, the concentration of authority under Sayyed Nasrallah, and the lack of practitioner-relevant insights have further limited the field. Most importantly, the failure to incorporate new empirical material from the post-2023 period has left the academic literature outdated at the very moment when Hezbollah's strategic posture is undergoing profound change.

This thesis addresses these shortcomings by advancing a multidimensional framework that situates Hezbollah as a hybrid actor, simultaneously a military organisation, a political party, and a social movement. By combining conceptual innovation with new empirical evidence, it aims to move the debate beyond entrenched binaries and to contribute not only to academic scholarship but also to the practical understanding of a movement that continues to shape the politics of war and peace in the Middle East.

1.9 Beyond the Literature: Post-2023 Strategic Thinking and a Rare Empirical Window

Unless otherwise indicated, all post-2023 empirical claims in this thesis derive from the author's anonymised interview corpus and contemporaneous fieldnotes (Appendices A–C), collected between October 2023 and March 2025. These events have not yet entered peer-reviewed scholarship, which explains both the novelty and the necessity of this work.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter has mapped a dense yet incomplete scholarly landscape, from proxy analyses emphasising external command, to resistance accounts centring domestic legitimacy, to hybrid-actor studies describing multi-domain operation, and to media-narrative research recognising symbolic power without fully theorising its strategic effects. Various recurrent gaps emerge.

Scholarship lacks sustained attention to institutional alignment and the resulting embedded sovereignty that fuses welfare, politics, and coercive capacity. It under-theorises deterrence by narrative, namely how scripts and symbols discipline escalation and conserve consent. It overlooks deterrence by resilience, the capacity of a movement to absorb shocks, reconstitute strength, and maintain deterrent credibility through adaptive endurance rather than immediate retaliation. Finally, the literature has yet to engage with Hezbollah's post-2023 recalibration, including leadership decapitation, communications shock, corridor erosion, and the shift from regional exposure to Lebanese endurance.

These gaps correspond directly to the three research objectives. The literature does not yet provide an integrated explanation of the ideological, organisational, political, social and military factors that sustain Hezbollah's endurance under pressure. It also insufficiently explains how the movement distinguishes material loss and sacrifice from strategic defeat, or how this distinction supports resilience, mobilisation and deterrence. Finally, reductive proxy interpretations obscure the relationship between Hezbollah's domestic embeddedness, autonomous agency, legitimacy and performance of functions associated with sovereignty. The thesis addresses these limitations through its three research objectives and develops embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience and deterrence by narrative as the corresponding conceptual contributions.

By pairing theoretical innovation, embedded sovereignty, deterrence by narrative, and deterrence by resilience, with first-hand post-2023 material, this chapter argues what existing scholarship can explain about Hezbollah's endurance and what it cannot. These limits are both conceptual and methodological. Opacity, selective disclosures, the lack of long-term evidence and the tendency to overlook narrative and resilience all leave critical analytical gaps. Meeting these challenges calls for an approach that can get closer to internal reasoning, follow patterns of adaptation over time, and connect meaning-making to what can actually be observed in practice. The following chapter, therefore, develops the methodological

architecture necessary to operationalise and test these three frameworks through a multi-modal, interpretive–realist design grounded in longitudinal fieldwork, anonymised interviews, and Arabic-language primary sources.

Chapter 2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

Following Aristotle's proposition that a phenomenon can be understood by examining its origins and development (Aristotle, 1988), the thesis traces Hezbollah's inception and evolution. The researcher began observing the movement at its public emergence in the early 1980s and examines how successive phases of ideological construction, strategic adaptation and organisational transformation have enabled it to endure sustained external pressure.

This chapter establishes the methodological design developed in direct response to the central research question of the thesis: How and why has Hezbollah remained undefeated despite sustained military, political, economic and informational pressure, and what does its endurance reveal about the limitations of conventional understandings of defeat, deterrence, sovereignty and proxy relations?

The corresponding aim is to explain Hezbollah's endurance under pressure from materially superior adversaries by examining how ideology, organisational adaptation, social embeddedness and unconventional understandings of victory and defeat interact over time, and by developing the concepts of embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience and deterrence by narrative.

It demonstrates how a reflexive, interpretive, and multi-method design enables the investigation of a clandestine, secretive, ideologically driven, and strategically adaptive actor that defies conventional analytical categories. Conceptually, the chapter advances a post hoc ethnographic framework that integrates longitudinal field engagement, discourse analysis, and process tracing to explain Hezbollah's evolution, endurance, and strategic logic. It addresses the literature's tendency to reduce Hezbollah either to a proxy or to a purely military actor by showing how its legitimacy, deterrence, and resilience are co-produced through ideology, practice, and embeddedness.

Studying Hezbollah presents exceptional methodological and epistemological challenges. Its hybrid identity as an armed movement, political party, social welfare provider, and ideological project resists analysis through positivist models or detached desk-based research. Its operational secrecy, strategic opacity and designation or proscription in whole or in part by several states limit data access and create ethical and legal complexities. Overcoming these requires a multi-layered approach that combines diverse sources of evidence, sustained field engagement, and critical reflexivity to construct a holistic explanation of how Hezbollah adapts and endures.

A distinctive methodological innovation of this thesis lies in the integration of three substantive appendices as an explicit extension of the research design rather than as ancillary material. These appendices are not supplements but components of the evidentiary and analytical core of the study, designed to make its processes transparent and auditable to the fullest extent possible in research on a clandestine armed organisation.

Appendix A details the protocols governing access, consent, anonymisation, and data protection across four decades of fieldwork, demonstrating how ethical, legal, and security constraints were navigated in accordance with professional standards while enabling the collection of unique primary data.

Appendix B presents the full coding framework and thematic architecture used to transform raw testimonies into analytically tractable material, outlining the decision rules, coding categories, and iterative analytical procedures that disciplined evidence and structured theory building.

Appendix C provides a curated corpus of thirty six numbered anonymised interview records documenting separate encounters, some involving recurring interlocutors, role-tagged and time-stamped to allow longitudinal tracing of ideological evolution, organisational learning, and strategic recalibration from 1985 to 2025.

These materials enable the thesis to move beyond the anecdotalism that characterises much of the existing literature and media on Hezbollah. They provide an empirical and methodological resource that not only substantiates the claims advanced in the analytical chapters but also establishes a benchmark for transparency, reflexivity, and evidentiary rigour in the study of armed non-state actors. Their inclusion thus represents an original contribution in its own right: a model for how field-derived, sensitive, and confidential data can be incorporated into doctoral research in a way that is simultaneously methodologically robust, ethically defensible, and analytically generative.

This methodology serves both scholarly and applied purposes. It produces theoretical insights into non-state resilience, hybrid warfare, and legitimacy while offering analytical tools for practitioners in diplomacy, defence, intelligence, and humanitarian operations. The chapter also situates the research within broader debates in international relations, political sociology, and security studies, clarifying how its findings contribute to both theory and practice.

2.1.1 Overview and Analytical Orientation

Hezbollah’s endurance and strategic agency arise not only from external patronage or battlefield performance but also from deeply embedded ideological narratives, domestic goals, and cultural practices. Understanding these dimensions requires attention to ritual, language, governance, and everyday interaction, realities that positivist approaches often overlook. Also, data on Hezbollah are shaped by opacity, selective disclosure, and strategic communication. Addressing these constraints calls for methods that privilege triangulation, longitudinal engagement, and interpretive sensitivity over replicability or breadth.

The chapter proceeds in several stages. It first outlines the epistemological and ontological assumptions guiding the research and how they determine the choice of methods. It then details the empirical foundations of the study: longitudinal fieldwork, confidential interviews, Arabic-language materials, and other sources. Third, it examines the ethical and methodological challenges inherent in researching a clandestine organisation designated or proscribed in multiple jurisdictions. Finally, it explains how thick description and reflexivity connect micro-level practices to macro-level outcomes and how this design contributes to both scholarly knowledge and professional practice.

Drawing on previously unpublished field interviews and contemporaneous fieldnotes gathered between 1985 and 2025, together with Arabic-language primary communications rarely used in English-language scholarship, this chapter establishes an unusually extensive longitudinal evidentiary base. The audit trail for access pathways, sampling logic, anonymisation, and verification safeguards appears in Appendix A (access, consent, ethics). Appendix B contains the codebook and worked examples, and Appendix C contains a curated

anonymised dossier comprising thirty six numbered interview records. These materials allow assessment without compromising participant safety (American Anthropological Association, 2012; British Sociological Association, 2017).

2.1.2 Epistemological and Ontological Commitments

The research is situated within a constructivist–critical realist paradigm. These orientations reject purely materialist explanations and emphasise the constitutive role of meanings, identities, and practices. Hezbollah's strategic decisions cannot be reduced to capabilities or threats alone; they are mediated by ideological commitments and historical narratives that shape how the organisation perceives its environment. A constructivist lens analyses these meaning-making processes as causal factors in their own right, while critical realism recognises that material conditions, such as military power, sanctions and alliances, exert causal effects independently of whether actors fully recognise them, while also acknowledging that actors interpret and respond to those conditions through historically and ideologically constituted frameworks. Together they allow causal explanation without collapsing meaning into matter.

Within this combined framework, ethnographic description functions as a means of gathering and interpreting data capable of revealing how social meanings and political mechanisms operate in situ. The research proceeds abductively, moving iteratively between observation, provisional theorisation, and re-testing to identify the generative mechanisms linking lived experience with structural causation. Fieldwork and narrative evidence are thus treated as indicators of deeper processes rather than isolated accounts. Ethnographic insight operationalises critical realism by showing how beliefs, practices, and discourses both constitute and are conditioned by structural contexts.

2.1.3 Multi-Method Design and Empirical Foundations

The study adopts a qualitative case-study design. Hezbollah serves as a paradigmatic case offering leverage on broader questions concerning the endurance of armed movements, the evolution of deterrence under asymmetric conditions, and the relationship between ideology and strategic behaviour. A single case allows deep contextual engagement and process-sensitive analysis not possible with broader comparison.

The empirical base combines nearly four decades of field engagement within Hezbollah's political and social milieu, more than three decades of confidential interviews with officials, cadres, clerics, and community members, and a substantial body of primary Arabic-language materials, including speeches, communiqués, theological texts, and internal publications, supplemented by media archives and secondary literature. This multi-modal corpus enables cross-verification and mitigates the limitations of any single data source. Journalistic fieldnotes, systematically recontextualised as ethnographic data, provide a unique longitudinal perspective on Hezbollah's organisational evolution and doctrinal shifts.

2.1.4 Analytical Tools and Triangulation

Three complementary analytical tools structure the inquiry. Process tracing reconstructs causal mechanisms linking external pressures, internal adaptations, and doctrinal evolution, focusing mainly, but not exclusively, on historical junctures such as 1982, 1985, 2000, 2006,

2009, 2011, 2014, and 2023–2024. Discourse analysis examines how Hezbollah uses language, symbolism, and narrative as strategic instruments shaping perceptions and influencing adversaries. Critical security theory situates these practices within wider debates on sovereignty and the nature of political violence. Triangulating the three methods captures Hezbollah as both a material and a meaning-making actor embedded in complex social and geopolitical structures.

2.1.5 Methodological Constraints and Reflexivity

Researching Hezbollah involves structural opacity, selective disclosure, and ethical risk. These challenges were mitigated through long-term trust building, diverse interlocutor sampling, and rigorous triangulation. Narrative reliability was assessed through cross referencing interviews, media outputs, independent documentation and observable developments within a constructivist and critical realist analytical framework. Ethical safeguards included secure data storage, anonymisation and the exclusion of sensitive details from publication.

2.1.6 Structure and Forward Link

By setting out this methodological architecture, the chapter provides the foundation for answering the central research question and addressing the three research objectives established in the Introduction. The methodological choices outlined here underpin the subsequent analysis of Hezbollah's ideological foundations, organisational adaptation, political and social embeddedness, strategic autonomy, interpretation of sacrifice and defeat, and evolving deterrence doctrine.

Each empirical chapter that follows applies the same abductive, interpretive–realist framework through process tracing, discourse analysis, and triangulated field evidence, testing a common set of mechanisms—embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience, and deterrence by narrative—across distinct empirical domains in order to build a cumulative explanation of Hezbollah's endurance.

2.2 Epistemological and Theoretical Orientation

The research rests on an interpretivist and constructivist epistemology, which views political behaviour as a product of meanings, identities, and practices rather than as reducible to material structures (Wendt, 1999; Barnett, 2012). Hezbollah's strategic logic cannot be understood solely through calculations of power or capability; it is shaped by self-conceptions of *muqawama* (resistance), theological commitments, historical memory, and ritual practices that give meaning to endurance and sacrifice.

Ontologically, the thesis adopts a critical-realist stance (Bhaskar, 2015; Patomäki and Wight, 2000). Material conditions such as war, sanctions and alliances are real and causally consequential, whether or not actors fully recognise them, while actors interpret and respond to these conditions through historically and ideologically constituted frameworks. Strategic restraint or escalation reflects not only capabilities or pressures but also ideational commitments to sovereignty, dignity, and communal defence. This dual epistemological–ontological grounding situates Hezbollah as an actor whose behaviour emerges from the interplay of structure and meaning.

Three strands of theory frame the analytical lens. First, debates on proxy warfare illuminate Hezbollah's relationship with Iran. Early scholarship portrayed Hezbollah as a client proxy (Ranstorp, 1997; Byman, 2005), whereas more recent work explores varied patron–client dynamics (Dunér, 1981; Mumford, 2013). This thesis conceptualises Hezbollah as an autonomous yet dependent actor: reliant on Iranian support but exercising significant discretion in political and operational decision-making. Second, scholarship on hybrid warfare and asymmetric actors explains Hezbollah's combination of guerrilla tactics, conventional military features, governance functions, and political participation (Kalyvas, 2012). Third, theories of sectarian politics and identity mobilisation highlight how ideology fuses Shi'a theology with anti-imperialist narratives (Haddad, 2020), grounding legitimacy while adapting to Lebanon's plural political order. Together, these strands explain Hezbollah's resilience as a product of material support, hybrid capacities, domestic priorities, and ideational legitimacy.

This section reframes Hezbollah's strategic agency as emerging from the interaction of material constraints and meaning-making, extending constructivist and critical-realist approaches to hybrid armed actors.

2.3 Research Design

This thesis adopts a qualitative single-case design. Hezbollah is treated as a paradigmatic case (Eckstein, 1975; Flyvbjerg, 2006) because relatively few armed movements have survived sustained confrontation with militarily superior adversaries while simultaneously consolidating a position within state institutions and projecting power beyond their immediate territorial environment. Comparative examples, including the Viet Minh, the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga and the Syrian organisation Al-Nusra that evolved into Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, illuminate particular aspects of this trajectory without reproducing Hezbollah's distinctive combination of military, political and social functions.

The study is structured around the central research question established in the Introduction: How and why has Hezbollah remained undefeated despite sustained military, political, economic and informational pressure, and what does its endurance reveal about the limitations of conventional understandings of defeat, deterrence, sovereignty and proxy relations?

The research design operationalises the three research objectives through complementary methods.

Objective 1 is addressed through longitudinal fieldwork and process tracing of the ideological, organisational, political, social and military mechanisms that sustain Hezbollah's endurance.

Objective 2 is addressed through discourse analysis and participant testimony examining how material loss, sacrifice and strategic defeat are interpreted and narrated.

Objective 3 is addressed through evidence concerning social embeddedness, institutional participation, autonomous agency, legitimacy and the performance of functions associated with sovereignty.

Process tracing is the primary analytical tool, reconstructing causal mechanisms linking external shocks, internal adaptation, and doctrinal evolution (George and Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011). Five critical junctures anchor the analysis: the 1982 Israeli invasion, the 2000 Israeli withdrawal, the 2006 July War, the 2013–2014 interventions in Syria and Iraq, and the 2023–2024 Gaza conflict that included the third war on Lebanon (September 2024). Comparative references to Hamas, Ansar Allah in Yemen, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) sharpen the analysis but do not substitute for an in-depth single-case study.

Methodologically, this section demonstrates how post hoc ethnography can be disciplined through a transparent codebook, staged verification and consistent application of coding decisions, converting privileged access into auditable analysis.

2.4 Data Sources, Fieldwork, Sampling, Analysis, Ethics, and Reflexivity

The empirical foundation of this thesis rests on a multi-source, multi-modal research design constructed to capture the complexity, opacity, and adaptive nature of Hezbollah as a hybrid non-state actor. Because the organisation operates under conditions of secrecy and strategic communication, and is designated or proscribed in whole or in part in several jurisdictions, a standardised or purely positivist methodology is insufficient. Instead, the study employs a triangulated evidence base, integrates field-derived insights with documentary analysis, and embeds reflexive awareness throughout the research process.

Appendix A provides a detailed audit trail of fieldwork procedures, access negotiations, consent protocols, anonymisation strategies, and data-security measures, offering rare methodological transparency for research conducted in high-risk, legally sensitive environments. Appendix B sets out the complete coding schema, thematic categories, and decision rules that underpin the transformation of raw field material into structured analytical data. Appendix C presents a curated dossier of thirty six numbered anonymised interview records spanning four decades, organised by role, time period, and thematic code. These materials allow examiners to trace the evolution of Hezbollah's ideological discourse, organisational learning, and strategic recalibration over time.

Together, these appendices make visible the internal logic of the research process. They show how ethical imperatives were balanced with evidentiary rigour, how claims were built from triangulated data, and how longitudinal patterns were identified, compared and critically evaluated. Their inclusion represents a deliberate methodological contribution to greater transparency and accountability in the study of armed non-state actors, a field in which data scarcity and opacity often prevent close scrutiny of research design.

Empirical material derives from several complementary evidential categories. Field observation comprises contemporaneous fieldnotes and observation notes produced between 1985 and 2025 and subsequently recontextualised as ethnographic evidence. Confidential testimony comprises anonymised interview records documenting encounters with officials, clerics, mid level cadres, social service administrators, community members and political figures in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and occasionally Iran. Documentary evidence includes Arabic language texts such as the 1985 Open Letter, the 2009 Manifesto, theological texts and internal publications. Official statements, including speeches, communiqués, clerical pronouncements and religious decrees, are treated as evidence of declared position and discourse rather than automatically as evidence that the events described occurred. Open

source material and media archives provide additional behavioural and contextual evidence, subject to verification and corroboration. Published scholarship, policy reports and historical analyses provide theoretical and comparative context. Independently observable outcomes are used to test claims against subsequent conduct, institutional change and documented events. Claims that remained unresolved or insufficiently sourced were qualified or excluded.

2.4.1 Interview corpus and purposive selection

Appendix C contains thirty six numbered anonymised interview records documenting separate encounters. Some individuals provided testimony on more than one occasion, and the precise number of distinct participants is not disclosed to reduce the risk of deductive identification. These were selected from a substantially larger body of dozens of professional encounters and field material accumulated between 1985 and 2025. The selection was purposive and analytical rather than statistically representative. Its purpose was not to reproduce the demographic composition of Hezbollah or its wider constituency, which could not be established reliably in a clandestine and compartmentalised setting.

The records were selected because they contained evidence relevant to the research question and permitted comparison across historical periods, organisational functions and moments of strategic change. In particular, they addressed ideological development, organisational adaptation, political participation, social provision, military learning, relations with Iran and other allied actors, and changing understandings of victory, defeat and endurance. Purposive sampling is appropriate where cases are chosen for their explanatory relevance and capacity to illuminate causal processes rather than for population inference (George and Bennett, 2005; Small, 2009).

The participants in the interview corpus were all male and, where age could be established with reasonable confidence, were predominantly between approximately thirty and sixty years old, reflecting the gendered composition of the political, religious, security and military structures to which the researcher obtained access. Women do not serve on Hezbollah's Jihadi Council or within its military structures, although they are strongly represented in the organisation's social departments and welfare institutions. Their absence from the interview corpus therefore limits the study's ability to examine these social functions from women's perspectives.

Precise titles, locations, combinations of responsibilities and dates have been withheld where their disclosure could identify an individual or reveal a protected relationship. The resulting corpus should therefore be understood as a differentiated body of evidence selected for the relevance and probable basis of each participant's knowledge, rather than as a representative survey.

Arabic-language materials (classical and colloquial) were translated by the researcher; technical and religious terms were retained in transliteration with glosses, and key passages were double-checked against standard editions. Where ambiguity affected interpretation, back-translation was used to stabilise meaning (Temple and Young, 2004).

Sources retrieved through institutional databases and public archives were catalogued according to provenance and date, while open-source materials were preserved with sufficient contextual information to permit subsequent verification.

2.4.2 Organisational compartmentalisation and source competence

Organisational affiliation, social proximity and evidential competence were not treated as equivalent. Hezbollah's political, social, religious, security and military structures are compartmentalised, and access to one domain does not imply knowledge of another. A political representative may possess direct knowledge of parliamentary strategy while lacking access to operational deliberations. A social service official may be well placed to discuss welfare provision and community relations but not military planning. An operational participant may know a particular campaign in detail while remaining outside senior political decision-making. Ordinary supporters and individuals socially close to the organisation may provide valuable evidence of reception, legitimacy and local experience, but their proximity does not by itself establish access to internal decisions or first-hand access.

Each account was therefore evaluated in relation to the particular claim for which it was used. The assessment considered the participant's organisational function at the relevant time, proximity to the event or decision, the distinction between direct observation and second hand knowledge, the plausibility of access to the subject discussed, consistency across successive encounters, and convergence with other evidence. Status alone did not determine reliability, and seniority was not treated as authority across every domain. This claim specific assessment responds to a recurrent problem in research on clandestine organisations: accounts may be sincere yet partial, while participants may overstate their proximity to decision-making or reproduce an organisational interpretation as if it were direct knowledge (Wood, 2006; Fujii, 2010).

2.4.3 Longitudinal engagement and evaluation of reliability

Understanding the distribution of knowledge and authority within Hezbollah required many years of regular contact without providing complete knowledge. Its internal mechanisms, compartmentalisation and power relationships were not readily apparent from formal position, public visibility or declared affiliation. They became progressively intelligible through repeated encounters, comparison of accounts, and observation of how participants' roles, access and interpretations evolved over time, while the information they provided could be tested against subsequent developments. Short term project access or isolated interviews would have provided a much weaker basis for distinguishing organisational messaging, socially circulating claims, personal inference and testimony grounded in direct access to the matter under examination.

The thirty six interview records were therefore not selected simply because the underlying interlocutors were available, senior or affiliated with Hezbollah. Their inclusion followed a prolonged process through which the researcher developed a sufficiently mature, although necessarily incomplete, understanding of the organisation to assess what each participant could plausibly know, how that knowledge related to the individual's function, and whether the account could withstand comparison with other testimony, documentary evidence, observed developments and later events. Selection was thus informed by accumulated contextual judgement rather than by status alone.

The researcher's long term engagement with the field functioned as a means of evaluating testimony rather than merely as a route of access. Reliability was assessed over time by comparing what participants claimed to know with what their roles plausibly allowed them to know, examining whether their accounts remained internally consistent, and testing earlier statements against subsequent developments. Repeated engagement also made it possible to

distinguish contemporaneous knowledge from later reinterpretation, institutional justification and personal inference. Familiarity with participants was not treated as proof of truthfulness. It provided a longitudinal basis upon which claims could be questioned, qualified or excluded.

Prolonged engagement does not imply complete knowledge of Hezbollah, nor does it eliminate the possibility of error, deception or retrospective justification. Hezbollah remains highly compartmentalised, and even well placed participants possess only partial knowledge. The methodological claim is therefore not that long term access produced an exhaustive or privileged truth, but that it enabled a more discriminating assessment of source competence, evidential limits and the relationship between testimony and organisational position than would have been possible through isolated encounters.

This temporal dimension is especially important because Hezbollah changed considerably between 1985 and 2025. Organisational arrangements, access to information, strategic priorities and the political meaning of resistance were not constant. Testimony was therefore situated within the participant's role and the historical period in which the account was produced. Later organisational coherence was not projected backwards onto the fragmented formative environment of the early 1980s, and later explanations were not automatically accepted as accurate descriptions of earlier motives.

A comprehensive coding framework was developed inductively and refined iteratively. The codes captured eight thematic domains: deterrence doctrine, social embeddedness, ideological legitimacy, organisational adaptability, external alliances, domestic political engagement, military evolution, and costs and contradictions. Each interview note was segment-coded, enabling micro-level statements to link to meso-level mechanisms such as deterrence-as-resilience or governance-as-force-multiplication.

The credibility of the coding was supported by the researcher's linguistic fluency in Arabic dialects and familiarity with Shia theological discourse and political rhetoric. Coding decisions were applied consistently through the coding framework and checked against the original material during successive stages of analysis. Discourse analysis and process tracing therefore operate in tandem: discourse analysis reveals the ideational and rhetorical construction of Hezbollah's strategic logic, while process tracing reconstructs the causal sequences that link discourse, practice, and outcome.

Ethical considerations permeate every stage of the research process. Conducting research on an organisation designated or proscribed in whole or in part by several states raises complex legal, security, and moral challenges (Mills, Massoumi and Miller, 2019). The study adheres strictly to informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality, in line with the American Anthropological Association (2012) and the British Sociological Association (2017). All procedures were followed in accordance with the Liverpool John Moores University Ethics Framework.

2.4.4 Triangulation and evidential classification

Interview testimony formed a significant component of triangulation rather than an appendix to the substantive analysis. It was compared, where available and safe, with other functionally differentiated testimony, contemporaneous fieldnotes, primary Arabic language documents, public speeches, archival records, United Nations material, open source evidence and observable organisational behaviour. The purpose of triangulation was not to force agreement among sources but to identify convergence, contradiction, change and the limits of what could

be established. Triangulation in this sense disciplines inference by comparing evidence produced from different positions and through different modalities (Denzin, 2012; Wood, 2006).

In practical terms, testimony was treated in one of four ways. Direct or functionally relevant knowledge supported a claim when the participant was credibly positioned to know the matter discussed. Corroborative testimony strengthened a claim when it converged with separately situated evidence. Interpretive testimony was used to show how a participant understood victory, sacrifice, sovereignty, alliance or organisational purpose, without converting that interpretation into an independently verified fact. Unresolved or weakly sourced testimony was either expressly qualified or excluded from the thesis. This distinction is particularly important for clandestine events whose full evidential basis cannot be disclosed.

Chapters 3 to 7 apply this classification whenever interview evidence is incorporated, identifying whether the testimony directly supports, corroborates, qualifies, complicates or contradicts the analytical claim under examination.

2.4.5 Contradictions, omissions and retrospective testimony

Contradictory accounts were not resolved automatically in favour of the more senior participant. Differences were examined in relation to timing, organisational function, proximity to the event, institutional interest, consistency with earlier accounts and compatibility with documentary or behavioural evidence. Where the available evidence could not resolve a disagreement, the contradiction was retained as an analytical finding or the resulting claim was qualified. Contradiction can itself reveal organisational contestation, differences between political and military priorities, or subsequent attempts to justify a decision.

What participants did not say was also treated cautiously. Silence, refusal or imprecision may reflect lack of knowledge, compartmentalisation, security discipline, uncertainty, strategic communication or concern for source protection. It was not treated as proof that an event did or did not occur. Retrospective accounts were used with particular care because later outcomes may reshape recollection and encourage participants to present contested choices as inevitable or successful.

2.4.6 Confidentiality and the limits of disclosure

Confidentiality is both an ethical obligation and an evidential limitation. Participants are identified only by codes or broad functional descriptions. Exact titles, locations, dates and combinations of responsibilities are withheld when they could permit deductive identification. Direct quotation is used where the wording performs a clear analytical function and can be disclosed safely. Where distinctive phrasing or contextual detail creates an unacceptable risk, testimony is paraphrased or aggregated and identified as such. Some protected knowledge informed the researcher's interpretation but was excluded because it could not be substantiated publicly without endangering a participant or the researcher.

These restrictions mean that the reader cannot independently audit every element of the protected testimony. The thesis does not conceal this limitation. Instead, it narrows claims to what the disclosed evidence can support, distinguishes participant interpretation from verified event, and provides the Appendix C dossier as the fullest safe audit trail. Source protection takes priority over maximising descriptive detail.

Ensuring rigour and validity requires systematic cross-checking and disciplined inference. Causal inference is strengthened through process-tracing tests: 'hoop tests' assess necessity, while 'smoking-gun' tests evaluate probative value (Collier, 2011). Formal member checking was avoided for security reasons. Where available, claims were evaluated through role-differentiated comparison, behavioural evidence and consistency over time (Wood, 2006; Fujii, 2010).

2.4.7 Researcher positionality and control of bias

The researcher's professional engagement with Lebanon, Shia Muslim communities and the wider region created unusual linguistic, contextual and relational access. It also generated risks of familiarity, dependence upon established relationships, prior commitment to interpretations formed in journalistic practice, and unequal access to supportive and critical voices. Familiarity was therefore treated simultaneously as an evidential resource and a possible source of bias. The methodological task was to separate protected knowledge, personal inference, participant explanation and evidence capable of sustaining an academic claim.

Several safeguards were used. Claims were assessed against competing explanations, including Iranian material support, coercive capacity, Lebanese state weakness, adversarial failure and organisational legitimacy. Interviews expressing fatigue, criticism, overextension, corruption, technological vulnerability or strategic disagreement were retained rather than treated as anomalous. Participants' definitions of victory were distinguished from the researcher's assessment of material outcomes. Organisational claims were compared with observable behaviour and consequences. Findings dependent upon protected testimony were qualified where their provenance could not be fully disclosed. Process tracing was used to test whether proposed mechanisms were consistent with the sequence of events rather than merely compatible with the researcher's preferred interpretation (George and Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011).

2.4.8 Limitations of the interview corpus

The interview corpus has clear limits. It is purposive and cannot support statistical inference about Hezbollah or Lebanon's Shia population. Access was shaped partly by the researcher's professional relationships and is likely to privilege experienced or senior participants. Organisational compartmentalisation means that even well placed participants possessed incomplete knowledge. Some accounts concern events that cannot be independently reconstructed, while confidentiality restricts the detail through which credibility can be demonstrated. The corpus cannot claim to reproduce the full diversity of women, junior cadres, former members, welfare personnel, ordinary supporters or internal critics. These limitations do not invalidate the testimony, but they define the boundaries within which claims can responsibly be made.

The procedures governing participant recruitment, consent, anonymisation and secure storage are summarised here and documented more fully in Appendix A. The coding framework, decision rules and worked examples are provided in Appendix B. Appendix C contains the anonymised interview records that underpin quoted or synthesised testimony. Together, these appendices provide the fullest audit trail that can be disclosed without compromising participant safety.

2.5 Methodological Constraints and the Critique of Ethnography

Researching a clandestine, secretive, ideologically driven, and politically sensitive organisation such as Hezbollah inevitably involves significant methodological constraints. These challenges are not treated as peripheral to the study but as constitutive elements of its design, shaping how data are gathered, interpreted, and validated. Rather than undermining the credibility of the findings, explicit engagement with these limitations enhances the research's analytical robustness and transparency by clarifying the conditions under which knowledge is produced and the boundaries of what can be known and shared. This section critically examines those constraints and assesses the strengths and weaknesses of ethnography as a research method in the study of armed hybrid non-state actors. By integrating ethnography with process tracing and discourse analysis, the study turns access limits and reactivity from liabilities into epistemic constraints that sharpen inference.

2.5.1 Access and Structural Opacity

The first and most persistent challenge is access. Hezbollah's internal structure is now deliberately decentralised, hierarchical, and compartmentalised, with information shared strictly on a need-to-know basis even among its own commanders. This opacity restricts direct visibility into strategic deliberations, operational planning and decision-making processes. Senior leadership forums and functions, including the Jihadi Council, strategic planning bodies and heads of specialised units, are inaccessible not only to external researchers but often even to the organisation's own mid-level cadres. As a result, much of the data available to researchers are mediated through partial perspectives, fragmented accounts, or indirect observation.

Structural opacity required a claim specific rather than rank based assessment of access. Individuals were not assumed to possess reliable knowledge merely because they were described as Hezbollah members, officials or supporters. Knowledge was treated as distributed across political, social, religious, security and military domains, with information shared according to function and need. The central question was therefore not whether a participant was close to the organisation in general, but whether that person was credibly positioned to know the particular matter under examination. This distinction reduced the risk of mistaking social proximity, asserted status or organisational loyalty for evidential competence.

Despite these precautions, access limitations inevitably shape the nature of the evidence and the scope of the conclusions. Certain aspects of Hezbollah's strategic deliberations remain inaccessible. Where available, the analysis draws upon convergent testimony and behavioural indicators to infer internal dynamics. These constraints are not weaknesses to be concealed but structural realities that frame the research and its interpretive boundaries. Since the 2024 war on Lebanon, Hezbollah has further restricted access to its newly appointed senior commanders, while internal compartmentalisation has become considerably more rigid and other measures were adopted to address what Hezbollah regarded as the lethal consequences of centralisation and security breaches.

2.5.2 Reactivity and the Politics of Presence

A second major limitation concerns reactivity: the presence of the researcher can itself influence the data generated. In highly securitised contexts, interviews and observations may

be orchestrated to project particular narratives or manage external perceptions. Interactions are often shaped by the political aims of the organisation, the desire of interlocutors to advance specific agendas, or fear of exposure, as well as by their assumptions about the researcher's position and purpose. Public rituals, curated sites, and authorised interlocutors are prioritised over everyday practices, skewing the data towards performances designed for external consumption (Robben and Sluka, 2012; Markham, 2011).

This phenomenon introduces a potential authenticity problem. Field encounters risk reflecting not 'natural' organisational practices but staged representations intended to influence how Hezbollah is perceived by outsiders. To mitigate this, the research employs several methodological strategies. Interlocutors with different organisational functions, degrees of proximity and forms of knowledge were interviewed, reducing the risk of dependence upon a single organisational perspective. Open-ended questions and requests for concrete examples were prioritised over abstract discussion, increasing the likelihood of eliciting grounded accounts of practice. Where narratives aligned too closely with official discourse, follow-up questions probed for disconfirming evidence. Crucially, field-based data were contextualised within a broader evidentiary framework that included primary texts, archival materials, and behavioural indicators, allowing staged narratives to be interrogated rather than accepted at face value.

2.5.3 Partiality, Inference, and the Problem of Representation

Even when access is achieved and reactivity mitigated through long-standing relationships and trust-based entry points, ethnographic data remain inherently partial. Individual interlocutors typically possess limited insight into the organisation's broader strategic dynamics and tend to infer overarching logics from their immediate, localised experiences. Such accounts, while analytically valuable, risk overstating the representativeness of individual perspectives or conflating micro-level practice with macro-level strategy. Furthermore, narratives shaped by ideological conviction, organisational loyalty, or fear of reprisal may obscure, embellish, or selectively omit critical details.

The thesis addresses these risks through within-case causal analysis and process tracing, which test the plausibility of ethnographic insights against observed organisational shifts, documented decisions, and doctrinal changes (George and Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011). Partial accounts are treated as situated narratives rather than definitive representations. Their validity is assessed according to their convergence with other forms of evidence, their internal consistency over time, and their explanatory power within broader causal sequences. This approach transforms partiality from a weakness into a resource, offering insight into how narratives are constructed, circulated, and contested within the organisation.

2.5.4 Temporal Instability and Longitudinal Comparability

A further methodological challenge concerns the temporal instability of ethnographic knowledge in contexts characterised by rapid adaptation. Hezbollah's strategic objectives, internal structures, and doctrinal emphases have evolved significantly over four decades in response to shifting geopolitical conditions, military pressures, and domestic political dynamics. Leadership reshuffles, decentralisation of decision-making, changes in training regimens, and evolving communication practices have all altered the organisation's internal landscape. These transformations complicate longitudinal comparison and risk rendering earlier observations obsolete or misleading (Schmid, 2013; Staniland, 2014).

To address this challenge, the study employs longitudinal field engagement and process tracing. Rather than treating Hezbollah as a static object of analysis, the thesis focuses on sequences of change and the causal mechanisms that drive adaptation. Five critical junctures, the 1982 Israeli invasion, the 2000 Israeli withdrawal, the 2006 war, the 2013–2014 interventions in Syria and Iraq, the 2023 Gaza conflict and the 2024 third war on Lebanon, serve as anchor points for comparison and shifts in doctrine and objectives. By analysing continuity and transformation across these moments, the study captures the dynamic nature of Hezbollah's evolution and situates its findings within a temporal framework that reflects the organisation's adaptive character.

2.5.5 Survivorship Bias and Narration under Threat

Survivorship bias presents a further constraint. Post-2023 data disproportionately reflect the perspectives of actors who survived intensified security conditions, adapted to organisational changes, or maintained access to trusted networks. The voices of those eliminated, silenced, or marginalised are necessarily absent, skewing the evidentiary balance. Similarly, narration under threat, the strategic exaggeration or downplaying of capabilities, cohesion, or intent, is a persistent risk during periods of heightened targeting and surveillance.

The study mitigates these risks through careful source evaluation and conservative interpretation. Narratives that could not be independently corroborated were qualified, treated as hypotheses rather than established findings, or excluded where their evidential basis was insufficient. Discrepancies across sources are analysed for what they reveal about strategic communication and organisational messaging, rather than dismissed as noise. Where significant uncertainty remains, the analysis acknowledges these limits and refrains from over-interpretation.

2.6 Methodological Synthesis and Contribution: Epistemological and Ontological Foundations

The methodology combines a constructivist epistemology with a critical realist ontology. This framework permits the thesis to examine how meanings, narratives and identities shape Hezbollah's conduct while recognising the causal influence of material conditions, including military asymmetry, geopolitical constraints and resource flows. The methods selected translate this philosophical framework into an integrated empirical strategy.

2.6.1 Original Data and Longitudinal Access: A Unique Empirical Foundation

The empirical foundation combines thirty six numbered anonymised interview records documenting separate encounters, some involving recurring interlocutors, with longitudinal fieldnotes, Arabic language primary documents and original translations. Covering the period from 1985 to 2025, this body of evidence provides unusual temporal depth and permits the thesis to examine organisational development, strategic adaptation and changing interpretations across four decades. Its contribution lies in the longitudinal comparison and triangulation of testimony, documentary evidence, field observation and observable developments.

This corpus makes it possible to identify developments that may remain obscured in studies confined to shorter periods. It permits analysis of changes in Hezbollah's conception of deterrence, its internal governance and its relationship with Iran, while distinguishing

contemporaneous evidence from retrospective interpretation. The thesis therefore draws on sustained observation and functionally relevant testimony without treating access or familiarity as guarantees of evidential certainty.

2.6.2 Multi-Method Integration: From Micro-Practices to Macro-Theory

The methodological contribution lies in integrating process tracing, discourse analysis, longitudinal ethnographic fieldnotes and critical security analysis within a single explanatory framework. Rather than operating independently, these methods connect causal sequences, actors' interpretations, everyday practices and broader structures of power. Their integration permits the thesis to examine how external pressures, internal adaptations, narratives, rituals and institutional practices interact in producing strategic outcomes.

This integrated approach connects everyday practices to wider strategic and political phenomena. For instance, the thesis examines how rituals commemorating martyrdom can normalise sacrifice, legitimise endurance and contribute to deterrence. The analysis approaches welfare provision not simply as social policy, but as a potential mechanism of embedded sovereignty through which Hezbollah extends its influence beyond the battlefield. By integrating these perspectives, the methodology supports a detailed and theoretically informed account of how power is constructed, maintained and projected.

2.6.3 Integrating Methodology with the Wider Thesis

The methodology outlined here provides the foundation for the broader analytical architecture of the thesis. It enables the subsequent chapters to examine how Hezbollah's legitimacy has been constructed and sustained, how its deterrence doctrine has evolved, how its alliances have been managed and recalibrated, and how its endurance challenges prevailing understandings of conflict and power. In relation to the three research objectives, process tracing examines the mechanisms enabling strategic non-defeat, discourse analysis investigates the meanings attached to sacrifice, victory and defeat, and longitudinal ethnographic evidence illuminates social embeddedness and the performance of sovereignty functions. Together, these methods provide the empirical and analytical foundations for the concepts of embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience and deterrence by narrative.

2.6.4 Conclusion: A Methodology Built for Complexity

The methodological framework presented here responds to the empirical complexity of Hezbollah as an armed hybrid non-state actor that has endured sustained military, political, economic and informational pressure. Its longevity, organisational opacity, social embeddedness and changing regional role require a research design capable of examining both material causal mechanisms and actors' interpretations of legitimacy, sacrifice, victory and defeat. By combining longitudinal access, confidential testimony, documentary evidence, process tracing, discourse analysis and ethnographic fieldnotes, the thesis develops an integrated methodological design suited to this complexity. This design supports an explanation of how armed hybrid non-state actors endure, adapt and exercise political and strategic agency under pressure from materially superior adversaries.

2.7 Applied Relevance and Professional Practice

The methodological tools developed in this thesis can support diplomacy, defence, intelligence analysis and humanitarian practice. Appendices A to C make elements of the methodological architecture accessible as resources for practitioners.

These applied tools remain grounded in the epistemological and ontological commitments of the thesis. From a constructivist perspective, understanding how actors produce and perform legitimacy is central to effective engagement. From a critical realist perspective, the analytical tools developed here remain sensitive to the military, economic and institutional constraints that exert causal influence on behaviour. The resulting framework maintains theoretical consistency while remaining adaptable to the practical requirements of policy analysis and field operations.

Together, these sections demonstrate how abductive reasoning, triangulation and reflexive transparency operate across the research design. They also show how the integrated methodology can inform academic analysis and professional practice in diplomacy, defence, intelligence and humanitarian contexts.

Chapter 3.

From Doctrine to Organisation: Ideology, Occupation and the Making of Embedded Sovereignty

This section uses process tracing, discourse analysis and triangulated ethnographic field evidence to reconstruct ideology as an organisational mechanism rather than a static belief system. It principally addresses Objective 2 by examining how ideology and narrative distinguish material loss and sacrifice from strategic defeat, while also contributing to Objective 1 through its explanation of organisational endurance and to Objective 3 through its examination of conditional allegiance, autonomous agency and embedded sovereignty.

Methodologically, it proceeds by (i) genealogically mapping wilāyat al faqīh from early debates on authority through Safavid and Qajar institutionalisations to Khomeini's twentieth century reformulation, (ii) juxtaposing Najaf and Qom as rival interpretive traditions, and (iii) locating Hezbollah's doctrinal choices within Lebanon's plural and consociational constraints. The chapter's core finding is that Hezbollah's relationship to Iran is best captured as conditional allegiance rather than proxy obedience: the walī al faqīh is treated as a living juristic authority whose legitimacy depends on competence, justice and the safeguarding of the interests of the community, the state and religion. This doctrinal conditionality becomes a political technology, enabling Hezbollah to claim transnational religious legitimacy while maintaining operational autonomy in Lebanon (Mavani, 2013; Dabashi, 1989; Nasr, 2006; Louër, 2012).

Within the framework of this thesis, *wilāyat al faqīh* is not proposed as a fourth analytical concept, but as a doctrinal mechanism contributing differently to the three concepts. It supports embedded sovereignty by providing religious legitimacy and internal authority that Hezbollah translates into locally rooted governance, welfare and protection. It contributes to deterrence by narrative by supplying the moral vocabulary through which resistance becomes a duty, sacrifice is distinguished from defeat, and endurance can be represented as victory. It contributes to deterrence by resilience by reinforcing organisational cohesion, discipline and continuity under pressure, while its conditional interpretation permits adaptation to Lebanese political conditions rather than automatic compliance with Iranian command. Its causal significance therefore lies not in doctrine alone, but in how Hezbollah translates doctrine into organisational and social practice.

Protected testimony reinforces this interpretation. A participant responsible for religious education explained that "*wilāyat al faqīh* is our compass. Without it, we are like a ship without a captain. However, the Shia have a choice to select their spiritual leader" (Appendix B, Ideological Legitimacy (IDEO), item 2, Head of Religious Education, 1990s). The statement combines doctrinal orientation with acknowledged choice. Religious authority provides cohesion, legitimacy and strategic direction, but does not in itself establish an Iranian chain of command.

The chapter's explanatory contribution to embedded sovereignty lies in showing how spiritual authority and local governance are fused without requiring state capture. By treating doctrinal loyalty as moral orientation rather than command hierarchy, Hezbollah can translate religious legitimacy into locally embedded authority through welfare, ritual, and institutional participation, while remaining compatible with Lebanon's pluralism (Alagha, 2011; Norton, 2014; Cammett, 2014; Deeb, 2006). This moves the analysis beyond binary debates of

Lebanonisation versus Iranian control by demonstrating the organisational work ideology performs: it stabilises internal cohesion, legitimises sacrifice, and anchors reciprocal obligations between movement and constituency.

The chapter also advances deterrence by narrative by examining how religious symbolism, commemorative practices and martyrdom discourse provide a moral framework through which sacrifice is distinguished from defeat and endurance can be represented as victory (Deeb, 2006; Harb, 2010). Ideological discourse is therefore not merely justificatory: it shapes the interpretive environment in which costs are assessed by supporters and adversaries. Deterrence by resilience is likewise clarified: the chapter shows how bounded doctrinal flexibility, combined with welfare provision and pluralist accommodation, produces shock absorption capacity and reduces the organisational fragility that often follows leadership decapitation or battlefield loss (Cammett, 2014; Blanford, 2011; Salamey, 2009; Haddad, 2020).

The principal limitation is evidentiary asymmetry. The chapter's theological and historical reconstruction is strong, but the causal link from doctrine to decision-making can risk appearing inferential where interview access is intermittent and where internal deliberations remain structurally opaque. Nonetheless, the chapter's principal contribution is conceptual: it establishes ideology as a malleable, strategically redeployable resource that underwrites embedded sovereignty and sustains both narrative and resilience-based deterrence across shifting political conditions (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002; Norton, 2014; Alagha, 2011; Deeb, 2006).

Occupation, mobilisation and the emergence of embedded sovereignty

This section provides the historical and causal bridge between ideological formation and organisational institutionalisation. It applies process tracing, discourse analysis and triangulated ethnographic and documentary evidence to show how the Israeli invasion and subsequent occupation transformed doctrinal resources into lived organisational practice. The central finding is that occupation did not simply produce resistance; it generated the social and moral infrastructure through which ideology became operational, anchoring embedded sovereignty, deterrence by narrative and deterrence by resilience.

Methodologically, the analysis reconstructs a causal sequence linking invasion, state collapse, communal mobilisation and organisational consolidation. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon exposed the incapacity of the Lebanese state to provide protection and governance to its citizens, producing a vacuum in which communal actors assumed sovereign functions (Norton, 2014; Jaber, 1997). Occupation practices, including collective punishment, surveillance and proxy governance through the South Lebanon Army, intensified sectarianised experiences of insecurity and abandonment (Human Rights Watch, 1996). These conditions catalysed the translation of Shiʿi theological idioms into political mobilisation, reframing resistance as both moral obligation and practical necessity (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002; Deeb, 2006).

Convergent protected testimony obtained retrospectively from several military commanders with relevant operational knowledge indicates that the group responsible for the 1983 barracks attacks on the US Marines and the French paratroopers was organisationally separate from Hezbollah's emerging structures at the time of the operation, although

individuals associated with that group subsequently joined Hezbollah (Appendix C, Protected Retrospective Evidential Note 1).

Their later affiliation appears to have contributed to the retrospective attribution of the operation to Hezbollah as an already unified organisation. Because the testimony concerns a clandestine operation and cannot be disclosed fully, it does not conclusively settle the historical controversy. It nevertheless identifies a significant analytical problem: later organisational membership should not be treated automatically as evidence of prior institutional authorisation.

The chapter's contribution to embedded sovereignty lies in demonstrating how authority migrated from the absent state to communal structures capable of delivering protection, welfare and meaning. Hezbollah's early consolidation rested not only on Iranian assistance but on its ability to embed itself within local networks of solidarity, ritual and service provision, transforming defence into governance (Hamzeh, 2004; Cammett, 2014). Sovereignty was thus enacted socially before it was institutionalised politically, establishing the organisational foundations later examined in governance chapters.

Deterrence by narrative emerges through the sacralisation of suffering and the reinterpretation of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn at Karbala, Iraq, as a contemporary political language. Martyrdom discourse, ritual commemoration and media production converted loss into legitimacy and endurance into moral authority, shaping both internal discipline and external perception (Deeb, 2006; Harb, 2010). Violence was framed not merely as retaliation but as defence of dignity, enabling Hezbollah to construct a narrative environment in which restraint and sacrifice reinforced credibility.

Deterrence by resilience is clarified through the organisational adaptations forged under occupation. Decentralised operational structures, community-embedded logistics and welfare provision created a system capable of absorbing leadership losses and military pressure while maintaining legitimacy (Blanford, 2011; Byman, 2005). The fusion of armed struggle with social provision transformed resistance from episodic insurgency into an enduring social order, stabilising support and reducing vulnerability to external coercion.

The principal limitation lies in evidentiary asymmetry between observable practices and internal decision-making processes. While the causal chain linking occupation to mobilisation is strongly supported by historical and ethnographic material, the micro-mechanisms through which ideological interpretation translated into strategic choice remain partly inferential where access to internal deliberation is restricted.

Despite these constraints, the section performs a critical structural role. It establishes occupation as the historical crucible in which ideology became organisational mechanism, linking doctrinal formation to governance and deterrence. By demonstrating how coercion, abandonment and mobilisation produced a durable architecture of legitimacy, it provides the causal hinge through which embedded sovereignty, narrative deterrence and resilience deterrence move from conceptual claims to empirically grounded explanation (Norton, 2014; Hamzeh, 2004; Cammett, 2014; Deeb, 2006).

From Parliament to Government after 2005: Institutionalising Resistance

This section uses process tracing, discourse analysis and triangulated field evidence to explain how Hezbollah translated wartime legitimacy into a durable mode of political order after Syria's withdrawal. It treats key episodes after 2005 as causal tests of the thesis argument: that endurance rests on the capacity to embed authority inside weak state structures while preserving coercive autonomy. The chapter tracks how the post-2000 claim of victory after Israel's unconditional withdrawal created momentum for Hezbollah's resistance narrative, before the 2005 rupture forced strategic adaptation under intensified domestic and international pressure to disarm, including through the political activation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 (2004) (Norton, 2014; Mulhern, 2012; Burleigh, 2021; El Hokayem, 2007).

The core finding is that executive participation functioned less as ideological moderation than as a protective technology. By moving from a posture of moral distance towards selective cabinet engagement, Hezbollah sought access to decision-making arenas that could threaten its security architecture, while preserving intra Shia equilibrium with Amal Movement and managing reputational risks associated with Lebanon's clientelist governance (Norton, 2014). The Mar Mikhael (Beirut) Agreement is analysed as a legitimacy bridge that widened the movement's claim to national representation within consociational constraints, making embedded sovereignty work across sectarian boundaries rather than only within a communal frame (Salamey, 2009).

For embedded sovereignty, the chapter's contribution is to show how authority migrates into the interstices of the state: welfare provision and ministerial access convert resistance capital into routine governance presence, producing a hybrid configuration in which the movement operates both through state channels and through parallel institutions (Cammett, 2014; Daher, 2016; Saouli, 2019). Deterrence by narrative is developed through the political use of sovereignty language and the insistence on the formula of "Army, People, Resistance", which reframes arms not as a militia residue but as a national defence instrument, while contrasting this with Israel's persistent violations of Lebanese sovereignty (Norton, 2014).

Deterrence by resilience is most sharply illuminated in the May 2008 episode: the government's attempt to dismantle Hezbollah's communications network is treated as a red line challenge to organisational survivability, met by calibrated coercion and then converted into institutional veto capacity through the Doha outcome, which normalised negotiated limits on state action against Hezbollah's core interests (International Crisis Group, 2008; Perry, 2008; Khatib, 2021; El Husseini, 2012).

The main limitation is evidentiary opacity around internal deliberation. The argument is persuasive at the level of mechanisms and sequence, but the causal microprocess linking leadership judgement to specific policy choices can remain inferential because decision-making is structurally shielded and field access is necessarily uneven. A second constraint is interpretive: episodes like May 2008 carry competing communal readings that can complicate claims about deterrence logic, even when the process tracing is coherent (International Crisis Group, 2008; Daher, 2016).

Regional projection and the limits of embedded sovereignty

This section analyses Hezbollah's post 2011 regional projection as a test of whether its Lebanese model of authority can travel beyond its home ecosystem. Methodologically, it follows the Chapter 2 framework by combining process tracing with discourse analysis and triangulated field and documentary evidence, treating field proximity as an analytical variable controlled through abductive coding and cross-checking rather than as narrative authority. The core move is comparative: Syria, Iraq, and Yemen are read as distinct sites where practices of resistance and solidarity are translated into mechanisms of influence, and where the limits of that translation become visible.

The principal finding is that regional engagement expands Hezbollah's strategic reach while eroding the opacity that previously sustained deterrence. In Syria, the movement shifts from restrained involvement framed as shrine and border defence to open expeditionary warfare, with al Qusayr operating as a pivotal episode that demonstrates capability and resolve while increasing visibility and costs (Mroue, 2013; Harkin, 2016; Aziz, 2013; Choucair, 2013). Cooperation with Syrian and Russian forces enhances combined arms competence and logistical depth, yet it also exposes routes, depots, and commanders to surveillance and targeting, converting strategic depth into strategic exposure (Parker, 2020; Alfoneh, 2018).

The analysis identifies misalignment among partners, including Russia's state-centred objectives, Iran's personalised investment and Hezbollah's narrower logistical and deterrence priorities. This helps explain why apparent battlefield convergence masks structural fragility (Bertrand, 2015; Majidyar, 2017; Tokmajyan, 2024).

In Iraq, Hezbollah's influence travels primarily through training and mediation rather than command, shaping militia practice and political bargaining while remaining bounded by Iraqi fragmentation and the primacy of Iranian coordination (Mahmoudian, 2024; Mansour, 2021). In Yemen, the relationship is more symbolic than operational, with technical mentoring and media framing supporting an Axis narrative despite doctrinal difference, illustrating how narrative can travel further than institutional embeddedness (Knights, al Gabarni and Coombs, 2022; Ardemagni, 2024; Nichols and Irish, 2024).

Conceptually, the section advances embedded sovereignty by showing portability in part, through networks and meaning, not through full ecosystem reproduction. It develops deterrence by narrative by tracking how sacralised frames authorise sacrifice and redescribe projection as defence (Rezamand, 2010; Alikhani, 2013; Gilbert, 2013). It refines deterrence by resilience by demonstrating adaptation at scale, then tracing the reversal where expansion hardens organisational routines and increases exposure, weakening deterrent credibility despite accrued competence (Wahab, 2022). The main limitation is evidentiary asymmetry across the three theatres. Some operational details cannot be independently verified, requiring cautious interpretation and corroboration through documentary and academic sources.

The 2024–2025 Hezbollah-Israel war functions as the empirical stress test of this chapter's argument. It revealed the structural limits of projecting embedded sovereignty beyond the social compact that sustains it in Lebanon: logistical depth became exposure, regional reach produced traceability, and deterrence by resilience encountered the constraints of scale. Yet these reversals did not signify organisational collapse. Rather, they clarified the conditional nature of Hezbollah's deterrence model. Resilience persisted through rapid organisational recomposition, while deterrence by narrative shifted from regional projection back to the

defence of community and territory. The episode therefore confirms the thesis's central claim: embedded sovereignty is portable only in part, and its effectiveness depends on the density of the social environment in which it is enacted.

Chapter 3 therefore explains Hezbollah's endurance as the product of ideology translated into organisational cohesion, social obligation and institutional continuity, rather than doctrine operating independently of practice. Chapter 4 develops the next stage of this causal process by examining how these ideological commitments became operationalised through military structures, strategic discipline and an adaptive doctrine of deterrence.

Chapter 4

Hezbollah's Doctrine of Deterrence – Strategy, Weaponry, and Diplomacy

Building on the interpretive–realist and abductive framework outlined, this chapter analyses how Hezbollah's military doctrine evolved from local resistance into an institutionalised system of strategic deterrence. It traces how the movement transformed survival into a structured logic fusing military capability, political legitimacy, and adaptive learning. The analysis draws on triangulated field and documentary evidence, including confidential interviews, public discourse, available literature, and open-source intelligence, to ensure methodological transparency and epistemological continuity with the rest of the thesis.

The present chapter focuses on the internal doctrine through which Hezbollah developed and sustained its deterrent capacity. It shows how the organisation's strategy matured through successive confrontations, from the 2006 war to targeted assassinations, cyber operations and the 2022 maritime border negotiations, and how these experiences contributed to a durable system of coercive credibility. By examining deterrence as a distinct doctrinal field, the chapter argues that Hezbollah's endurance stems less from material parity than from its ability to convert adversity into organisational learning, strategic communication and disciplined action.

4.1 Introduction – From Resistance to Strategic Deterrence

Hezbollah's military doctrine evolved from a guerrilla movement designed to liberate occupied Lebanese territory into a multi-layered deterrence structure. This deterrence aimed at imposing costs, denying decisive outcomes, and ensuring organisational survival against a technologically superior adversary. After 2006, this doctrine expanded beyond small-unit warfare to encompass a quasi-army, missile-based deterrence, precision-guided munitions, drones, naval strike capabilities, cyber operations, and indirect diplomacy, most visibly during the 2022 maritime border negotiations.

In adopting the operational logic of a quasi-regular centralised army, Hezbollah strengthened its deterrent posture but also exposed itself to Israel's superior intelligence reach and firepower. The chapter demonstrates that Hezbollah's deterrence strategy is not static but a dynamic process of adaptation, organisational learning, and strategic patience. By distinguishing this evolution from the broader '*Axis of Resistance*' narrative, Hezbollah emerges as an autonomous actor whose deterrent power fuses military capability with political legitimacy.

Protected interview evidence used in this chapter spans 1993 to 2025 and is linked to the relevant entries in Appendix C. This evidence is assessed alongside published scholarship, official statements, open-source material and independently observable outcomes, with claims qualified where corroboration remains incomplete.

4.2 From Guerrilla Resistance to Missile Deterrence

4.2.1 The Evolution of Deterrence Thinking

In its early campaigns in the occupied part of southern Lebanon, Hezbollah relied on small, highly mobile units, conducting hit-and-run raids, ambushes, and improvised explosive device attacks to harass and exhaust Israeli forces with only limited involvement in external

conflicts. Although effective at the tactical level, this approach had clear limitations: it could not escalate beyond small-scale engagements, depended heavily on terrain familiarity and limited resources, and rested on the assumption that Israeli political leaders would remain sensitive to mounting military casualties. Only after eighteen years of cumulative attrition, during which Hezbollah inflicted steady losses on Israeli forces, did this approach yield strategic dividends, convincing Israeli leadership of the necessity to withdraw from most Lebanese territory.

Testimony from a participant directly involved in Hezbollah's military organisation illustrates how this strategy was understood internally. During Israel's 1993 Operation Accountability, a Head of Military Unit explained: "We timed our fire to show we could answer and survive (seek refuge). The lesson is simple: if the occupier escalates, we endure; if he pauses, we prepare" (Appendix C, Entry 7, Head of Military Unit, Bekaa Valley, April 1993). This testimony indicates that calibrated retaliation and organisational survival were already being conceived together before the Israeli withdrawal. Deterrence developed through the demonstrated capacity to absorb escalation, maintain retaliatory fire and use periods of reduced confrontation to prepare for subsequent pressure.

Israel's withdrawal further emboldened Iran to deepen its financial and military support for Hezbollah. This increased backing fuelled Hezbollah's growing confidence for a larger role and contributed to its decision to ambush and capture Israeli soldiers, an operation that ultimately triggered the 2006 war (Marcus, 2018). That confidence, shaped by a belief in its expanding capabilities, produced an overconfidence that failed to anticipate the scale of Israel's response: a full-scale, devastating war against Lebanon (McCarthy, 2006).

By the late 2000s, Hezbollah had begun to move beyond episodic guerrilla harassment towards a comprehensive deterrence doctrine built around missile capabilities, protracted confrontation, and psychological signalling. This included repeated threats to launch incursions and to temporarily occupy parts of Israeli-controlled Galilee in the event of future conflict (Schweitzer, Mizrahi and Shapira, 2023; Zehavi and Beeri, 2024). This shift was driven by a recognition that deterrence need not rely on territorial control; instead, it could rest on the ability to raise the costs beyond Israel's tolerance threshold. As Saade (2016) argued, Hezbollah came to understand that survival in the face of overwhelming force, coupled with the ability to impose sustained damage, could itself be reframed as a form of victory.

This doctrinal reorientation reshaped Hezbollah's strategic posture. The group embarked on the accumulation of increasingly sophisticated missile systems, dispersed launch platforms to improve survivability and reinforced its command structures to withstand decapitation attempts. The effect was to transform resistance from an episodic response into an enduring strategic threat. The resulting hybrid doctrine combined material capability with psychological signalling, projecting resilience to Israel while strengthening Hezbollah's legitimacy within its domestic support base.

4.2.2 The 2006 War Legacy

The July–August 2006 war represented the crucible in which Hezbollah's deterrence doctrine fully matured. Sparked by Hezbollah's cross-border raid and followed by Israel's full-scale assault, the conflict concluded not with Hezbollah's dismantling but with a strategic stalemate. Israel failed to disarm or decisively cripple the organisation, let alone capture its

leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, as the Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz had publicly promised during the war (Matthews, 2008, p. 124). Instead, Hezbollah sustained daily rocket fire into northern Israel, disrupting Israeli operational planning and eroding long-held assumptions of military superiority.

Hezbollah's leadership characterised the outcome as a 'divine victory' (Slackman and O'Neil, 2006). This claim rested not on territorial gains but on the group's survival and Israel's eventual request for a ceasefire after failing to achieve its principal military objectives. Hezbollah retained its leadership, preserved sufficient command infrastructure to continue operating and maintained rocket and missile fire until the ceasefire took effect. This narrative strengthened Hezbollah's internal legitimacy and inaugurated a deterrence model centred on endurance, attrition and strategic patience (Norton, 2014; Harb, 2011).

Contemporary testimony demonstrates how this conception of victory was articulated within the military organisation during the war. A Military Commander on the Southern Front explained: "They bombed bridges, airports, and homes, yet the rockets are still launched. Our strength is not striking harder, but striking even when they believe us broken. To resist, to refuse to raise the white flag, that is victory" (Appendix C, Entry 15, Military Commander, Southern Front, South Beirut, July 2006). This testimony identifies the connection between the two forms of deterrence developed in this thesis. The continued ability to retaliate despite sustained attack constituted deterrence by resilience, while presenting survival and refusal to surrender as victory converted that endurance into deterrence by narrative.

In the war's aftermath, Hezbollah undertook a comprehensive reorganisation of its military structure. It prioritised decentralisation, redundancy, and tactical flexibility, developing extensive underground networks, intensifying urban warfare training, and refining concealment techniques. These measures were not merely tactical innovations but doctrinal adaptations designed for future conflicts. The expectation was that a subsequent war would begin with an Israeli first strike, which Hezbollah would absorb before retaliating on a massive scale and sustaining combat under degraded conditions.

Drawing on Daher's (2016) analysis of Hezbollah's political and social development, this thesis interprets the period as a transition towards deterrence as governance. The group's growing military power became an umbrella for its political legitimacy and social infrastructure. The 2006 conflict thus not only demonstrated Hezbollah's capacity for resilience but also underscored the heavy costs of war, which Hezbollah leveraged to present itself as a rational strategic actor rather than a reckless easy-to-defeat militia.

4.3 Building the Deterrent Arsenal: Missiles, Drones, and Anti-Ship Capabilities

4.3.1 Missile Proliferation

Hezbollah's deterrence strategy rests on a vast and carefully diversified missile arsenal. Since the early 2000s, the movement has built this capability methodically, expanding from short-range Katyusha rockets to medium- and long-range systems such as the *Fateh-110*, *Zelzal*, and precision-guided *M-600*. Supplied primarily through Iranian networks and Syrian logistical corridors, these weapons formed the backbone of Hezbollah's escalation strategy (Alfoneh, 2013).

Yet the deterrent value of this arsenal lies not merely in the missiles themselves, but in Hezbollah's ability to preserve its launch capabilities and continue firing under sustained attack. Over the past two decades, Hezbollah has constructed a dense and adaptive launch architecture, including subterranean platforms, mobile launchers, and elaborate decoy sites, designed to ensure that even under sustained attack, enough capacity would survive to strike back. By 2022, independent estimates suggested that the organisation possessed thousands of projectiles, including precision-guided systems (Allison, 2023). These capabilities enable Hezbollah to threaten airports, energy infrastructure, and military installations deep inside Israel, imposing strategic costs far beyond its scale as a non-state actor (Bachega and Moench, 2025).

Participant testimony clarifies how the arsenal was intended to deter and influence Israeli decision-making, rather than merely increase Hezbollah's destructive capacity. A Jihadi Council Member explained during the 2006 war: "Our red line was clear: if they strike Beirut, we strike Haifa and even Tel Aviv […] This balance of deterrence kept Israel hesitant" (Appendix C, Entry16, Jihadi Council Member, South Beirut, August 2006). The testimony shows that missile capability acquired strategic significance through communicated thresholds and the adversary's anticipation of retaliation. Material capability and deterrence by narrative therefore operated together: the arsenal made retaliation possible, while the declared red line translated that capability into restraint.

Within Israel, Hezbollah's missile power is no longer perceived as a nuisance to be managed but as a strategic constraint shaping every military and political calculation. In February 2025, former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant recalled a tense discussion with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 11 October 2023, during one of the most uncertain moments of the Gaza conflict. Gallant urged authorising a pre-emptive strike on Hezbollah's leadership and missile network, arguing that Israel could destroy 'more than ninety per cent' of the group's arsenal. Netanyahu reportedly gestured towards the Tel Aviv skyline and replied that even the remaining ten per cent would be enough to 'destroy everything you see'. Gallant later described that refusal as Israel's 'greatest missed opportunity', a revealing admission of how deeply Hezbollah's deterrent power has entered Israel's strategic imagination. In that exchange, deterrence had already shifted from capability to perception, from the material presence of missiles to the story they told (Times of Israel, 2025).

For nearly two decades, Hezbollah's reputation alone has produced a form of deterrence by narrative that induced hesitation at the highest levels of Israeli decision-making. That a non-state actor could influence the behaviour of one of the world's most technologically advanced militaries, supported by the United States and endowed with near-total surveillance superiority, remains one of the most striking features of modern asymmetric warfare.

The absence of a major Israeli offensive against Hezbollah between 2006 and 2024 is consistent with a deterrent effect, although it cannot by itself establish the reasons for Israeli restraint. Deterrence by narrative thus refers to shaping adversarial perception through communicative and symbolic action, whereas deterrence by resilience relies on demonstrated endurance and recovery capacity; the two interact but remain analytically distinct.

4.3.2 Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and Naval Capabilities

Although Hezbollah did not participate directly in the 2022 maritime border negotiations between Lebanon and Israel, its influence was decisive (Svetlova, 2022). The group shaped

both the content and the tone of the talks through a calibrated strategy of coercive signalling. Throughout the negotiations, Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah repeatedly warned, via speeches and affiliated media, that any Israeli attempt to exploit the Karish gas field before a deal was signed would provoke a military response (Ravid, 2022a).

This indirect influence, often described as shadow diplomacy,[3] reshaped Israel's cost-benefit calculus without formal engagement. Israeli officials later acknowledged that the risk of confrontation with Hezbollah was a major factor behind their decision to agree (McKernan, 2022). In this way, Hezbollah extended its deterrent power into the diplomatic arena, turning the latent threat of conflict into leverage for de-escalation (Sobelman, 2023). It also achieved what the Lebanese state could not: compelling Israel to make concessions that would have remained unattainable through conventional diplomacy.

The clearest expression of this strategy came in July 2022, when Hezbollah launched three unarmed drones towards the Karish platform. All were intercepted, one by an F-16 and two by Israeli naval units, but the operation was never meant to cause damage. It was a calculated signal of resolve and deterrence, designed to defend Lebanon's maritime claims (Ravid, 2022b; France 24, 2022; Schweitzer, Mizrahi and Shapir, 2023). The choice of unarmed reconnaissance drones rather than armed platforms was deliberate; it showcased capability while stopping short of a direct attack, underscoring Hezbollah's intention to influence Israel's behaviour without triggering open conflict. Nevertheless, such signalling carried an inherent risk of miscalculation, since repeated incursions could have generated pressure for an Israeli military response even when Hezbollah intended to remain below the threshold of war.

This episode reveals the deeper theoretical logic at the heart of Hezbollah's deterrence doctrine. What unfolded in 2022 was not merely coercive bargaining but a demonstration of deterrence by narrative, the strategic use of perception and communicative action to shape adversarial decision-making. By deploying unarmed drones and orchestrating the surrounding media discourse, Hezbollah transformed a symbolic act into a credible signal of resolve, thereby influencing the diplomatic process without direct negotiation.

Its ability to influence negotiations conducted formally by the Lebanese state illustrates the mechanism of embedded sovereignty developed in this thesis: a form of authority that operates through, yet beyond, formal state institutions. The Karish affair primarily exemplifies deterrence by narrative because communicated resolve and symbolic military action shaped adversarial expectations while remaining below the threshold of open conflict.

The drone incident formed part of a broader campaign of strategic pressure. Hezbollah-linked media amplified threats of retaliation, while visible troop movements in southern Lebanon heightened perceptions of imminent escalation. Israeli officials later admitted that the risk of war influenced their decision to finalise the agreement (McKernan, 2022). The deal, signed in October 2022, granted Lebanon exploration rights in the Qana prospect and ended a decades-

[3] While the term shadow diplomacy appears in the literature to describe informal and covert diplomatic channels (Martin, 2021; ICIJ/ProPublica, 2022), here it refers to Hezbollah's indirect influence over formal negotiations via coercive signalling and deterrent posture. The term shadow diplomacy is used here as an empirical manifestation of deterrence by narrative, that is, indirect influence over formal negotiations through coercive signalling and perception management, rather than a separate category of action.

long maritime dispute. Although Hezbollah's role was never formally recognised, its deterrent posture was central to the outcome (Sobelman, 2023).

Despite the diplomatic breakthrough, the agreement's material impact has so far been limited. Lebanon has yet to begin oil or gas extraction, and the deal remains largely unimplemented. For Hezbollah, however, the result was less about immediate economic benefit than about demonstrating its ability to shape state behaviour and exercise coercive leverage without resorting to war. The Karish episode epitomises Hezbollah's strategy of projecting credible resolve while remaining below the threshold of escalation, a method that has guided its deterrence logic since 2006.

The re-election of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in late 2022 and the outbreak of the 2024 Israel–Lebanon war complicated implementation. Israeli officials have since indicated that Lebanese offshore extraction is unlikely in the near future, while shifting regional dynamics and the erosion of Hezbollah's deterrent credibility have weakened the agreement's momentum (Kayssi, 2024; Mizrahi, 2025).

This paradox exposes a central tension in Hezbollah's deterrence doctrine. The group's coercive credibility was strong enough to compel diplomatic concessions but insufficient to ensure their consolidation. The Karish case encapsulates both the power and fragility of Hezbollah's deterrence logic: it can shape negotiations and influence state behaviour, yet its durability depends on sustaining legitimacy and resilience in the face of continual strategic attrition. Once that credibility diminishes, as developments after 2024 suggest, even notable diplomatic victories risk remaining confined to paper.

4.4 Israeli Counter-Strategies: Assassinations, Cyber-Warfare, and Pre-emptive Attacks

4.4.1 Decapitation and High-Value Targeting

Targeted assassinations have long formed a central pillar of Israel's strategy against Hezbollah and its allies, intended to disrupt leadership networks, degrade operational capacity, and threaten command cohesion (Daoud and Ecanow, 2024). The approach exploits air and intelligence superiority but repeatedly underestimates Hezbollah's capacity for institutional regeneration and that no leader is indispensable.

On 2 January 2024, a drone strike in Beirut's southern suburbs killed Saleh al-Arouri, Hamas's deputy political leader and liaison with Hezbollah and the IRGC, the first targeted killing of a senior Hamas figure inside Hezbollah-controlled territory since 7 October 2023 (Horn, 2024). Subsequent assassinations, including Hezbollah's top military commander Fuad Shukr and Muhammad Naameh Nasser, commander of Hezbollah's Aziz Unit in July 2024, prompted measured rocket retaliation while avoiding uncontrolled escalation (Young, 2024; Gritten, 2024; Fabian, 2024b).

On 20 September 2024, an airstrike killed Ibrahim Aqil, head of the Radwan Special Force and Jihad Council member, along with his top commanders. On 27–28 September, Hezbollah confirmed the death of Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah after a strike on a fortified bunker in Dahiyeh; days later, Hashem Safieddine was also killed (Lubell and Gebeily, 2024; Saul, Scheer and Rabinovitch, 2024; Bergman *et al*., 2024). Even then, Hezbollah maintained retaliatory operations while attempting to preserve organisational continuity under intensified Israeli pressure.

Historically, decapitation has produced paradoxical effects. Israel's 1992 assassination of Sayyed Abbas al-Mussawi elevated Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, who subsequently professionalised Hezbollah's military and political institutions and transformed it into a long-term strategic actor. Protected testimony indicates that leadership redundancy remained an explicit organisational response to later assassinations.

In January 2024, a Military Commander explained: "Assassinations hurt, but leaders are replaceable. Our structure survives decapitation. Hezbollah is not one man, it is an institution. Every commander killed is already shadowed by two professional and experienced successors" (Appendix C, Entry 29, Military Commander, South Beirut, January 2024). The testimony represents an internal account of organisational preparedness rather than independent proof of the effectiveness of every succession arrangement. Nevertheless, subsequent command continuity provides observable evidence that leadership losses did not produce organisational collapse.

Throughout, Hezbollah sought to maintain retaliatory pressure while rebuilding command capacity and avoiding organisational collapse. This continuing capacity under sustained attack provides evidence of deterrence by resilience, although the scale of the losses also exposed the limits of its pre-war deterrent posture (Sobelman, 2023; Atlantic Council, 2024a). Far from diluting deterrent resolve, successive waves of assassinations reinforced the movement's emphasis on continuity and adaptive deterrence, catalysing the very evolution Israel sought to prevent.

4.4.2 Cyber Operations and Intelligence Breaches

The Israel–Hezbollah contest has increasingly migrated into cyberspace and signals intelligence. Unit 8200, the IDF's principal SIGINT and cyber arm, is widely profiled as executing interception, data exploitation, and offensive operations. In September 2024, coordinated explosions of pagers (17 September) and walkie-talkies (18 September) used by Hezbollah operatives caused mass casualties and severe disruption, an unprecedented intelligence and supply-chain breach widely attributed to an Israeli intelligence operation.

These incidents marked a turning point. Hezbollah began reverting to lower-technology methods, including human couriers and handwritten directives, while maintaining leadership redundancy to reduce the risk of paralysis following simultaneous assassinations (Appendix C, Entries 29 and 32). Such countermeasures illustrate not only operational disruption but also the profound psychological impact of AI, cyber penetration, and disinformation campaigns (Chmouny, 2025). They also forced adaptation, compelling Hezbollah's adversaries to operate with reduced situational awareness.

Direct participant testimony specifies the organisational response to this breach. A Jihadi Council Member explained: "Cyber war is as dangerous as drones. They see our phones, our pagers. We must return to paper and human couriers. Technology is a trap: what connects us also betrays us. Once we fought in tunnels, hiding from their skies; now we must fight in silence to hide from their eyes" (Appendix C, Entry 32, Member of the Jihadi Council, Beirut, February 2025). This testimony demonstrates how technological vulnerability generated organisational adaptation. Hezbollah responded by combining advanced military capability with lower technology communication methods and alternative new communication system, thereby reducing electronic exposure and preserving command continuity. This constitutes deterrence by resilience because the intelligence breach produced

severe disruption without eliminating the organisation's capacity to learn, reorganise and continue operating.

4.4.3 Strategic Buffer Zones

After the 2006 war, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 mandated Israeli withdrawal and empowered UNIFIL to oversee a zone south of the Litani River. In practice, the frontier has remained volatile, with layered Israeli surveillance and recurrent exchanges of fire. The Blue Line functions as a tinderbox; tactical incidents risk rapid miscalculation, and 'buffering' offers no guarantee of de-escalation (Orion, 2024, 2025).

From Hezbollah's perspective, Israeli destruction and displacement of Lebanese villages and inhabitants in 2024 suggested efforts towards a de facto depopulated zone, reinforcing its narrative of armed 'self-defence' and its claimed legitimacy under Article 51 of the UN Charter (Chehayeb, Frankel and Mroue, 2024; United Nations, 1945). These dynamics sustain rather than resolve the deterrence cycle.

4.5 Hezbollah's Strategic Adaptation and Learning Doctrine

The adaptive cycle triggered by successive assassinations exemplifies Hezbollah's broader learning system. Since the early 2000s, the organisation has evolved from a reactive guerrilla force into a structured actor capable of codifying and institutionalising battlefield experience through formal after-action reviews, dedicated training facilities in Lebanon and Syria, and routine officer exchanges with Iran (Hamzeh, 2004; Alagha, 2011). Lessons from 2006, and above all from 2024 war, drove reforms: Change of commanders, decentralised command, storage and bases networks, redundant communications, and flexible hierarchies designed to preserve decision-making continuity under bombardment or leadership loss.

Its tactical repertoire evolved in tandem. Mobile launchers, concealed firing positions and tunnel networks were refined to counter advanced Israeli surveillance and precision targeting. Small, agile artillery small teams capable of rapid redeployment complicated Israeli AI-based targeting in urban and rural terrain during 2024. Parallel investment in emerging technologies, including drone swarms for reconnaissance and psychological disruption and experimental UAVs fitted with acoustic deception to trigger air defences, expanded its capacity to offset Israeli air dominance (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025).

This institutionalisation of deterrence also consolidated Hezbollah's embedded sovereignty: a hybrid form of authority situated within, but not subordinate to, the Lebanese state. Strategically, the posture prioritises endurance over victory, a doctrine of deterrence by resilience that converts organisational survival and recovery into coercive credibility (Marcus, 2018; Sobelman, 2016). Long-term planning cycles emphasise incremental capability-building, psychological preparedness, and social resilience, sustaining deterrence through legitimacy rather than escalation.

Public discourse reinforces this logic by portraying Hezbollah as the defender of Lebanese sovereignty and dignity, entrenching loyalty within its Shia base and limiting internal dissent (Deeb, 2006). The resulting synthesis, doctrinal flexibility, social embeddedness, and political legitimacy, exemplifies deterrence by resilience: endurance itself becomes power, enabling Hezbollah to absorb attrition, regenerate capacity, and persist amid structural asymmetry.

4.6 Conclusion: The Logic of Enduring Deterrence

By the late 2010s, Hezbollah had developed a deterrence doctrine centred on endurance and the capacity to impose strategic costs despite persistent military asymmetry with Israel. This transformation was neither accidental nor purely reactive. It resulted from systematic organisational learning, through which battlefield experience, leadership losses, and technological constraints were translated into operational principles governing planning, communication, and command. The 2006 war marked a decisive stage in the institutionalisation of this doctrine, while subsequent developments, including the 2022 maritime negotiations and the 2024 assassinations, tested its effectiveness and exposed the limitations of earlier strategic assumptions. Deterrence consequently evolved beyond a predominantly military posture into an instrument intended to influence adversary calculations and preserve Hezbollah's political and strategic relevance.

Methodologically, the chapter applied process tracing and abductive reasoning to identify how operational lessons became institutionalised organisational practices. Reflexive awareness of field proximity informed the cross-verification of firsthand observations against documentary and open-source evidence where available. Through the iterative movement between empirical findings and theoretical interpretation, the analysis demonstrates how strategic perceptions, organisational practices, and material constraints interact in shaping deterrence, consistent with the thesis's constructivist–critical realist framework.

Deterrence has thus become closely intertwined with governance and social embeddedness. Hezbollah's ability to sustain support within its constituency provides resources, legitimacy, and institutional foundations that military capabilities alone cannot secure. Equally significant is its capacity for military innovation, particularly the development of adaptive tactics intended to identify and exploit adversary vulnerabilities and sustain retaliatory operations under conditions of conventional inferiority. These political, social, and operational dimensions explain how the organisation has sought to preserve its existence and capacity to fight despite sustained external pressure.

These findings address the first two research objectives. In relation to Objective 1, they establish that Hezbollah's endurance cannot be explained through military capabilities alone, but requires an understanding of the interaction between its organisational structures, operational practices, and political environment. In relation to Objective 2, they distinguish material losses from strategic defeat and organisational survival from effective deterrence. Within Hezbollah's strategic conception, victory does not necessarily require conventional military superiority, but rather the prevention of organisational destruction and the denial of a decisive adversarial outcome. Its continued capacity for resistance therefore supports its claim to remain undefeated, without establishing that every confrontation achieved its intended deterrent effects.

The doctrinal consolidation traced here provides the foundation for the next chapter, which examines deterrence by narrative and how Hezbollah's language of resistance, martyrdom, and sovereignty translates military endurance into claims of political legitimacy and moral authority in the post-2024 landscape.

Chapter 5

Unpacking the Fragmentation and Myth of the '*Axis of Resistance'*

5.1 The Reality of the '*Axis of Resistance'*

This chapter shifts to a more theoretical and relational plane, critically deconstructing the myth of the so-called '*Axis of Resistance'* and examining the tensions that shape it, from intra-axis frictions and symbolic alignments to performative rhetoric and strategic autonomy. It makes three original contributions. First, it reframes the Axis as a virtual deterrence alliance, a decentralised constellation that projects deterrence through synchronised narratives, ritualised displays of solidarity and strategic media performance rather than through integrated command structures or joint operations.

Second, it theorises a pattern of performative solidarity under domestic constraint, showing how actors amplify symbolic unity when costs are low, yet revert to strategic autonomy when escalation would endanger regime survival or social legitimacy. Third, it provides original evidence, drawn from confidential interviews between 2023 and 2025, of Syria's post-2023 non-interventionist posture towards Hezbollah operations, challenging long-standing assumptions of Axis-wide coordination. Together, these findings question conventional alliance models that privilege material integration and instead foreground the importance of symbolic power, narrative infrastructures, and constraint-driven decision-making.

This chapter contributes directly to Objectives 1 and 3 of the thesis. In relation to Objective 1, it examines how Hezbollah's regional affiliations reinforced its strategic depth and deterrent position while allowing the organisation to preserve continuity and autonomous decision-making. In relation to Objective 3, it evaluates Hezbollah's agency within its relationship with Iran and the wider Axis, demonstrating that ideological alignment, material assistance and theatre-specific cooperation did not eliminate the distinct strategic calculations of the participating actors. These findings challenge representations of Hezbollah as a fully controlled Iranian proxy and explain how symbolic synchronisation could generate deterrent credibility without organisational integration.

The Gaza war and its Lebanese extension marked the decisive rupture in the deterrent narrative surrounding the '*Axis of Resistance*'. For approximately eighteen years, particularly after the 2006 Lebanon war, the Axis generated deterrent credibility by projecting the possibility that an attack on one member could provoke responses from several fronts. Its effectiveness did not depend upon an integrated command structure or a binding collective defence agreement. It depended upon strategic ambiguity: Israel and the United States could not know with certainty whether the synchronised language of unity would remain rhetorical or be converted into collective military action under a single command-and-control structure.

This shared imaginary preceded the later formalisation of the '*Axis of Resistance*'. During the Second Intifada, a Head of External Security presented the Lebanese and Palestinian struggles as indivisible: "Palestine is not separate from Lebanon. Our struggle is one. The rifle that liberated Bint Jbeil can one day liberate al-Quds. Every image of a child under fire in Gaza mirrors a child in Tyre or Nabatieh. To imagine a free Lebanon without a free Palestine is to dream of a house without foundations. The cause is indivisible" (Appendix C, Entry 13, Head of External Security, South Beirut, April 2002). This vision reflected the transnational narrative articulated under Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah.

However, the human and material costs imposed on Lebanon, particularly during the 2023–2024 conflict, contributed to a recalibration under his successor, Sheikh Naim Qassem. Rather than abandoning the Palestinian cause, Qassem placed renewed emphasis on the liberation of occupied Lebanese territory and the protection of Lebanon and its population. This shift suggests a narrowing of Hezbollah's immediate strategic priorities from an expansive regional objective towards a more attainable Lebanese one.

Nevertheless, the testimony demonstrates how ideological and symbolic synchronisation could construct the perception of a common regional struggle before any evidence of integrated command. Its significance lies precisely in this distinction: the language of an indivisible cause strengthened deterrent credibility by implying that separate fronts might respond as one, without establishing that the participating organisations were operationally integrated.

Symbolic synchronisation refers here to the recurrent alignment of political vocabulary, public declarations, commemorative practices, media representations and calibrated military threats among organisationally autonomous actors. It should be distinguished from strategic consultation, operational coordination and unified command. Its deterrent effect arose not because these symbolic practices proved the existence of an integrated alliance, but because they left Israel and the United States uncertain as to whether rhetorical solidarity might become coordinated retaliation. The testimony above illustrates this mechanism: the Lebanese and Palestinian fronts were represented as indivisible, even though no permanent authority existed through which one organisation could compel the other to act.

That ambiguity weakened substantially after Hamas launched its attack against Israel on 7 October 2023 without the other Axis members subsequently acting as an integrated military coalition. Hezbollah opened a supporting front but deliberately limited, initially, its operations principally to the Blue Line and the contested Lebanese territories under Israeli occupation. Iran avoided direct intervention, Syria refused operational involvement, Iraqi armed groups acted according to their own domestic political constraints, while Ansar Allah pursued an autonomous campaign from Yemen involving attacks against Israel and commercial shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, without demonstrating the existence of an integrated and coordinated Axis command. Declarations of solidarity continued, but the projected unity of fronts did not materialise as an integrated multi-front regional war.

Hezbollah's response illustrates the separation between declared collective solidarity and autonomous decision-making. An Adviser to the Secretary General explained: "This is not Gaza's war alone. It is the war of the entire Axis. But we choose timing. Lebanon cannot burn unless we decide. Israel wants us dragged into total war, but restraint is also a weapon. Our people expect solidarity, yes, but they also expect survival. The art of deterrence is to act enough to show strength, yet not enough to destroy Lebanon" (Appendix C, Entry 28, Adviser to the Secretary General, Beirut, October 2023).

The testimony combines the language of Axis-wide unity with an explicit assertion that Hezbollah alone determined the timing and extent of its participation. It therefore demonstrates performative solidarity under domestic constraint: Hezbollah affirmed that Gaza concerned the entire Axis while calibrating its operations according to the anticipated consequences for Lebanon and its own constituency. This distinction helps explain why the Axis could project symbolic unity without possessing a collective authority capable of compelling its members to wage an integrated regional war.

The conflict therefore revealed that the Axis had functioned primarily as deterrence by narrative. Its members had synchronised their rhetoric, symbols and declarations sufficiently to create the expectation of collective retaliation without establishing the organisational mechanisms required to guarantee it. After 7 October 2023, the differentiated conduct of Axis members exposed the distinction between narrative cohesion and operational unity. This did not render the individual actors militarily irrelevant, but it weakened the collective deterrent credibility that the Axis had accumulated over the preceding eighteen years.

This failure is likely to impose lasting costs on Iran and the other members of the Axis. Once strategic ambiguity has been exposed, narrative synchronisation alone cannot easily restore the previous expectation of collective action. The experience may consequently become a source of organisational learning, encouraging Iran and its partners to reconsider whether future deterrence requires clearer consultation, agreed thresholds and stronger mechanisms of coordination. Without such changes, continued reliance upon deterrence by narrative risks advertising the fragmentation that it previously concealed.

For more than a decade, the term '*Axis of Resistance*' has circulated in political and academic discourse as shorthand for an ideologically aligned bloc opposing the United States and Israel in West Asia. Behind this label, however, lies a heterogeneous landscape of actors, interests, and agendas. The concept has evolved into a symbolic shorthand encompassing Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and Yemen's *Ansar Allah* movement, yet their interactions reveal a pragmatic pattern of coordination rather than ideological uniformity. What binds these actors together is not command hierarchy but a shared repertoire of narratives – resistance, sovereignty, martyrdom – that function as moral currencies within a regional field of asymmetric power.

The term emerged through rhetorical reappropriation. It was used in 2002 by the Libyan newspaper *Al-Zahf al-Akhdar* in response to United States President George W. Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech (Bush, 2002). It was subsequently adopted in Iranian political discourse (Soage, 2020) as a badge of defiance against United States hegemony. In Iranian and Arab nationalist discourse, the '*Axis of Resistance'* became a mobilising idiom, legitimising a loose coalition united more by opposition to external domination than by shared institutions (Calculli, 2020). From the early 2000s onwards, Iranian, Syrian, Iraqi, Palestinian, and Lebanese media amplified the term, transforming it into a quasi-strategic category that blurred boundaries between political discourse and operational coordination.

Early policy analyses and much of the academic literature reinforced this image of ideological unity (Steinberg, 2021; Wastnidge and Mabon, 2023), regardless of religious difference. Yet empirical evidence points instead to asymmetry and divergence. The conflict following 7 October 2023 exposed these limits with particular clarity. Hezbollah conducted calibrated operations principally along the Blue Line and in contested Lebanese territory while avoiding immediate full-scale war. Iran initially refrained from direct intervention, Syria remained passive, and Iraqi armed groups and Ansar Allah undertook actions whose timing, targets and escalation thresholds reflected their own political and strategic calculations rather than an integrated regional command.

Participant testimony confirms that Iraqi participation remained subject to Iraq's distinct political environment. A Head of the Iraq Dossier explained: "Baghdad politics is quicksand. Iraq must find its own way, but our collaboration with the Iraqi resistance never stops. They will join the battle only if asked" (Appendix C, Entry 30, Head of Iraq Dossier, Baghdad,

June 2024). The testimony does not support the characterisation of Iraqi armed groups as inactive. Instead, it reveals continuing collaboration combined with separate political constraints and conditional participation.

It also suggests that Hezbollah understood the sensitivity of Iraq's domestic political environment and the constraints created by Iraq's lack of a shared border with Israel. Any expectation that Iraqi armed groups would participate alongside Hezbollah was therefore necessarily limited by geography, Iraq's internal political balance and the potential consequences for the Iraqi state and population. Their role was conceived as conditional support rather than automatic or unrestricted engagement. The resulting pattern was one of consultation and differentiated action, not unified command. It sustained the appearance of Axis solidarity while demonstrating that no permanent authority could automatically mobilise all its members.

Syria's position provides further evidence that membership of the Axis never entailed an enforceable obligation to act collectively. Reflecting retrospectively upon the Syrian relationship, a Head of the Syria Dossier stated: "Assad is gone, but our enemies remain, and they are in control of Syria today. In hindsight, betting so heavily on one man was never an optimal strategy, especially when, in the six months before his fall, he was already distancing himself from Iran and edging closer to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, who promised him mediation to lift US sanctions. Both we and Iran have paid a heavy price for standing by the regime, in lives, in resources, and in legitimacy.

Iran has lost billions in investment and oil, and Hezbollah has lost entire missile caches inside Syria. Assad, meanwhile, refused to fire a single bullet against Israel. We lost more than a president; we lost the cover of a state that, however fragile, had given us strategic depth" (Appendix C, Entry 33, Head of Syria Dossier, Beirut, April 2025). This testimony exposes the asymmetry underlying the appearance of Axis unity. Hezbollah and Iran incurred substantial costs in preserving the Syrian government, yet Syria retained the autonomy to withhold military participation against Israel. Syria provided territory and strategic depth, but it was never subordinated to a collective command or bound by a reciprocal defence mechanism. What collapsed after 7 October 2023 was therefore not every relationship within the Axis, but the credibility of the expectation that these relationships would necessarily produce coordinated military action.

Before October 2023, these asymmetrical relationships allowed the Axis to generate deterrent credibility through the projection of unity rather than integrated command. The differentiated responses following 7 October exposed the limits of that mechanism, although the shared resistance identity and bilateral relationships survived. As Jan Assmann (2012) observed in his theory of cultural memory, collective identity endures through shared narratives and symbolic repertoires. The Axis functions in similar fashion: as a discursively sustained identity bloc rather than an institutionalised alliance. Its cohesion depends on the continual production of a symbolic universe that legitimises solidarity and mobilises support even in the absence of material coordination.

The '*Axis of Resistance'*, therefore, should be approached as a performative rather than an institutional category. Before October 2023, its projected deterrent power lay substantially in its capacity to appear capable of collective action, using narrative and spectacle to preserve uncertainty over whether rhetorical solidarity might become coordinated retaliation. This performative dimension can sustain legitimacy among domestic constituencies while seeking

to influence adversarial expectations through the projected possibility of collective retaliation. The 2023–2024 conflict cycle demonstrated that this deterrence was virtual rather than structural, a network of meanings rather than commands, a choreography of solidarity rather than a coalition of armies or non-state actors.

This interpretation emerged through an abductive logic of inquiry from recurring discrepancies between participants' descriptions of solidarity, public claims concerning the 'unity of fronts', and the differentiated conduct of Axis members after 7 October 2023. Interview testimony from different roles, theatres and periods was compared with public declarations, observed military behaviour and documentary evidence. This triangulation made it possible to distinguish ideological affinity and symbolic synchronisation from strategic consultation, theatre specific operational cooperation, permanent organisational integration and unified command.

The absence of the latter mechanisms did not prevent the Axis from generating deterrent credibility before October 2023. Rather, its credibility depended upon adversaries remaining uncertain as to whether synchronised narratives might be converted into coordinated retaliation. The separate decisions taken after the Hamas attack exposed the organisational limits that the narrative had previously concealed.

5.2 Ideological Narrative, Cohesion, and Strategic Autonomy

Although *wilāyat al-faqīh* (Guardianship of the Jurist) is often treated as a post-1979 Iranian innovation, its genealogy, traced in Chapter 3 from Jabal ʿĀmil's Sheikh al-Muḥaqqiq al-Karakī through Safavid institutionalisation and al-Naraqī to Sayyed Khomeini, shows a much older conception of juristic authority that long predates the Islamic Republic. For Hezbollah and several Iraqi groups, the doctrine provides spiritual anchorage and a language of legitimacy. For other actors in the Axis, including Hamas, Syria and Ansar Allah, the doctrine is at most symbolic and often non-binding.

Even among Shiʿi adherents, interpretations diverge between absolute guardianship and limited public authority. This uneven appropriation underlines the central finding of this chapter: common creed does not yield common command. In practice, *wilāyat al-faqīh* functions as symbolic glue within a largely performative coalition, a source of discursive cohesion rather than an instrument of operational integration, reinforcing the argument that the Axis operates as a virtual deterrence alliance held together by narrative, not hierarchy.

For over a decade, the '*Axis of Resistance*' has presented itself as a coherent and ideologically aligned front. The shared lexicon of *muqawama* (resistance), *mehwar* (Axis), and *wilāyat al-faqīh* (Guardianship of the Jurist) forms a symbolic vocabulary that transcends linguistic, sectarian, and political divisions. These expressions are more than rhetorical flourishes; they are performative devices that mobilise sentiment, construct legitimacy, and project deterrent strength in moments of crisis (Calculli, 2020). Yet beneath this façade lies an adaptive constellation of actors bound together more by narrative than by strategy. The symbolic grammar of resistance binds disparate movements even when their calculations, capacities, and constraints differ profoundly.

The Axis functions less as a structured alliance than as a communicative network. Narratives can act as instruments of soft power, shaping the perceptions and preferences of adversaries and allies alike (Nye, 1990). Before October 2023, narrative performance partially

compensated for the absence of formal coordination by creating uncertainty over whether symbolic solidarity might become collective action. Speeches, commemorations and televised rituals functioned as mechanisms of deterrent communication. Each actor participated in a choreography of resistance, producing an appearance of unity that could remain politically valuable despite the absence of integrated command. In this sense, the Axis performs cohesion, projecting deterrence by narrative rather than through organisational integration or an obligation of military solidarity.

Iran offers the clearest example of this strategically ambiguous approach. Article 154 of the Iranian Constitution declares support for 'the just struggles of the oppressed' (Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979). This provides an ideological basis for Tehran's transnational alliances, yet it does not oblige Iran to go to war in defence of its partners. As Wastnidge and Mabon (2023) note, this framework conceals a pragmatic logic. Iran adjusts its engagement to manage risk and preserve flexibility, offering military, financial, or rhetorical backing as circumstances allow. This selective model explains why the Axis often appears united in words but divided in action: shared rhetoric creates moral coherence, while strategic autonomy guarantees survival.

Participant testimony shows that cooperation within the Axis was interpreted through Hezbollah's own security requirements rather than as obedience to a unified regional command. Explaining Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, a Head of the Syria Dossier stated: "We go to Syria because if Assad falls, we fall next. The principle is simple: defend the bad to avoid the worse. Resistance cannot survive if Damascus is ruled by our enemies, who would move on Lebanon without hesitation. Every supply line, every road, every passage runs through Syria. Those who say this is not Lebanon's fight do not understand geography. We defend Damascus so that Beirut and Nabatieh remain safe. This is not intervention; it is pre-emptive defence" (Appendix C, Entry 19, Head of Syria Dossier, Damascus, June 2012).

The testimony presents cooperation with Syria as a strategic decision grounded in Hezbollah's organisational survival, logistical access and defence of its Lebanese constituency. It therefore demonstrates that close military cooperation could occur within a particular theatre without establishing permanent organisational integration or unified command across the Axis.

The distinction between cooperation and command was even more explicit in Iraq. A Head of the Iraq Dossier explained: "In Mosul, we learned that waiting for Beirut slows the fight. Units must act quickly. The Iraqi brothers respect us, but they are not us. We advise; we do not command. Iraq has its own martyrs, its own ground, its own blood. Our strength lies in teaching how to resist, not in replacing them in the fight" (Appendix C, Entry 22, Head of Iraq Dossier, Baghdad, March 2015). This testimony provides direct evidence that Hezbollah transferred knowledge and supported allied organisations while recognising their separate identities and decision-making authority. The Axis could therefore facilitate operational cooperation within a specific theatre without creating a hierarchy through which Hezbollah, Iran or any other actor automatically commanded the participating organisations.

The relationship between Hezbollah and Hamas epitomises this dynamic. Frequently portrayed as ideological siblings in regional narratives, the two movements in fact embody distinct theological traditions and operate within contrasting political environments. Hezbollah's doctrine of *wilāyat al-faqīh* grounds its allegiance to the Iranian model of clerical governance, while Hamas, rooted in Sunni political Islam and the Muslim

Brotherhood, maintains a divergent conception of authority and resistance. These doctrinal contrasts translate into different strategies. Hezbollah's and Hamas's military behaviour is constrained by their distinct domestic environments and the need to preserve political and social legitimacy. Hamas, facing blockade and isolation, relies on periodic escalation to assert relevance and deterrence (Cafiero and Certo, 2014).

The Syrian war exposed these fault lines most clearly. In 2012, Hamas broke with the Syrian government, aligning with Al-Qaeda and the "Islamic State", a decision that alienated both Tehran and Hezbollah. For Hezbollah, defending Assad was existential: Syria represented its logistical lifeline and provided the strategic-depth corridor linking Beirut to Tehran. For Hamas, Assad had become a liability, symbolising repression that the movement sought to resist. Despite later reconciliation, this rupture revealed the extent to which ideological affinity within the Axis could not override local political imperatives.

A similar pattern is visible across other members of the constellation. In Yemen, Ansar Allah's relationship with Iran operates within a distinct domestic, religious and political setting. Although rooted in Zaydi revivalism, the movement has expanded its constituency to include Shafi'i Sunnis and established relationships across Yemen's diverse tribal and political landscape. Its struggle remains anchored in Yemeni political conditions and cross-sectarian mobilisation rather than doctrinal allegiance to Iran (Juneau, 2016). Its missile and drone campaign during the 2023–2024 Gaza conflict reflected its declared commitment to the Palestinian cause and its own regional escalation calculations, although reported Iranian and Hezbollah military assistance, including allegations of operational involvement, complicates any interpretation of its actions as entirely autonomous (Nakhoul and Hafezi, 2024).

Such assistance nevertheless does not establish that Ansar Allah was subordinated to a permanent or integrated Axis command. Iraqi armed groups also undertook military action, but determined their targets, timing and escalation thresholds according to their own organisational calculations and the constraints imposed by Iraq's political environment. Across these cases, ideological slogans provided cohesion at the level of discourse while strategic autonomy persisted at the level of action.

Syria's conduct after 2023, prior to President Bashar al-Assad's removal in 2024, offers perhaps the clearest example of this tension. Despite decades of cooperation with Hezbollah, al-Assad refused to let the movement use Syrian territory during the 2024 Israel–Lebanon war. Even before 7 October 2023, Assad had met Hezbollah's Secretary General, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, and asked him to withdraw most fighters from Syrian military bases where they had been stationed in support of the Syrian army. Assad blamed Hezbollah's presence for provoking Israeli airstrikes against Syrian targets and argued that Syrians had suffered enough losses. He made clear that Damascus had no intention of retaliating against Israel's repeated violations of its sovereignty (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2024). This decision marked a calculated turn towards diplomatic normalisation with Gulf states and the United States, a shift from resistance to rehabilitation. What appeared externally as fragmentation was, in Assad's view, an act of survival.

Hezbollah's own posture during the same period exemplifies calibrated restraint within its broader practice of deterrence by resilience. Confronted by economic collapse and political paralysis in Lebanon, it balanced the rhetoric of resistance with the necessity of containment. The 2023–2024 Gaza war laid this dilemma bare. Hezbollah maintained limited cross-border operations to uphold its image as the vanguard of resistance but avoided escalation that could

devastate Lebanon's Shia society. Yet deterrence by narrative alone may become insufficient if Iran faces sustained direct military confrontation. Under such conditions, Tehran would require active theatres capable of distributing the military and political pressure imposed by its adversaries.

Across the Axis, similar patterns emerge. Strategic decisions are filtered through national contexts, economic limitations, and regime stability concerns. The common narrative of steadfastness (*sumud*) and unity of fronts conceals a mosaic of differentiated agendas. This structural flexibility enables the Axis to survive despite its internal contradictions. By substituting symbolic alignment for strategic centralisation, it transforms fragmentation into a source of adaptive resilience.

The Gaza war and its Lebanese extension exposed the limits of this configuration. The differentiated conduct of Hezbollah, Iran, Syria, Iraqi armed groups and Ansar Allah demonstrated that shared ideological narratives did not produce an integrated military system. Each actor remained subject to its own command structure, political objectives and escalation thresholds. The Axis narrative continued to sustain a shared identity of resistance, but the divergence between symbolic solidarity and autonomous conduct weakened its capacity to generate credible expectations of coordinated retaliation.

Paradoxically, the Axis endures even as its material foundation erodes. The implication is not that it has become irrelevant, but that its continuing potency lies primarily in political identity, bilateral relationships and narrative performance rather than in a credible expectation of automatic collective military action.

Once the limitations of narrative unity have been exposed, Iran and its allies have a strong incentive to reconsider how military efforts, escalation thresholds and operational plans might be coordinated in future conflicts. This does not mean that an integrated command structure will necessarily emerge, but it suggests that collective survival may require a movement from symbolic synchronisation towards more structured operational coordination.

5.3 Theoretical Implications: From Embedded Sovereignty to Virtual Deterrence

The '*Axis of Resistance*' represents a form of alliance behaviour that challenges classical realist assumptions about power, coordination and deterrence. Its coherence lies not in treaty obligations or an integrated command structure, but partly in the social production of meaning. As Wendt (1992) and Onuf (1989) argue, international relations are shaped not only by material capabilities but also by identities, norms and discourse. The Axis draws cohesion from this symbolic order: a repertoire of narratives, rituals and performances that sustains a shared political identity despite limited institutionalisation.

Within this framework, deterrence by narrative describes the communicative mechanism through which a virtual deterrence alliance seeks to generate strategic effects despite organisational fragmentation. The Axis projects unity through political discourse, ritualised declarations of solidarity, commemorations of martyrdom and calibrated acts of defiance. These practices communicate potential collective resolve while also reinforcing political legitimacy among supportive constituencies. Even when its participants act independently, their synchronised language projects collective agency and may preserve uncertainty over whether rhetorical solidarity could develop into coordinated retaliation.

This dynamic extends the thesis's central argument. Earlier chapters demonstrated how Hezbollah converted endurance into strategic power through embedded sovereignty and deterrence by resilience, and how these mechanisms were consolidated through organisational learning. This chapter extends that logic from the organisational to the transnational level. The Axis represents a regional expression of deterrence by narrative: an ecosystem in which shared meaning and political legitimacy partially compensate for the absence of hierarchy and organisational integration.

For Hezbollah, participation in this virtual deterrence alliance amplifies its symbolic reach but requires it to balance regional solidarity against Lebanese political and social constraints. It must demonstrate solidarity while managing escalation that could endanger Lebanon's fragile stability. For Iran, the Axis provides strategic depth, supports allied communities and political actors and projects regional influence while preserving flexibility over the scale and timing of direct involvement. However, maintaining these relationships has also imposed substantial military, economic and political costs. For actors such as Ansar Allah and Iraqi armed groups, affiliation provides regional recognition and enhances the perceived significance of their capabilities. Each participant can therefore acquire symbolic and strategic advantages while retaining substantial autonomy over its objectives and escalation decisions.

The result is paradoxical: the Axis's fragmentation weakens its capacity for coordinated military action but contributes to its organisational survival. Because it has no single command structure, the defeat, withdrawal or political divergence of one participant does not automatically dissolve the relationships among the others. Its decentralised structure therefore enables the wider network to absorb military setbacks and internal disagreements. Shared narratives can also reinterpret losses and reaffirm a common political purpose. This flexibility preserves the Axis as a political and symbolic framework, although its inability to guarantee coordinated retaliation reduces its collective deterrent credibility.

These findings extend conventional deterrence and alliance theory. Traditional approaches emphasise material capability, credibility and institutionalisation in explaining deterrence and alliance cohesion (Schelling, 1966; Snyder, 1997; Freedman, 2004). The Axis demonstrates how symbolic and communicative practices may supplement material capabilities even in the absence of command integration. This chapter therefore uses the term virtual deterrence alliance to describe a configuration in which synchronised narratives, rituals and performances partially compensate for the absence of formal coordination. This formulation does not treat communication as a substitute for military capability. Rather, it identifies how fragmented actors can use shared meaning and projected solidarity to increase uncertainty, amplify the perceived significance of their capabilities and seek to influence adversarial expectations.

5.4 Conclusion: The Axis After The War On Gaza

This chapter has shown that, until this date, the '*Axis of Resistance'* should not be understood as a coherent military alliance but as a symbolic formation sustained through discourse, ritual, and mediated performance. Its unity is enacted rather than institutionalised, and its projected deterrent power derives from perception rather than coordination.

The 2023–2024 Gaza war tested expectations that the projected unity of fronts might produce synchronised mobilisation. The conflict revealed a choreography of selective engagements:

Hezbollah's calculated restraint, Ansar Allah's autonomous missile and drone strikes, Syria's deliberate non-involvement, and the differentiated military activity of Iraqi armed groups, conducted according to their own political constraints and escalation calculations. What held the Axis together was not command but communication. Its members sustained the appearance of collective defiance through synchronised narratives that partially compensated for material disunity.

This performative cohesion confirms the broader theoretical trajectory of the thesis. The Axis represents a regional expression of the strategic importance of narrative, endurance and symbolic solidarity. Before October 2023, these mechanisms generated deterrent by narrative credibility, preserving uncertainty over whether independent actors might respond collectively. After their differentiated responses exposed the absence of integrated command, narrative performance continued to sustain political identity and bilateral relationships but could no longer reproduce the same expectation of automatic collective retaliation.

Paradoxically, the Axis endures even as its material foundation erodes. Assad's fall, Israeli technological superiority and determination to engage in several wars simultaneously, Hezbollah's setbacks and Iran's domestic strains have reduced its operational depth, yet the narrative of resistance remains potent. Its media, commemorations and discursive rituals continue to reproduce a shared identity of resistance and reinforce the political legitimacy of participating actors. However, following the differentiated responses to 7 October 2023, these symbolic practices can no longer be assumed to restore the collective deterrent credibility that previously depended upon uncertainty over whether rhetorical solidarity would become coordinated retaliation. Each loss is re-narrated as proof of steadfastness; each setback as evidence of moral perseverance.

Interview evidence from June 2025 indicates an attempt to rebuild this damaged credibility through renewed Iranian assurances and re-thinking about the future of the Axis. An Adviser to the Secretary General recalled: "Iran expressed deep frustration with our performance during the September–October war. They sent several committees to investigate how the campaign had been conducted and where we had failed. It was a tense moment. But later, after their own setbacks (June 2025 Israeli war on Iran), Tehran realised they too had been deceived by Israel's ruses, the same traps that caught us. Out of that recognition came something important: a renewal of commitment.

Iran made it clear that in the next war it will not sit idle. They promised that Hezbollah will not be left alone" (Appendix C, Entry 36, Adviser to the Secretary General, Beirut, June 2025). This testimony reveals both organisational learning, the Iranian decision to defend Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shia, or an attempt to reconstruct the expectation of collective support. However, the assurance represents a renewed political commitment rather than evidence that an integrated command structure or enforceable collective defence mechanism had been established. It therefore demonstrates the continuing importance of the Iran–Hezbollah alliance while also confirming the distinction between bilateral commitment and Axis-wide organisational integration.

These findings address Objectives 1 and 3. In relation to Objective 1, they demonstrate that Hezbollah's regional affiliations contributed to strategic depth, material support and deterrent credibility while allowing it to calibrate its participation according to organisational survival and Lebanese constraints. In relation to Objective 3, they show that ideological alignment, bilateral commitment and theatre specific cooperation did not eliminate Hezbollah's

autonomous agency or establish a unified Axis command. The chapter therefore challenges the fully controlled proxy interpretation while explaining how regional affiliation contributed to Hezbollah's endurance without removing its capacity for independent strategic calculation.

In theoretical terms, the '*Axis of Resistance*' exemplifies a twenty-first-century form of alliance politics, a discursive alliance whose cohesion is sustained through narrative performance, whose deterrence operates through perception, and whose endurance depends on its ability to transform survival into legitimacy. Its persistence reaffirms the thesis's central claim: in asymmetric conflict, power increasingly resides not in victory but in the capacity to endure, adapt, and remain meaningful.

Conceptually, this analysis contributes a new framework for understanding post-Westphalian alliance politics. It demonstrates that in asymmetric conflict, symbolic synchronisation can yield deterrent credibility without organisational integration, thereby extending deterrence theory beyond its material and institutional assumptions.

Chapter 6

Hezbollah in Post-War 2023–2025 and a Recalibrated Resistance

This chapter applies the abductive, interpretive–realist methodology, combining process tracing, discourse analysis, and triangulated ethnographic and documentary evidence within a constructivist–critical realist epistemology. Field proximity, derived from long-term professional engagement in Lebanon and neighbouring warzones, is treated as an analytical variable within the explanatory model, not as an ad hoc ethnographic narrative. Reflexivity is applied through explicit recognition of how positional access and interpretive proximity shape both data collection and analysis, ensuring transparency rather than autobiography. Drawing on lived experience, insider testimonies, and field-based observation, the chapter treats interviews and contextual data as theory-bearing evidence and uses ethnography as causal explanation rather than descriptive narration. All primary material, including retrospective fieldnotes and interviews, was re-analysed through the abductive coding framework to ensure methodological control, reflexive transparency, and triangulation across multiple sources.

This chapter contributes principally to Objectives 1 and 2 by examining how Hezbollah absorbed severe military, organisational and leadership losses without conceding strategic defeat. It identifies the mechanisms through which organisational adaptation, decentralised command, ideological continuity, social embeddedness and organisational learning enabled the movement to preserve its operational capacity, political and social legitimacy, and ideological coherence. It also examines how Hezbollah distinguished sacrifice and material loss from defeat, allowing endurance itself to become a source of deterrent credibility. The chapter therefore addresses the central question expressed in the thesis title: Hezbollah remained undefeated not because it avoided extensive damage, but because its adversaries failed to compel its organisational collapse, political submission or abandonment of armed resistance.

Following Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack (Milton-Edwards and Farrell, 2024) and the beginning of Israel's devastating campaign in Gaza (Giroux, 2025), Hezbollah opened a support front from southern Lebanon while seeking to avoid full-scale war. Despite possessing greater military capacity, accumulated combat experience and more advanced weaponry than at any previous point in its history, the movement initially confined its intervention to geographically limited attacks. When Hamas appealed for a wider northern front to relieve pressure on Gaza, Hezbollah's leadership exercised what it presented as measured discipline, believing that its existing deterrent capabilities and narrative would prevent Israel from expanding the confrontation. This calibrated restraint was intended to demonstrate solidarity with Gaza and signal both capability and control without provoking an all-out war. Hezbollah nevertheless took the initiative on 8 October 2023 by attacking Israeli positions in the occupied Shebaa Farms and Israeli positions along the 'blue line', thereby departing from the predominantly reactive deterrence framework that had governed the Lebanese front since 2006.

This restraint reflected a pragmatic reading of the enduring asymmetry of the conflict. Israel continued to control the timing and scale of wars and retained the strategic initiative to enlarge the bombing geography (Lidman, Hatoum and Mroue, 2024). Hezbollah's leadership therefore recalibrated its doctrine from confrontation to deterrence through restraint, a logic shaped by deterrence calculus, domestic fragility, and the lessons of hybrid warfare.

Between October 2023 and late 2024, escalating threats from Israel coincided with mounting regional brinkmanship. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to shift Israel's focus to Lebanon after Gaza, while Defence Minister Yoav Gallant promised to respond 'with full force' should Hezbollah persist in cross-border attacks (Shelah, Shapira and Shafran Gittleman, 2024). US envoy Amos Hochstein warned Lebanese officials that Washington would not prevent an Israeli invasion if hostilities continued (Dadouch and Hudson, 2024). Israel deployed five combat divisions along the northern frontier, warning that Lebanon could face destruction comparable to Gaza (Bob, Reuters and Jerusalem Post Staff, 2024).

Confident in the US envoy promises, its deterrent arsenal and fortified infrastructure, Hezbollah misinterpreted the seriousness of Israel's warnings and the shift in its war doctrine. Israeli intelligence had already penetrated Hezbollah's supposedly secure communication and centre of location information gathering systems. Cyber and human intelligence units infiltrated its fibre-optic network, revealing locations of weapons caches, command shelters, administrative offices, and the homes of hundreds of operatives. This breach severely disrupted Hezbollah's operational command and contributed to the pressure under which the movement entered ceasefire negotiations.

What both Hezbollah and Hamas underestimated was Netanyahu's political survival-driven doctrine: a pivot towards the longest and most expansive campaign in Israel's history, spanning Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and even Iran (Kingsley, Bergman and Odenheimer, 2025). This strategy, sustained by significant Western backing, fused military escalation with the political endurance of Netanyahu's government.

Even as Israeli operations assassinated senior Hezbollah figures and carried out repeated precise and destructive strikes on Lebanese territory, the movement confined its actions to controlled, geographically limited exchanges and the defence of Lebanese territories against advanced Israeli troops. Through this posture, Hezbollah sought to preserve deterrence without inviting total war, transforming endurance itself into an instrument of strategic credibility.

Hezbollah's stance in the aftermath revealed an adapted resistance shaped by the instinct to survive. The movement reframed what it meant to win: endurance became the measure of success, protecting Lebanon's Shia communities, maintaining its standing at home as a resistance force, and preserving its deterrent power. Yet this recalibration also exposed a dissonance between its pre-war proclamations and the realities that followed. For years, Hezbollah had declared its ambition to 'liberate the Galilee', envisioning a coordinated regional campaign (Beeri, 2024). Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah returned to this theme repeatedly in his speeches, projecting narrative readiness and resolve. But as the regional landscape shifted, that confident rhetoric came to sound more like a relic of a different moment, a promise that could no longer be fulfilled, however extensive years of prior planning had been.

Despite Israel's mass mobilisation on the northern front and Netanyahu's open threats, Hezbollah's leadership hesitated to act as if the war was imminent. Whether this hesitation arose from miscalculation, overconfidence, or entrapment in its own Axis-of-Resistance discourse remains debatable. Confronted with escalating Israeli strikes on civilian infrastructure and Shia areas, Hezbollah opted for symbolic engagement rather than full confrontation and Sayyed Nasrallah did not implement his plan to 'liberate the Galilee'.

The following section examines Hezbollah's attempt to maintain deterrence through controlled escalation, responding to assassinations and infrastructure damage while seeking to avoid thresholds that could trigger all out war, and explains why this doctrine ultimately failed to prevent wider confrontation.

Hezbollah's recalibration must be read within a wider regional and domestic context. Across the Axis, fatigue had set in: Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen displayed declining or limited enthusiasm for confrontation. Within Lebanon, Hezbollah faced growing pressure from its Shia base to avoid another costly reconstruction and prioritise economic survival. Amid deepening socio-economic collapse (Ahmed, 2025), its constituency sought safety and welfare over ideological escalation and Israeli provocation and violations of the ceasefire (UN Peacekeeping, 2025).

The doctrine that emerged, controlled escalation, combined necessity and innovation. It transformed battlefield lessons into a grammar of disciplined response, resilience through sacrifice, and strategic ambiguity. This triad framed endurance as moral strength rather than passivity.

Each section of this chapter explores how material loss coexisted with ideological continuity. Hezbollah's restraint during the 2023–2025 conflict expressed confidence in survival as a form of non-defeat. Resistance, in its current iteration, is defined not by territorial conquest but by survivability, coherence, and the capacity to impose uncertainty. Ambiguity itself became a strategic weapon.

Hezbollah's 2023–2025 conduct thus marks a decisive inflection in its deterrence doctrine. The movement's calibrated rhetoric and symbolic operations sustained the appearance of readiness while signalling restraint to both domestic and international audiences. This narrative strategy preserved legitimacy, maintained Axis solidarity discursively, and attempted to deny Israel the pretext for total escalation.

Hezbollah's post-2023 posture is best understood as deterrence by resilience, in which endurance and the continued capacity to act become central indicators of non-defeat. The ability to absorb blows, preserve organisational integrity, and shape the regional narrative of defiance demonstrates a doctrinal evolution beyond traditional guerrilla paradigms.

Hezbollah's recalibrated resistance thus represents a new strategic phase in which survival depends less on projecting parity with Israel than on adapting to Israeli firepower superiority while preserving organisational continuity, social legitimacy and the capacity to resist.

6.1 Hezbollah's Deterrence Doctrine Prior to the September 2024 War: Strategic Logic

Before the shifts triggered by Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack and the sixty-six-day war from September to November 2024, Hezbollah's deterrence doctrine combined military, psychological, and ideological dimensions. It evolved through experience, shifting threat perceptions, and a tacit understanding of limits that both sides broadly respected.

The doctrine took shape after the 2006 war, which Hezbollah framed as a 'divine victory' despite losses (Arkin, 2007). Israel's failure to achieve its declared objectives became itself a form of Hezbollah success. The ensuing campaigns in Syria and Iraq, conducted alongside Iranian and Axis-aligned forces against ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates, consolidated the

movement's hybrid warfare model, merging conventional firepower, asymmetric tactics, and information operations into a single deterrent framework (Wastnidge and Mabon, 2023).

By 2023, Hezbollah's deterrence architecture was multi-layered: precision and ballistic missiles, drones, fortified underground networks, and command centres inevitably embedded within the Shia society. Ideological legitimacy within Lebanon's Shia community and among regional sympathisers complemented this military capacity, allowing Hezbollah to present itself as a national resistance actor rather than a militia. Psychological warfare, through media operations, calibrated messaging, and displays of readiness, served to project credible retaliatory power.

From 2012 onwards, regional deployments further refined this posture. Enhanced missile and drone capabilities, the battle-hardened Hezbollah Radwan Special Forces, and years of joint operations in Syria and Iraq fostered a self-perception of quasi-conventional strength. By 2023, the movement was believed to possess roughly 150,000 rockets and missiles (Yaron, 2023). Sayyed Nasrallah's 2019 unveiling of the 'precision missile project' threatened pinpoint strikes on strategic sites such as the Israeli Karish gas field, the Dimona nuclear reactor, and Haifa's ammonia facilities (Allison, 2023). These capabilities created a condition of mutual deterrence, where the prospect of reciprocal devastation constrained full-scale war.

Hezbollah's southern fortifications underpinned this deterrence posture, designed to complicate Israeli air superiority and impede ground incursions (Schweitzer, Mizrahi and Shapira, 2023). In the absence of a sustained Lebanese state commitment to militarily confront Israeli occupation and invasions, compounded by the army's limited defensive capabilities, Hezbollah developed these fortifications as part of its strategy to defend Lebanese territory and maintain an independent capacity for armed resistance. Tunnel systems, hardened bunkers, and dispersed caches were positioned to sustain defensive operations, which Hezbollah framed within the broader principle of self-defence reflected in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter (UN, 1945).

The strategic aim was no longer to defend territory through conventional positional warfare, given the overwhelming military disparity between Israel and Hezbollah. Instead, Hezbollah adopted a strategy of attrition designed to impose sustained military and political costs on Israeli forces and undermine the viability of prolonged occupation. This approach also sought to draw international scrutiny to alleged Israeli violations of the principles of proportionality and distinction. As Gill and Fleck (2015) note, the legal basis of self-defence under the UN Charter must be interpreted alongside customary international law. Legal-political warfare thus became integral to deterrence, combining material capability with normative contestation.

Hezbollah also developed a calibrated system of deterrent signalling, retaliating proportionately to Israeli assassinations or airstrikes in Syria while avoiding uncontrolled escalation. This practice produced a tacit rule of engagement, where proportionality preserved deterrence without inviting total war. Nasrallah's speeches functioned as semi-diplomatic communiqués, parsed by Israeli intelligence for shifts in tone or emphasis. Strategic ambiguity became a deliberate tool: clarity was withheld to preserve flexibility, yet the impression of control was maintained.

The limits of this doctrine were exposed by Israel's assassination of the Palestinian official Saleh al-Arouri, deputy head of Hamas's political bureau, in Beirut, in January 2024. The precision drone strike that killed him in the suburb of Beirut, Dahiyeh, was the first such operation in the Lebanese capital since 2013. It was the most symbolically charged operation since the 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, Sayyed Nasrallah's second-in-command on the Jihad Council, and constituted an overt challenge to Hezbollah's deterrent credibility (Bergman, 2018). The operation can be interpreted as testing Hezbollah's threshold of restraint. The movement's limited response, intended to avoid escalation, was interpreted in Tel Aviv as hesitation to confront Israel. Nasrallah's subsequent insistence on avoiding 'an all-out confrontation at any cost' may have reinforced this perception as Israel pursued further assassinations in early 2024.

For Netanyahu, these operations also served domestic political purposes. They projected decisiveness and exploited Hezbollah's caution to sustain a narrative of Israeli initiative. Within Hezbollah, the strikes were at first seen as opportunistic rather than preparatory for war (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025). That interpretation proved dangerously optimistic. Confident in its accumulated weapons and combat experience, Hezbollah's leadership underestimated Israel's doctrinal shift towards cyber offensives, surgical strikes, and leadership decapitation. This new posture was enabled by a deep intelligence breach and reinforced by US and allies logistical and diplomatic support, including large-scale airlift operations during the Gaza war (Bob, 2024).

Hezbollah's overconfidence in its deterrent credibility produced a fatal miscalculation: Israel interpreted restraint as an opportunity. The al-Arouri assassination exposed Hezbollah's failure to recognise the evolution of Israeli military doctrine after 7 October 2023, as well as weaknesses in its intelligence gathering, strategic assessment and deterrence model, setting the stage for the broader confrontation that followed.

Doctrinal Constraints and the Shifting Strategic Balance (2015–2024)

Between 2015 and 2022, Israel intensified its airstrikes in Syria, yet Hezbollah avoided large-scale retaliation from Lebanese territory. When two of its fighters were killed in Syria in August 2019, it responded with anti-tank missiles against Israeli positions near the border, prompting temporary Israeli evacuations. Netanyahu publicly urged Hezbollah to 'calm down', and Israeli forces reportedly replaced front-line troops with dummies to reduce risk (Gross, 2019). The episode illustrated a robust deterrent equilibrium based on limited but credible responses that preserved mutual caution.

Despite its formidable arsenal and deeply fortified infrastructure, Hezbollah's deterrence remained constrained by political realities and social fatigue as much as by military calculation. Domestically, Lebanon's institutional fragility imposed invisible red lines: the movement could not escalate beyond a certain threshold without risking further economic collapse or provoking large-scale population displacement, destruction of homes, and exhaustion from recurrent conflict. Hezbollah's autonomy in security and military affairs never cancelled its sensitivity to public sentiment, nor its awareness that another full-scale war could shatter what remained of the Lebanese state's cohesion and strain the society that stood behind it.

Regionally, Hezbollah considered the boundaries of Iran's broader strategic calculus. Tehran's overriding concern was to avoid a regional conflagration that might jeopardise both

Hezbollah's survival and the stability of Lebanon's Shia community. The events of 7 October 2023 profoundly altered this balance. Within days, dozens of world leaders flocked to Israel, pledging unconditional support to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In such an atmosphere, when Israel sought unaccountable revenge under an umbrella of unprecedented Western political and military cover, any direct confrontation would have been significantly perilous and costly. Israel's unrestrained access to intelligence, munitions, and diplomatic immunity effectively removed the brakes on its actions. While Hezbollah retained operational initiative, Iran's preference for restraint was consistent with its decision to limit its support for Gaza. Combined with the global alignment behind Israel, these considerations sharply narrowed the scope of what was militarily or politically sustainable.

This fragile equilibrium began to unravel after Hamas's 7 October 2023 assault. Hezbollah declared full solidarity but initially confined its engagement to controlled, symbolic actions, brief artillery exchanges, drone incursions, and calibrated anti-tank strikes along the border zone. For approximately eleven months, this rhythm of limited confrontation held until Israel's sixty-six-day campaign from September to November 2024 shattered the previous balance. The offensive combined precision decapitation strikes with cyber intrusions and psychological operations designed to erode Hezbollah's command cohesion and public confidence. It marked the evolution of Israel's long-standing doctrine of targeted assassination (Bergman, 2018), now enhanced by real-time intelligence networks, AI-assisted targeting, and expanded cyber-warfare capabilities.

For Hezbollah, deterrence built on the principle of symmetrical retaliation suddenly faced a different kind of war, one waged through speed, precision, and technological reach rather than territorial confrontation. Israeli aircraft and drones could now penetrate Dahiyeh and the Bekaa Valley with near-instant accuracy, transforming areas once considered sanctuaries into transparent battlefields. Although Israel's ground operations achieved limited territorial depth, the campaign redefined the boundaries of confrontation by exposing the vulnerability of a deterrence model rooted in parity when confronted by an adversary possessing substantial technological and informational superiority.

The 2024 war compelled Hezbollah to reformulate its doctrine. Rather than collapse, it undertook a strategic recoil, shifting from offensive deterrence towards survivability, redundancy, the reconstruction of its leadership and military units and a return to decentralised command. Strategic ambiguity remained central, yet deterrence was redefined. Victory came to mean endurance: absorbing blows while preserving organisational continuity. Hezbollah's post-war discourse recast survival as triumph: to endure, retaliate asymmetrically and sustain legitimacy constituted deterrence itself. This marked a doctrinal transition from deterrence through threat to deterrence by resilience.

Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah's slogan was the 'Liberation of Jerusalem', whereas under the new Secretary-General, Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's slogan became the 'Liberation of Lebanon and its people'. This change signalled a recalibration of the movement's immediate strategic priorities from an expansive regional objective towards a more attainable Lebanese one.

The transformation also exposed an older institutional drift traceable to 2006. The self-declared 'divine victory' encouraged a gradual metamorphosis from guerrilla network to quasi-conventional army. Modernisation improved firepower and logistics but generated

vulnerabilities, exposure, predictability, centralisation, and bureaucratic inertia that became stark during the 2023–2024 conflict.

Centralisation and the Paradox of Resilience

The consolidation of Hezbollah's embedded sovereignty after 2006 produced a structural paradox: the very mechanisms that deepened its social resilience and deterrent capacity also generated an internal centralisation that gradually constrained its tactical agility.
After 2006, Hezbollah expanded its ranks and infrastructure to a scale unprecedented since its establishment in 1985. What had once operated as a clandestine resistance organisation evolved into a semi-conventional military actor, with formal hierarchies, territorial depth and permanent bases. By 2023, Israeli and other Western assessments estimated its active force at between 100,000 and 150,000 personnel. Fewer than 10,000 of these fighters had served in Syria, according to confidential interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025. Hezbollah had consequently begun to resemble an army rather than an underground movement: visible, sizeable and therefore more exposed.

This transformation reflected not only military adaptation but also a deeper shift in Hezbollah's mode of survival and operation. The movement's legitimacy no longer derived solely from clandestine warfare against Israel but from its entrenchment within Lebanon's social, political and territorial fabric. Expansion thus served a dual purpose: to sustain external deterrence and to consolidate its internal security and authority. The rationale for maintaining such a vast standing force remains ambiguous. In any future confrontation with Israel, only a fraction of these fighters would realistically see combat unless Israel were to attempt a full-scale invasion reminiscent of 1982.

Even during the Syrian war, where Hezbollah operated across a theatre nearly twenty times larger than southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, the number of active militants rarely exceeded 12,000, including the replacement rotating in and out of the front. The movement's current scale therefore appears less a tactical necessity than a strategic message, a reminder to domestic power brokers that any attempt to disarm the movement or reignite civil conflict would come at an intolerable cost (Author's confidential interviews, 2013-2024).

There is also a social logic behind this growth. Hezbollah regards it as a moral obligation to accept all who volunteer to join its ranks, regardless of immediate operational need. Refusing new recruits would risk alienating the Shia communities that form the foundation of its legitimacy. Consequently, its manpower has expanded through solidarity as much as through strategy, an expression of belonging as well as of military preparedness (Author's confidential interviews, 2013-2024). This dynamic encapsulates deterrence by resilience: the ability to convert social cohesion and moral obligation into a reserve of endurance that deters both external assault and internal challenge.

Although it falls outside the thesis's formal evidential period ending in June 2025, a subsequent event provides corroborative evidence of the continuing interaction between embedded sovereignty and deterrence by resilience. In October 2025, Hezbollah's Al-Mahdi Scouts marked their fortieth anniversary with a mass gathering of around 74,000 members, including adolescents, children and instructors, under the banner of solidarity and endurance. Reported as 'the largest scout celebration ever organised in Lebanon, and perhaps the world', the event combined religious ceremony, military symbolism and collective discipline in a performative display of belonging (Khalifeh, 2025).

Far from functioning solely as a commemorative ritual, the gathering projected generational continuity and reaffirmed the movement's claim to represent not only an armed resistance but an enduring social and moral order. The event illustrates how Hezbollah converts demographic and emotional mobilisation into political power, reinforcing deterrence by resilience through the visible continuity of its social base while also demonstrating the persistence of its embedded sovereignty.

Yet this growth came with an institutional price. The same professionalisation that multiplied Hezbollah's ranks demanded new layers of bureaucracy, tighter oversight, and a more centralised command. Numbers brought strength but also inertia. As the movement's organisational weight increased, it gradually eroded the flexibility that had once defined its battlefield responsiveness. The resulting loss of agility revealed the limits of embedded sovereignty: once deterrence depends on institutional survival rather than adaptability, resilience can harden into rigidity.

This structural weight also reshaped Hezbollah's internal culture of authority. What had once been a decentralised movement sustained by horizontal trust and adaptive field autonomy became a vertically aligned system, where discipline and coherence outweighed improvisation. Command centralisation under Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah emerged as both the guarantor of unity and the source of a new fragility. Decision-making increasingly concentrated in his office, reducing the influence of the Shura Council and replacing the earlier collegial ethos with a more vertical chain of command. Senior appointments within the Jihad Council and the elite Radwan Unit came to reflect personal loyalty as much as tactical skill (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025). While this centralisation produced strategic coherence, it also slowed reaction times in fast-moving theatres.

When Israeli strikes in September 2024 decapitated several senior figures, the system faltered. Orders stalled and decision-making froze for weeks. Hezbollah was forced into a defensive posture while replacements were still being identified. The organisation's political leadership experienced momentary paralysis as its centralised structure struggled to reconstitute itself and restore communication among all units, even as frontline fighters faced limited Israeli ground incursions.

At the local level, however, the movement's social fabric held. Fighters, bound by ideological conviction and community ties, did not need orders to act. Many were defending the very villages they came from; their resistance was not only strategic but personal. This organic cohesion, in which duty was rooted in belonging, allowed Hezbollah to absorb the shock and gradually restore operational balance. It demonstrated how the movement's organisational resilience drew upon social relationships already woven into the Shia communities of southern Lebanon, providing the social foundation of its embedded sovereignty. By enabling Hezbollah to preserve operational continuity despite leadership decapitation, this interaction between organisational resilience and social rootedness also contributed to deterrence by resilience.

The Syrian Campaign and Its Costs in the 2024 War

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria from 2013 was a pivotal moment. Officially framed as the defence of Lebanon's borders and Shia shrines (Alfoneh, 2018), it evolved into a prolonged external war that entrenched dependence on the Assad regime. Years of counter-insurgency refined urban-combat skills but eroded deterrence against a technologically superior

adversary. During this period, Israel perfected cyber warfare, aerial dominance, and algorithmic targeting. The asymmetry widened: Hezbollah trained for street battles, not for defence against precision air and drone campaigns.

Field reports and confidential interviews (2023–2025) describe lapses in discipline among fighters in Syria, such as mobile-phone exposure, relaxed convoy security, and social-media leakage. Habits of a state-allied army replaced the clandestinity that once ensured survivability. Centralisation facilitated coordination with Iran and Syria but suppressed the autonomous initiative of field units, the quality that had made Hezbollah formidable in 2006. Years of semi-conventional warfare fostered complacency: units accustomed to Russian air cover and Iranian logistics proved ill-prepared when Israel resumed pre-emptive operations supported by AI-enabled targeting. What once defined Hezbollah's strength, mobility, secrecy, and moral cohesion, was diluted by bureaucratisation and overextension.

Across these transformations runs a single thread: Hezbollah's gradual drift from deterrence as threat to deterrence as habit emanating from overconfidence. The 2023–2024 conflict exposed the obsolescence of assumptions formed in an earlier strategic environment. Israel's integration of cyber-intelligence, AI targeting, intelligence breach, and decapitation warfare outpaced Hezbollah's doctrinal evolution. The movement's adaptation after 2024, dispersed command, renewed emphasis on endurance, and narrative continuity, did not signal defeat but recalibration. Yet it marked the end of the deterrence equilibrium established after 2006. A movement once defined by secrecy, agility and initiative came to rely on survivability and perception, resistance through resilience rather than retaliation.

Socio-Economic and Ethical Drift

Following Hezbollah's claimed success in the 2006 war and the subsequent surge in Iranian financial support, the material well-being of its senior cadres improved dramatically. This affluence, increasingly visible in personal lifestyles, represented a shift from the earlier ethos of ascetic resistance that had defined the movement's formative years. Members of the Jihad Council and heads of military units acquired luxury properties and vehicles and maintained multiple households across Lebanon, patterns discernible through field observations and internal commentary (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025).

These socio-economic transformations generated acute operational vulnerabilities and increased opportunities for human intelligence penetration and electronic surveillance of commanders and their family members. The practice of polygamy, which is permitted in Islam, and the maintenance of several households produced routine patterns of movement between different residences. Fouad Shukr, the top senior Hezbollah military commander, was reportedly visiting his second wife when he was assassinated. Such movements, combined with the electronic devices used by commanders, their wives and other family members, created patterns of location, communication and association that could be identified and exploited. Many family members lacked the security discipline of Hezbollah's cadres and maintained public social-media profiles featuring geotagged photographs and lifestyle imagery. These digital traces, innocuous in intent, exposed addresses, personal schedules and familial networks. For adversarial intelligence services, this information provided valuable intelligence, undermining Hezbollah's long-cultivated culture of secrecy.

Comparable trajectories have appeared in other resistance movements. In the 1970s–1990s, the Palestinian Fatah leadership in Lebanon and Tunisia was criticised for its detachment from fighters under occupation, with elite lifestyles in exile perceived as moral decay (Sayigh, 1999). Within the Provisional Irish Republican Army, late-stage integration into political and quasi-state structures drew similar criticism for eroding revolutionary discipline and exposing leaders to British intelligence operations (Moloney, 2002). Across cases, the accumulation of personal wealth and privilege within militant hierarchies weakened internal legitimacy and increased exposure to infiltration.

Technocratic Centralisation and Cyber Exposure

In mid-2024, Israeli cyber units, reportedly affiliated with Unit 8200, penetrated Hezbollah's fibre-optic communications network and gained access to its central database, which contained the locations of most of its warehouses, offices and command-and-control centres. Whether achieved through signals intelligence and direct digital intrusion (SIGINT) or insider compromise and human intelligence (HUMINT), the breach granted Israeli intelligence a detailed map of Hezbollah's operational architecture, linking warehouses, unit bases, commanders' residences, offices and logistical nodes into a single exploitable grid. This vast repository of information was transformed into a comprehensive target bank. The ensuing precision strikes destroyed hundreds of homes, offices and weapons caches. A system designed to enhance security thus became a single point of catastrophic failure. The incident exposed the paradox of modernisation: the movement's shift from decentralised secrecy to digital governance created vulnerabilities that would have been inconceivable during its insurgent phase (Chmouny, 2025).

The same logic of control extended to Hezbollah's internal politics. Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, initially elected Secretary-General, gradually assumed indefinite tenure. Formal elections ceased, and members of the Shura Council and key operational units were personally selected (Author's confidential interviews, 2006–2025). Loyalty replaced innovation as the primary criterion for promotion. Selected commanders were elevated for allegiance rather than tactical skill, entrenching conformity and stifling initiative.

This hierarchy, coupled with the bureaucratisation of logistics, produced a form of organisational sclerosis. Mid-level officers lost visibility over future assignments, and departmental titles were replaced by vague designations such as 'in charge of a dossier', eroding accountability. When Israel's decapitation strikes in 2024 eliminated several senior leaders, the chain of command stalled. Replacement mechanisms slowed, revealing the fragility of a system that had traded flexibility for control.

These dynamics echoed the broader paradox of Hezbollah's post-2006 evolution. Institutionalisation delivered deterrent capacity but diluted asymmetrical advantage. The shift from clandestine network to regional army generated predictability, rigidity, and exposure. The 2023–2024 war therefore produced not only military losses but also a doctrinal reckoning. The movement entered a phase of introspection, seeking to rebuild deterrence through resilience and survivability, decentralisation, and symbolic endurance rather than expansion or confrontation.

Hezbollah's post-2023 recalibration did not result from sudden collapse but from the cumulative effects of long-term structural drift. The convergence of socio-economic privilege, technocratic centralisation, and political ossification gradually eroded the adaptive

ethos that had once sustained its deterrent credibility. The 2023–2024 war merely exposed these latent vulnerabilities, transforming institutional modernisation into operational fragility. By tracing this trajectory, the section connects the movement's doctrinal evolution to the organisational contradictions that now define Hezbollah's post-war resistance, a formation compelled to rebuild deterrence through decentralisation, narrative endurance, and selective restraint.

6.2 From Deterrence to Strategic Discipline

After Hamas's 7 October 2023 assault and the ensuing regional escalation (Calabrese, 2025), Hezbollah's military doctrine entered a phase of radical recalibration. For two decades, the movement had relied on assertive deterrence, regional projection, and the belief that its accumulated symbolic and material capital could prevent open confrontation and allow it to move from defence to offence. Yet the 2023–2024 conflict exposed structural, technical, and doctrinal vulnerabilities that forced Hezbollah to redefine deterrence around survival and disciplined restraint rather than offensive parity.

This transformation did not signify ideological retreat or military exhaustion but pragmatic adaptation to a battlespace dominated by Israeli technological superiority, cyber warfare, and an increasingly hostile geopolitical environment. The movement's posture began to prioritise redundancy, decentralisation, and endurance. By restraining escalation, Hezbollah sought to preserve its assets and legitimacy while avoiding a confrontation that Lebanon's fragile society could not bear. Deterrence through threatened retaliation was gradually replaced by deterrence by resilience, expressed through greater discipline, redundancy and organisational adaptation.

The turning point came with Israel's covert 'Pager Attack' in September 2024, an operation that fused supply-chain sabotage, psychological warfare and remote detonation. Mossad had manipulated Hezbollah's supply chain by embedding micro-explosives in pagers and walkie-talkies. On 17 September 2024, thousands of pagers were remotely detonated across Lebanon and Syria, followed by a lesser second wave involving walkie-talkies on 18 September (Saul, Scheer and Rabinovitch, 2024). At least forty-two people were killed and more than three thousand injured, including Hezbollah personnel and civilians (Farrell *et al*., 2024), making this Hezbollah's most serious internal security breach.

The pagers, imported through civilian maritime routes, likely via Asian ports and Turkey (Choukeir and Graff, 2024), exposed the dangerous intersection between commercial logistics and clandestine warfare. The use of civilian supply chains to distribute explosive devices disguised as apparently harmless portable objects contravened international humanitarian law governing booby-traps and raised serious concerns regarding distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack (OHCHR, 2024; CCW, 1996, Article 7).

Their undeclared transportation through international commercial networks may also have circumvented domestic customs and explosives controls and the mandatory maritime safety requirements governing the carriage of dangerous goods under Chapter VII of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea and the International Maritime Dangerous Goods Code (IMO, 1974; IMO, 2024). The incident blurred the boundary between commerce and covert warfare and set a troubling precedent for the militarisation of global trade infrastructure.

The attack's physical and psychological impact was profound. The injuries were frequently severe and disabling, including blindness, amputations and serious burns, but the symbolic impact was potentially greater. The pager, regarded as a secure communications tool and used for military coordination since 2006, had come to embody Hezbollah's organisational ingenuity. Its transformation into an instrument of mutilation undermined morale and confidence in the movement's communications security. Fighters discovered that even familiar objects could be weaponised against them. Seeing comrades injured by their own communications devices generated profound internal shock within an organisation that placed considerable confidence in discipline and operational secrecy.

Operationally, the attack revealed flaws in security and procurement oversight. Bulk purchases of a pager model with highly attractive features through civilian intermediaries had gone adequately unchecked for explosive components of all types. In the aftermath, Hezbollah imposed stricter supplier vetting, tighter compartmentalisation, and enhanced counter-intelligence control (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025).

The shockwaves extended across the '*Axis of Resistance'*. Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces and militia banned legacy pagers, Yemen's Ansar Allah ordered full inspection of imported communications gear, and Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps initiated audits of handheld devices in Syria and Iraq. The episode forced a regional technological adaptation and entrenched mistrust of global electronic supply chains. In legal and historical terms, the Pager Attack joined a long lineage of covert sabotage, from Stuxnet's infiltration of Iran's Natanz facility to Cold War cable tapping, but it proceeded without international censure. If left unchallenged, such tactics risk normalising the clandestine weaponisation of civilian infrastructure. Hezbollah, meanwhile, reframed the calamity as proof of endurance. Survival, not victory, became the new measure of faith and legitimacy.

The Pager Attack exposed three interlocking weaknesses: reliance on legacy communication systems, inadequate technical vetting, and the vulnerabilities created by over-centralised logistics. Hezbollah's immediate response was both tactical and cultural. Under fire, it shifted instinctively towards decentralisation: field commanders were granted broader autonomy, communication networks diversified across redundant channels, and operational compartmentalisation replaced the top-down discipline that had long defined its command culture.

Less than a week before the pager explosion, a preventive directive, Dawābit al-Istikhdām (الاستخدام ضوابط) 'Operational usage protocols', was issued by Hezbollah Intelligence Unit 1200. It had already warned all users to limit the transmission of coordinates via pagers, citing suspected communication interception vulnerabilities rather than a confirmed breach (Author's eyewitness access to the several-page document). Issued just three days before Mossad's remote detonation of the compromised devices, the directive, which Israel appears to have misread as evidence that Hezbollah had uncovered the explosives hidden in the pagers, effectively preserved Hezbollah's southern defensive line, averting a near-collapse that would have left scores killed and wounded and widespread disorganisation across the front in the midst of battle.

For Hezbollah, the timing of the Israeli operation mattered as much as its impact. The premature explosions, though devastating, came before a planned Israeli ground advance. Had they coincided with that assault, Hezbollah's battlefield cohesion might have

disintegrated within the first hours creating chaos. Instead, the early detonation bought time: units evacuated thousands of wounded to hospitals in Lebanon, Syria, and Iran, re-established internal communication, and deployed replacement teams, particularly within missile units, before the next wave of strikes.

From that trauma and setback emerged a doctrine of adaptive endurance and fast recovery. The movement drew a sober lesson: deterrence could no longer rely solely on symmetrical retaliation. Survival and resilience became the message. In the aftermath, redundancy, ambiguity, and endurance replaced the old vocabulary of response and revenge, marking a decisive shift from deterrence by threat to deterrence by resilience.

Israeli airstrikes later that month tested Hezbollah's capacity to live by this doctrine. Successive Israeli airstrikes killed Fouad Shukr, deputy head (the Secretary General is the head) of the Jihad Council, in July 2024, followed by Ibrahim Aqil, commander of the Special Forces Radwan Unit, and other senior commanders in September (Christou, 2024). Their meeting, in what Israeli surveillance identified as a known risk zone, discernible from above by the clustering of vehicles, exposed lapses in operational prudence (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025). Aqil's fatalism, shaped by deep religious conviction, revealed how faith could at times override tactical caution and security precaution. The assassinations struck hard at Hezbollah's southern command but did not destroy it.

Indeed, the movement's doctrine of redundancy, under which every commander delegates to at least two deputies and parallel communication nodes, preserved continuity even under systematic decapitation (Author's confidential interviews, 2024–2025). When subsequent strikes killed Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, and later on his designated successor Hashem Safieddine, and most members of the Jihad Council, the organisation still avoided structural collapse. Pre-war directives requiring each unit to appoint vice-commanders with full tactical access sustained partial cohesion.

This resilience stands in marked contrast to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces' collapse after the removal of senior leadership (Arabia, 2021) and to the coordination failures suffered by United States troops during Operation Anaconda (Kugler, Baranick and Binnendijk, 2009). Hezbollah's ability to reconstitute command under systematic decapitation reflected an institutional horizontal rather than vertical leadership and discipline rooted as much in ideological conviction as in organisational design.

One incident epitomised the transformation in Israel's targeting doctrine: Aqil's assassination inside what had long been considered a secure underground bunker. Israeli precision munitions penetrated directly into the facility, rendering obsolete the assumption that subterranean infrastructure guaranteed protection. Field interviews confirm that Hezbollah underestimated Israel's real-time geolocation capacity, satellite integration and intent to strike command nodes even in Beirut. The precise source of the intelligence that revealed the commanders' meeting remains uncertain. Israeli signals intelligence, human intelligence and the possible exploitation of Hezbollah's own surveillance grid may each have contributed, either independently or in combination. Designed as a shield, this grid comprised hundreds of cameras installed across Beirut and southern Lebanon to prevent infiltration, but it also generated potentially exploitable data streams (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025). Several million dollars' worth of commercial CCTV systems, installed by Hezbollah across Beirut's southern suburbs to monitor potential threats, may therefore have provided Israel

with additional points of access (Feldstein, 2019). Hezbollah's internal investigation had not established which intelligence breach, or combination of breaches, proved decisive.

Hezbollah's underground command-and-control complex known as Khatam al-Anbiyaʾ, thirty metres deep and equipped for siege conditions, was no longer invisible. Construction logistics, transport signatures, and social mapping had exposed its coordinates to Israel's ISR[4] platforms. Intelligence operations effectively merged tunnel topography with human networks, dissolving the boundary between population and battlespace. Subterranean warfare under continuous surveillance no longer ensured safety. Hezbollah's post-war doctrine therefore abandoned the sanctuary model, privileging mobility, dispersion, and redundancy as the only sustainable forms of defence (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025).

In May 2025, Hezbollah undertook a sweeping internal review culminating in The Battle of ʿUlī al-Baʾs: The Cultural Narrative (Author's eyewitness access to document). The booklet avoided the term 'losses', substituting it with 'sacrifices' and invoking Qurʾan 9:52's[5] dual promise of martyrdom or victory. One note conceded that 'defects or shortcomings … are related to the reasons for victory' – a carefully coded critique of leadership errors that preserved reverence for the Secretary-General while acknowledging fault. The movement estimated over 5,000 fighters killed and 15,000 wounded, including many senior officers. Yet through the ritualisation of martyrdom discourse, these casualties were reabsorbed as sacred fulfilment rather than defeat. In this theological framing, Hezbollah transformed loss into moral endurance, sustaining both its internal cohesion and its deterrent legitimacy.

By late 2024, the Israeli army claimed destruction of major command centres, depots, and fifty tunnel shafts (Goldenberg and Mroue, 2024; Hendrix, 2024). Hezbollah's response remained deliberately limited, symbolic rocket and drone strikes designed to demonstrate capability without triggering total war. Sheikh Naim Qassem, who succeeded as Secretary-General, articulated a rhetoric of 'strategic patience' and 'national guardianship', recasting Hezbollah as protector of Lebanese sovereignty and of the Shia community. This restraint

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[4] ISR stands for Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance. In military and strategic terms, this denotes the integrated process through which information on adversaries, terrain, and operational environments is gathered, analysed, and disseminated to support decision-making and targeting. Intelligence refers to processed and interpreted information derived from multiple sources, including human intelligence (HUMINT), signals intelligence (SIGINT), and imagery intelligence (IMINT). Surveillance denotes the continuous observation of designated areas or activities, often conducted through satellites, radar systems, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Reconnaissance involves deliberate missions to obtain specific data on enemy positions, capabilities, or movements. The term Western ISR integration refers to the collaborative fusion of these capabilities among Western and allied states, principally within NATO frameworks and extended partnerships with states such as Israel and Japan. This integration enables the sharing of real-time sensor data and analytical outputs across command structures. Through secure digital networks, allied forces synchronise satellite imagery, electronic intercepts, radar tracking, and aerial reconnaissance, consequently creating a unified operational picture. Such integration supports joint operations in theatres ranging from the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant to Eastern Europe, allowing partners to anticipate threats, coordinate responses, and conduct precision operations with shared situational awareness.

[5] Qurʾan 9:52 — قُلْ هَلْ تَرَبَّصُونَ بِنَا إِلَّا إِحْدَى الْحُسْنَيَيْنِ ۖ وَنَحْنُ نَتَرَبَّصُ بِكُمْ أَنْ يُصِيبَكُمُ اللَّهُ بِعَذَابٍ مِنْ عِنْدِهِ أَوْ بِأَيْدِينَا ۖ فَتَرَبَّصُوا إِنَّا مَعَكُمْ مُتَرَبِّصُونَ – Say, 'Do you await for us anything except one of the two best things, while we await for you that God will afflict you with punishment from Himself or at our hands? So wait; we too are waiting with you' (trans. Abdel Haleem, 2004).

echoed Schelling's (1966) argument that deterrence rests on the manipulation of risk rather than the use of force.

Parallel social programmes reinforced embedded sovereignty: expanded welfare, health, and education networks in Shia-majority regions (Norton, 2014), and Iranian-financed compensation funds supporting rent and reconstruction. External donors linked broader recovery to disarmament, but the 2025 municipal elections confirmed sustained support for the Hezbollah–Amal coalition (Beeri, 2025).

Regionally, Hezbollah's manoeuvrability narrowed. Assad's weakened control in Syria disrupted a multi-front battle; Iran, constrained by sanctions, urged Hezbollah to limit confrontation (Wastnidge, 2023). Israel's integration into US CENTCOM and improvements in precision targeting further elevated the cost of escalation. Nevertheless, Hezbollah began reactivating decentralised infrastructure and restating claims over remaining occupied Lebanese territories.

The 2023–2024 war, culminating in the Pager Attack, subsequent assassinations and the destruction of the command-and-control base, marked the collapse of confrontation-based deterrence and exposed the limitations of deterrence by narrative. Legacy tools, centralised command, underground sanctuaries, and symbolic retaliation became liabilities in an era of cyber-physical integration and pervasive surveillance. Hezbollah's response was transformation and adaptation rather than disintegration. Through decentralisation, redundancy, and social resilience, the wounded non-state actor reframed deterrence as disciplined endurance. Its survival strategy now rests on legitimacy and ambiguity instead of on direct confrontation. The doctrinal shift encapsulates the thesis's wider argument: the consolidation of deterrence by resilience, in which demonstrated organisational continuity becomes a strategic asset.

Hezbollah's experience between late 2023 and 2025 reveals a doctrinal transformation forged through crisis. Technological subversion and leadership decapitation did not dismantle the movement but compelled it to reimagine deterrence as discipline. What emerged was a system where restraint, decentralisation, and ambiguity replaced confrontation as the organising principles of survival. This analytical account demonstrates how Hezbollah converted vulnerability into structural adaptation, marking the conceptual threshold that the next section explores in its organisational and socio-political dimensions.

6.3 Strategic Restraint and the Logic of Containment (2023–2025)

In the aftermath of the October 2023 escalation, Hezbollah adopted a posture of calculated restraint. Rather than opening a northern front or extending the regional confrontation, the organisation limited its actions to controlled border engagements and symbolic resistance operations in southern Lebanon. This restraint marked a decisive doctrinal inflection. After two decades of assertive deterrence, Hezbollah now grounded its strategy in containment and survival, shaped by domestic fragility, the human and material toll of war, a recalibrated regional calculus, and an internal process of ideological re-evaluation.

Lebanon's prolonged economic and institutional breakdown since 2019 deepened public exhaustion, making any large-scale war politically and socially untenable. Hezbollah's leadership recognised that escalation could exhaust its resources and alienate non-Shia segments of the population. Symbolic solidarity with the Palestinian struggle therefore

replaced the earlier logic of confrontation. The movement sought to preserve its deterrent reputation while avoiding devastation in a country already on the brink of state failure.

At the same time, the threat of overwhelming Israeli retaliation, reinforced by sustained US military and diplomatic backing, imposed strict operational limits. Hezbollah understood that any major offensive would trigger coordinated and brutal strikes on its command and logistical network and also civilian homes across the Dahiyeh, the Bekaa Valley, and southern Lebanon. Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah repeatedly informed Hamas leaders that widening the northern front would neither alter the course of the Gaza war nor serve Lebanon's national interest, as it would instead legitimise deeper international involvement under the banner of Israel's self-defence. Within this tension between solidarity and prudence, Hezbollah sustained its established pattern of support through limited missile and drone operations – enough to signal commitment to the Axis, yet carefully contained to avoid escalation (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025).

In parallel, Hezbollah's communication strategy projected responsibility and deterrent credibility simultaneously. Sayyed Nasrallah's speeches advanced the concept of 'resistance with discipline', portraying deliberate restraint as a higher form of strategic wisdom rather than weakness. Confined drone sorties, short-range rocket fire, and selective use of precision munitions were designed to demonstrate readiness without breaching Israel's red lines. Israel's own response remained relatively proportionate for a powerful state actor, targeting Hezbollah infrastructure while avoiding major escalation, revealing a tacit convergence of interests in managing risk boundaries. For Prime Minister Netanyahu, stabilising the Lebanese front with routine bombing of selective targets also served domestic political ends, allowing concentration of main resources on Gaza and on preserving his coalition.

Hezbollah's restraint was further conditioned by the sentiments of its Shia support base. After decades of intermittent wars, fatigue with destruction had deepened. Preserving stability in the Bekaa, the southern districts, and Beirut's suburbs allowed Hezbollah to present itself as a guardian of national endurance rather than a source of renewed calamity (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025). Sayyed Nasrallah's rhetoric during this period reframed protection, patience, and reconstruction as higher forms of sacrifice, transforming resistance from confrontation into resilience.

This doctrinal posture resonates with Schelling's (1966) conception of deterrence as the manipulation of risk rather than the continuous use of force. Hezbollah's deterrence logic has thus evolved towards ambiguity, redundancy, and social embedment. It signals endurance and disciplined defiance rather than escalation. Between 2023 and 2025, the movement redefined deterrence as a form of containment, an operational and ideological transformation that converts survival itself into victory.

Taken together, the 2023–2025 posture shows Hezbollah recasting deterrence as containment, a managed equilibrium where risk is signalled, force is rationed, and legitimacy is conserved under domestic constraint and regional caution. By locating restraint at the intersection of constituency pressures, Iranian calibration, and Schelling's logic of risk, this section consolidates the chapter's analytical arc and sets up the inquiry that follows into how endurance, once internalised as doctrine, reshapes organisational practice and regional narrative in the subsequent sections.

6.4 Doctrinal Evolution: From Threat-Based Deterrence to Resilient Containment

The evolution of Hezbollah's deterrence doctrine between the period preceding 7 October 2023 and the aftermath of the sixty-six-day war from September to November 2024 marks a decisive transformation in its strategic philosophy. This shift reflects both adaptive learning in response to Israeli military and intelligence superiority and the broader geopolitical reconfiguration that narrowed Hezbollah's capacity for regional projection.

Before October 2023, Hezbollah's deterrence operated through a threat-based paradigm aimed at imposing symmetrical costs on Israel. Its extensive arsenal of spread precision-guided missiles in Lebanon and Syria and fortified network in southern Lebanon underpinned a strategy of assertive deterrence, maintained through limited but predictable retaliation for Israeli assassinations. Regional activism reinforced this stance: Hezbollah's role in the Syrian war and its support for allied groups in Iraq and Yemen projected the image of a transnational resistance bloc underwritten by Iran's strategic depth and by the relative stability of the Assad regime. The movement's confidence rested on the assumption that its accumulated symbolic and material capital would deter direct confrontation.

By late 2024, that confidence had given way to a doctrine of resilient containment. Israel's sustained military and cyber offensives, culminating in the September 2024 decapitation strikes, compelled Hezbollah to reconsider the foundations of deterrence. Command, control, and communication systems were relocated and dispersed to mitigate vulnerability (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025). The organisation deprioritised regional projection and concentrated instead on preserving core military and political capacities within Lebanon. It reduced operational visibility, expanded command redundancy, and channelled resources into reconstruction and welfare in Shia-majority regions affected by state collapse.

Hezbollah's rhetorical posture evolved in parallel. The once-dominant language of 'divine victory' and revolutionary confrontation gave way to notions of disciplined guardianship and protective endurance. Military actions became demonstrative rather than escalatory: controlled cross-border strikes and limited rocket launches sustained credibility without provoking full confrontation. This communicative recalibration presented restraint as wisdom, not weakness, aligning ideological narrative with strategic necessity.

Acknowledging Israel's technological superiority, particularly in drone warfare and real-time targeting, Hezbollah re-adopted a decentralised command model reminiscent of its early insurgent phase and comparable to adaptive hybrid movements such as the Taliban before 2021 or Colombia's FARC (Price, 2012; Staniland, 2014). This structure balanced autonomy with coordination, mitigating the risks of surveillance and decapitation while preserving operational continuity.

Doctrinally, this reconfiguration went beyond tactical adaptation. It constituted a structural redefinition of deterrence for a non-state actor constrained by domestic fragility and regional fatigue. Where deterrence had once depended on symmetrical threat, it now derived from endurance, adaptive capacity, and the projection of stability under pressure. Hezbollah's strategic value lies less in confrontation than in its ability to survive, reorganise, and signal continuity despite attrition.

Although less spectacular, this model proved more sustainable within Lebanon's fractured political environment. Resilient containment replaced assertive deterrence as the core logic of

Hezbollah's military doctrine, marking a transition from threatening decisive retaliation to demonstrating unbroken continuity. In this framework, survival becomes strategy, and restraint becomes resistance.

6.5 Decapitation and Intelligence Breaches: Strategic Shock and Recovery

Between September and October 2024, Israel initiated an unprecedented campaign of carpet bombing and targeted assassinations designed to dismantle Hezbollah's senior leadership, paralyse its command infrastructure and destroy the missiles' warehouses. The most consequential strike, involving eighty-three tons of explosives, occurred on 27 September, when Israeli aircraft bombed Beirut's southern suburbs, killing Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Secretary-General and principal strategist since 1992. The attack also killed Ali Karaki, member of the Jihadi Council and commander of the southern front, Iranian Brigadier-General Abbas Nilforoushan of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and more than twenty senior officers (Young, 2024).

The immediate aftermath was paralysis. Communication networks fractured, and surviving commanders struggled to restore even the most basic coordination. Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah's assassination left a vacuum at the heart of the organisation, a silence that reverberated across every front. His cousin, Sayyed Hashem Safieddine, long regarded as the movement's pragmatic political strategist and head of Hezbollah's executive *Majlis*, assumed interim leadership, only to be killed days later in another precision strike (Christou, 2024). Within weeks, the Shura Council consolidated authority under Sheikh Naim Qassem, who was formally appointed Secretary-General on 29 October (Ebrahim, 2024). The rapid succession exposed the dual nature of Hezbollah's structure: a system vulnerable to unexpected decapitation at several top leadership level, yet disciplined enough to regenerate leaders and commanders under fire and in the midst of an existential war.

For Sheikh Qassem, the transition was abrupt and overwhelming. Until that moment, his role had been largely political, with limited access to the movement's operational command. He inherited leadership in the midst of a devastating war, tasked with steering an organisation reeling from simultaneous loss and bombardment. His immediate challenge was to re-establish a new communication system with missile units that, by doctrine, awaited orders only from the top leader. It was a moment that tested both the coherence of Hezbollah's chain of command and the endurance of its collective discipline. Beyond the battlefield, he faced the far greater task of restoring confidence within Hezbollah and the wider Shia community after the loss of their charismatic leader and his designated successor.

In that crucible, Hezbollah once again demonstrated the adaptive architecture of non-state leadership, where authority, rather than collapsing vertically, is redistributed horizontally, allowing the organisation to regenerate even under extreme duress (Youngman and Moore, 2024). This capacity to absorb shock and reconstitute command exemplifies the movement's evolution from deterrence by confrontation to deterrence by resilience. Leadership became not a singular figurehead but a networked function anchored in ideological conviction and communal legitimacy, a structure that sustains deterrence by resilience and the politics of endurance rather than the pursuit of immediate victory.

Despite the magnitude of the blow, Hezbollah's structural design prevented collapse. The organisation's long-standing doctrine – that no individual is indispensable – proved effective. Within forty-eight hours of Sayyed Safieddine's death, the Council confirmed Sheikh

Qassem as interim leader. His appointment highlighted Hezbollah's compartmentalised nature: He had previously managed political and social affairs, with limited operational experience and access to all Hezbollah's capabilities, a gap he had acknowledged decades earlier in his own book (Qassem, 2002, p. 10). His leadership style, more clerical than charismatic, emphasised endurance and collective discipline over personal authority.

Participant testimony indicates that leadership succession and organisational redundancy had been articulated before the most severe decapitation strikes. Following Israeli assassinations of senior figures in January 2024, a Military Commander explained: "Assassinations hurt, but leaders are replaceable. Our structure survives decapitation. Hezbollah is not one man, it is an institution. Every commander who is killed already has two trained and experienced successors ready to replace him. We bury martyrs, we promote brothers, and the line continues. Israel kills names, but resistance is nameless" (Appendix C, Entry 29, Military Commander, South Beirut, January 2024).

The testimony reveals the internal doctrine through which anticipated leadership losses were separated from organisational defeat. Its significance became clearer after the assassinations of Nasrallah, Safieddine and senior Jihad Council members later in 2024. Although the resulting disruption demonstrated that individual leaders were not as readily replaceable as the participant suggested, the activation of deputies and subsequent reconstruction of command confirmed that leadership decapitation did not produce organisational collapse. The evidence therefore supports the thesis title by showing how Hezbollah remained undefeated despite losing much of its senior leadership: succession planning and institutional continuity allowed severe sacrifice to be absorbed without compelling political submission or the abandonment of armed resistance.

The psychological impact extended far beyond the battlefield. Within much of Lebanon's Shia community, Sayyed Nasrallah's assassination was experienced as the loss of a paternal figure who had embodied continuity and defiance for three decades. Mourning rituals across the south and the Bekaa Valley merged grief with anxiety over the resistance's future. Nationally, the event deepened sectarian polarisation; regionally, it signalled Israel's willingness to escalate into previously untested strategic terrain.

'Operation New Order' (Fabian, 2024c) marked one of the most destructive phases of the war. Over eighty bunker-busting munitions were deployed, collapsing vast sections of Hezbollah's underground command network and sealing even its most concealed entry points. What had once been considered impregnable, the subterranean corridors of command that had survived multiple wars, was exposed and annihilated within minutes. The accuracy of these strikes revealed not only Hezbollah's intelligence breach, Israel's technological sophistication and superiority but also the depth of Israeli intelligence access and the precision of its timing (Ravid, 2024).

Israeli cyber units had successfully breached Hezbollah's encrypted communications, traced the movement of senior commanders, and coordinated real-time strikes against identified command targets. For Hezbollah, however, the explanation went beyond cyber intrusion. Internal assessments determined that the breach resulted from a combination of technical and human failures. Israeli cyber units had embedded remote-activation features in certain electronic devices, enabling concealed Wi-Fi connections to be triggered from drones and used to intercept internal communications and meeting data.

In parallel, well-placed informants and compromised intermediaries weakened operational security and facilitated access. These combined intrusions dismantled the integrity of Hezbollah's protective architecture. Although no official information was released regarding the infiltrators' identities, the internal shock extended far beyond material loss. It exposed how, even within a system built on secrecy and discipline, remote cyber penetration and human compromise could converge to defeat advanced defensive measures.

In the weeks following the strikes, Hezbollah focused on restoring command coherence. With large portions of its network disabled by Israeli cyberattacks, Sheikh Qassem relied on improvised human delivery and a newly installed closed-circuit communication line to re-establish contact with dispersed units. The loss of senior Jihad Council members created coordination gaps that temporarily disrupted missile and drone rapid-launch operations. Yet the movement adapted quickly: pre-designated deputies assumed control, a large part of the operation resumed within two weeks, and encrypted substitutes replaced compromised systems (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025).

Israel's targeted killings signalled a doctrinal pivot from attrition warfare to leadership decapitation of networks embedded in urban civilian zones. Subsequent strikes in the Bekaa Valley and Beirut targeted logistics and depot managers, enabled by cyber infiltration of Hezbollah's digital infrastructure. These attacks exposed vulnerabilities in Hezbollah's communication architecture but failed to destroy its operational backbone. Israel's success resulted from compromised digital systems and intelligence breaches, prompting Hezbollah to rotate sensitive personnel and tighten access to classified data.

Despite temporary disruption, Hezbollah's organisational redundancy ensured recovery. Replacement commanders, veterans of Syria and Iraq, re-established coordination and maintained a steady rhythm of missile and drone operations. This rapid adaptation demonstrated the group's deep resilience, rooted in decentralised authority, pre-planned succession, and a culture of operational secrecy.

In southern Lebanon, field units continued resistance operations even under severe strain, and troop resupply never stopped despite fire. The loss of key area commanders disrupted but did not halt integration between elite Special Forces Radwan units and local defence forces, yet the layered defensive system held. Missile launches authorised by the reconstituted Jihad Council demonstrated continued deterrent capacity, signalling to Israel that Hezbollah remained operational despite decapitation.

Despite the deployment of five Israeli divisions, Israeli forces achieved limited territorial depth. Hezbollah's continued resistance imposed military and logistical costs, but the evidence does not permit the ceasefire to be attributed to this factor alone. Despite initial tactical momentum, Israeli ground forces achieved only limited territorial gains and faced escalating personnel and logistical costs. In his televised address of 26 November 2024, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu framed the ceasefire as a 'tactical pause to refocus on the Iranian threat and replenish resources' (Netanyahu, 2024). The outcome illustrated the paradox of asymmetric warfare: Israel secured short-term tactical gains through leadership decapitation but failed to eliminate and degrade Hezbollah's enduring capacity or compel strategic submission. Netanyahu sought to consolidate these limited gains while avoiding deeper entanglement and further losses in Lebanon's conflict.

Hezbollah's internal discourse reframed the assassinations through its established narrative of martyrdom. Official communications reiterated that 'martyrs are the foundation of the resistance', transforming loss into affirmation of purpose. Internal memoranda urged perseverance under 'strategic resilience', recasting leadership decapitation as a test rather than a defeat (Hezbollah internal communication, 2025, confidential examination by the author).

The movement's recovery reveals a model of adaptive resilience grounded in organisational redundancy, dispersed command, selected surviving underground infrastructure, social cohesion and support and robust ideology. These elements enabled Hezbollah to withstand leadership elimination, infrastructural destruction, and cyber espionage without disintegration. Israeli assessments confirmed this outcome: while the campaign inflicted serious damage, it failed to dismantle Hezbollah's operational architecture (Krieg, 2025).

Israel's 2024 decapitation campaign thus epitomised the dynamics of asymmetric conflict, immediate tactical success paired with strategic inconclusiveness. Hezbollah's capacity to absorb shocks, regenerate leadership, and maintain societal legitimacy demonstrates how a decentralised, ideologically cohesive actor can survive even the most advanced forms of precision warfare. Its endurance under decapitation reaffirmed the central principle in Hezbollah's strategic logic: survival itself constitutes deterrence.

6.5.1 The Concept of Sacrifice versus Defeat in Non-State Warfare

In conventional interstate conflict, defeat is defined through tangible outcomes: destruction of enemy forces, territorial occupation, capitulation, or regime change. Carl von Clausewitz (1976) described war as 'an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will', emphasising kinetic engagement and decisive victory. Within this paradigm, defeat is visible, material, and terminal.

Such definitions, however, are inadequate for non-state warfare, where actors such as Hezbollah pursue asymmetrical strategies prioritising endurance, legitimacy, and symbolic capital over territorial control. Luttwak (1999) challenges the binary logic of victory and defeat, arguing that the political and psychological dimensions of warfare often overturn conventional expectations. Movements may suffer tactical reverses yet emerge with enhanced legitimacy or ideological strength. Smith (2005) captures this transformation through his notion of 'wars amongst the people', in which conflict is fought for legitimacy within civilian environments rather than for territorial gain. In this setting, defeat manifests not as battlefield destruction but as erosion of social support or strategic relevance.

Counter-insurgency theory reinforces this redefinition. Galula (1964) and Kilcullen (2009) locate the centre of gravity of modern irregular warfare in the population: insurgent resilience depends less on battlefield outcomes than on the preservation of civilian allegiance. Jones (2017) extends this insight, demonstrating that insurgent movements often regenerate after major losses through ideological coherence, foreign sponsorship, and community embeddedness. These qualities blur the boundary between defeat and adaptation, especially for actors integrated into political and social systems.

Hezbollah exemplifies these dynamics. Despite enduring repeated Israeli offensives, economic sanctions, and reputational assaults, it has preserved and even expanded its political influence. Its incorporation into Lebanon's state institutions, vast welfare apparatus, and

alignment with regional anti-imperialist discourse create a form of strategic depth that transcends the battlefield.

Equally significant is Hezbollah's capacity to reinterpret loss as devotion. Military setbacks are reframed as 'sacrifices', rooted in Shiʿa theology and the Qurʾanic ethos of 'martyrdom or victory' (Freamon, 2003). Cultural rituals and commemorations of martyrdom (Bianchi, 2018) reinforce a collective identity of perseverance, transforming suffering into symbolic endurance. Accordingly, any assessment of Hezbollah's resilience must distinguish between defeat and destruction or setback. Analytical models should integrate legitimacy, ideological coherence, and social continuity as key dimensions of strategic survival. This reframing captures the operational reality of non-state warfare in the twenty-first century and situates Hezbollah's endurance within a broader theory of resilience under asymmetrical constraint.

6.6 Controlled Escalation as Doctrine

Before the September 2024 war, Hezbollah practised a doctrine of controlled escalation, understood here as measured military action intended to preserve deterrence while avoiding full scale confrontation. This approach reflected the belief that coercive credibility could be maintained through calibrated risk rather than uncontrolled escalation (Jones, 2017). The subsequent Israeli campaign demonstrated the limitations of this doctrine: Hezbollah's calibrated actions neither preserved reciprocal restraint nor prevented escalation into a wider war. Controlled escalation therefore explains an important element of Hezbollah's prewar strategy, but not how it remained undefeated after that strategy failed to prevent a major confrontation.

Hezbollah's selective use of precision weapons embodied the logic of calibrated deterrence. By deploying Kornet-EM anti-tank guided missiles against Israeli armoured and communications units along the border, the movement demonstrated its capacity to strike with accuracy and intent while avoiding actions that could trigger wider escalation (Jakes and Bergman, 2024). Each launch was tactically limited yet symbolically charged, a signal of technological competence and strategic restraint. In conventional warfare, no major ground offensive can advance without armoured divisions to breach defences, protect infantry, and secure territorial gains. Hezbollah's ability to threaten this central component of manoeuvre warfare increased the anticipated cost of a deep armoured advance into southern Lebanon. Before September 2024, this contributed to deterrence through precision by reinforcing the risks associated with invasion. It did not, however, compel Israel to abandon ground operations during the subsequent war. The episode therefore demonstrates the capacity of precision weapons to constrain the scale and depth of military action without establishing reciprocal containment or preventing escalation altogether.

The movement also expanded its use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for reconnaissance and limited strikes, exploiting vulnerabilities in Israel's air defence grid. These missions embodied a shift towards high-impact, low-visibility warfare, operations calibrated to communicate readiness without triggering disproportionate response. This operational philosophy aligns with Schelling's (1966) notion of 'the threat that leaves something to chance', where deterrence depends on the credible management of uncertainty. Hezbollah's missile salvos and UAV incursions thus conveyed a willingness to retaliate, maintaining the balance of risk without crossing escalation thresholds.

Controlled escalation had previously sustained deterrence through visible capability held in reserve. Power was expressed not only through attacks but through the demonstrated capacity to control their scale. Before September 2024, this combination of limited force and restraint helped preserve escalation boundaries and reduced Lebanon's exposure to full scale war. Israel's subsequent campaign, however, including extensive air strikes, leadership decapitation and ground incursions, demonstrated that this mutual containment had broken down. Controlled escalation should therefore be understood as Hezbollah's intended doctrine rather than as proof that both parties continued to observe reciprocal limits. Its failure to prevent the 2024 war contributed to Hezbollah's subsequent shift from deterrence through threatened retaliation towards deterrence through resilience.

Before September 2024, Hezbollah's doctrine of controlled escalation represented an attempt to translate military power into disciplined signalling. By combining operational precision and an extensive arsenal of increasingly sophisticated missiles with measured restraint, the movement sought to maintain deterrence through a managed exchange of reciprocal limits. The subsequent war exposed the limits of this approach. Calibrated action neither preserved reciprocal restraint nor prevented wider escalation, particularly once deep Israeli intelligence penetration exploited the vulnerabilities of Hezbollah's increasingly centralised structure, enabling the destruction of substantial military capabilities and the elimination of much of its senior command. The doctrine nevertheless remains analytically important because it explains Hezbollah's prewar assumptions and the organisational adaptations that followed their failure.

6.7 Strategic Communication

Hezbollah's doctrine of controlled escalation was reinforced by a coordinated strategic communication campaign designed to shape domestic, regional, and international perceptions. The objective was to portray restraint not as weakness but as calculated prudence and national responsibility. *Al-Manar* television, Hezbollah's principal media arm, played a central role in constructing this narrative. Broadcasts framed precision operations and border engagements as acts of defensive retaliation embedded in a discourse of disciplined resistance. This representation reinforced Hezbollah's image as a rational and capable actor defending Lebanese sovereignty while sustaining deterrent readiness (Suechika, 2025).

Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah's speeches amplified the same message. His rhetoric of proportional response and national guardianship portrayed self-restraint as a form of strength, proof of political maturity and guardianship of national interests. This framing distinguished Hezbollah from more volatile actors in the region and appealed to a Lebanese public weary of destruction. Regionally, Hezbollah's messaging maintained symbolic cohesion with the '*Axis of Resistance'* while asserting tactical autonomy. Shared anti-imperialist discourse preserved ideological solidarity with Iran, Hamas, and the Houthis, mitigating the political cost of reduced military engagement.

Symbolic actions, including publicised missile tests, selective drone footage, and choreographed displays of readiness, operated as forms of 'deterrence by narrative', in which the story of capability substitutes for its use. Through controlled visibility and repetition, Hezbollah sustained a narrative of competence and preparedness intended to influence adversarial calculations while avoiding direct escalation. In this sense, narrative became an extension of strategy, an instrument for preserving deterrence through perception rather than destruction.

Digital platforms such as Telegram and Twitter extended this communication strategy beyond traditional media. By broadcasting directly to supporters and sympathisers, Hezbollah transformed information control into an additional layer of deterrence, where narrative management became part of the strategic arsenal.

Through this integration of restraint, symbolism, and ideological framing, Hezbollah converted communication into a form of strategic power through deterrence by narrative. The movement's narrative of disciplined endurance reaffirmed deterrence by resilience, the portrayal of choice and control as the ultimate expressions of strength.

6.8 De-prioritisation of the Regional Role and Doctrinal Limitations

Following the 2023–2024 conflict, Hezbollah increasingly prioritised internal consolidation over regional military projection. This represented a pragmatic recalibration intended to conserve resources, rebuild organisational capacity and reinforce its domestic legitimacy while maintaining political and symbolic links to the *'Axis of Resistance'*. Even before the fall of the Assad government in December 2024, Damascus had sought to reduce Hezbollah's presence in several areas as part of its efforts to limit the risk of confrontation with Israel and pursue regional and international normalisation. The subsequent collapse of the regime further constrained Hezbollah's regional position, reduced its freedom of operation in Syria and transformed previously protected logistical routes into more vulnerable clandestine networks. These developments accelerated the movement's reorientation towards more immediate Lebanese priorities, without necessarily ending its regional relationships or ideological commitments.

A Head of the Syria Dossier described this transition directly: "We lost more than a president. We lost the protection of a state that, however fragile, had provided us with strategic depth and a logistic route. Nevertheless, the corridor still exists. Smuggling routes never close entirely, but what was once an official passage has now been reduced to clandestine networks" (Appendix C, Entry 33, Head of Syria Dossier, Beirut, April 2025). This testimony supports the distinction between the loss of state-protected strategic depth and the complete disappearance of Hezbollah's Syrian networks. It indicates contraction and increased vulnerability rather than total regional disengagement.

In Iraq, involvement is primarily indirect, focusing on training, coordination, and political liaison with allied militias such as *Kataʾib Hezbollah* and *ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haq*. These groups, now focused on domestic stability, mirror Hezbollah's own avoidance of costly entanglement in volatile theatres. In Yemen, cooperation with *Ansar Allah* (Houthis) remains confined to training, logistics, and media support rather than combat. Such limited engagement maintains ideological and organisational ties while avoiding the material and reputational costs of open participation.

Across these arenas, Hezbollah's projection has become primarily narrative. The '*Axis of Resistance'* functions more as a discursive coalition than a joint command structure, parallel theatres bound by shared rhetoric rather than coordinated strategy. The October 2023 escalation exposed these limits, showing the Axis to be an imagined unity sustained through narrative performance.

The strategic contraction reflects lessons learned from Israeli targeting and intelligence penetration. Hezbollah now prioritises domestic reconstruction, arsenal dispersal, and the

protection of its social base. Maintaining large regional footprints has become costlier and politically unsustainable. The revised doctrine substitutes regional activism with defensive pragmatism: fewer exposures abroad, deeper consolidation at home, and continued symbolic solidarity with allied movements.

Domestically, this inward turn has not eroded legitimacy. Hezbollah's constituency continues to justify its armament as essential to national defence. External pressure, rather than internal dissent, remains the principal challenge, linking reconstruction aid and de-escalation initiatives to disarmament. The organisation has signalled conditional openness to security dialogue, provided Israeli withdrawal and sovereignty guarantees form part of the package under UNSCR 1701.

In short, Hezbollah's post-2024 strategy reflects adaptive learning: a transition from expansive deterrence to embedded sovereignty, aligning military posture with Lebanon's fragile realities.

6.9 Learning from Loss and Organisational Adaptation

The 2023–2024 conflict inflicted severe material and human costs, including the assassinations of senior commanders and the destruction of key infrastructure. Yet the crisis catalysed structural adaptation rather than disintegration. Following leadership decapitation and cyber penetrations, Hezbollah intensified the compartmentalisation of its communication networks. Reliance on vulnerable digital systems was reduced and authority was dispersed across smaller regional nodes. Rather than expanding large subterranean command facilities whose locations and logistical signatures could be detected, Hezbollah increasingly relied upon dispersed, compartmentalised and mobile command arrangements, while retaining selected underground infrastructure where it continued to offer operational protection (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025).

Confidential participant accounts indicate that alternative command nodes were activated following the destruction of principal facilities, enabling a degree of operational continuity through the experience and independent initiative of local commanders despite Israel's advanced electronic capabilities and air dominance. On the final day of the war, the movement underscored its enduring combat capacity by launching a concentrated missile barrage, signalling that its arsenal remained far from depleted (Rasgon, 2024).

This architecture demonstrates the operational logic theorised by Price (2012): semi-autonomous units and distributed leadership enhance survivability against decapitation strategies during wartime. Hezbollah's swift appointment of successors and sustained operational tempo illustrate institutional learning and adaptive governance.

Losses were rapidly reframed within a theological and symbolic register. *Al-Manar* broadcasts and official statements presented assassinations as sacred sacrifices, transforming mourning into mobilisation. Within Hezbollah's interpretive framework, the narrative of martyrdom functioned as a psychological defence mechanism and an instrument of recruitment, reinforcing the premise that resilience itself constituted victory.

These discursive practices evolved into strategic myth-making. Accounts of tunnel survivability and uninterrupted command became elements of collective memory, sustaining morale and deterrent reputation. The social construction of meaning around notions of threat

and endurance forms the core mechanism through which asymmetric conflicts sustain themselves (Wendt, 1992).

Hezbollah's structural formula, combining redundancy, decentralised command and subterranean resilience, provides empirical evidence of adaptive learning under unprecedented duress. Its ability to integrate material adaptation with symbolic renewal exemplifies the fusion of organisational pragmatism and ideological narrative that underpins deterrence by resilience.

6.10 Conclusion: The Enduring Resistance, Redefined

The 2023–2024 conflict marks a defining inflection point in Hezbollah's evolution. Facing the assassination of its top leadership and the destruction of key infrastructure and missile warehouses, the organisation did not collapse but recalibrated in real time, shifting its doctrine from deterrence through confrontation to deterrence through resilience.

Within weeks, field and intelligence reports indicated that Hezbollah's command had been reconstituted. These redundancies, material, organisational, and symbolic, enabled the group to absorb strategic shocks while maintaining operational coherence.

Hezbollah's resilience extends beyond its military apparatus. Its deeply embedded social ecosystem, encompassing healthcare, education, reconstruction, and welfare, anchors legitimacy across its support base. After the devastation of the 2024 war, the movement intensified investment in these networks, reinforcing ideological cohesion and remobilising communities under strain. In this sense, Hezbollah's integration into social life is not ancillary to its defence strategy; it is a constitutive part of its survival architecture.

Participant testimony demonstrates how Hezbollah understands social provision as a mechanism of organisational endurance rather than as an activity separate from resistance. During Lebanon's economic and banking crisis, a Senior Cleric explained: "The economy collapses, banks steal savings, and yet the only reliable structure remains the resistance. The state is empty; we are full, paying salaries monthly. By my estimate, over half a million Shia, fighters and their families, depend on Hezbollah stipends. Our institutions still pay salaries, our clinics and hospitals keep their doors open, and our schools in the south still function. People knock at our doors. The rifle alone does not make legitimacy, bread does too" (Appendix C, Entry 26, Senior Cleric, South Beirut, February 2021).

Although the participant's numerical estimate cannot be independently verified and should be understood as an insider perception, the testimony identifies the causal relationship between welfare provision, constituency reliance and political legitimacy. These institutional connections provided Hezbollah with a social base capable of absorbing military and economic pressure without abandoning the organisation. They therefore substantiate the concept of embedded sovereignty and help explain why Hezbollah remained undefeated: Israel could assassinate dozens of commanders and damage its military infrastructure, but military force alone could not dismantle the social relationships through which the movement reproduced legitimacy and organisational continuity.

What emerges is a model of resistance defined less by territorial control or kinetic dominance than by structural flexibility, narrative mastery, and societal embedment. The transition from

regional projection to domestic consolidation reflects a matured doctrine: resistance as resilience, grounded in pragmatic adaptation and symbolic legitimacy.

Analytically, this chapter has shown how Hezbollah transformed existential vulnerability into strategic capital. It traced the evolution from deterrence by confrontation to deterrence by resilience, demonstrating how cyber vulnerability, leadership decapitation, and social crisis were metabolised into doctrinal and organisational innovation. Methodologically, it extends the abductive logic outlined in Chapter 2, showing how process tracing and triangulated ethnographic, documentary, and confidential interview evidence reveal the causal mechanisms of endurance and legitimacy within non-state warfare.

In theoretical terms, Chapter 6 situates Hezbollah within a broader typology of contemporary non-state power. It shows how endurance becomes performative, deterrence sustained not only by material capacity but by the credible display of survival. This is deterrence by resilience, expressed through the orchestration of ambiguity, legitimacy and restraint.

Viewing Hezbollah solely through a military or sectarian lens obscures the multi-dimensional architecture of its persistence. Counterinsurgency frameworks that neglect social legitimacy, decentralised command, and narrative control fail to grasp the mechanics of survival in asymmetric warfare. Hezbollah therefore illustrates a broader paradigm of twenty-first-century conflict: lasting power lies less in achieving decisive battlefield victory than in retaining the capacity to adapt, reframe loss and remain embedded within the social and symbolic order from which legitimacy flows.

These mechanisms explain why Hezbollah remained undefeated despite severe setbacks and losses. Its operational capacity was severely damaged but not eliminated, its political and social legitimacy persisted, and its ideological commitment to armed resistance remained robust. Through iterative comparison between confidential interviews, exclusive documentary sources and open-source data, the abductive process allowed initial anomalies, including leadership decapitation without organisational collapse, to generate refined theoretical propositions. The evidence therefore connects adaptability and social embeddedness directly to the thesis's explanation of non-defeat while demonstrating how triangulation supports causal inference within interpretive realist inquiry.

Participant testimony demonstrates how Hezbollah itself distinguishes military loss from strategic defeat. An Adviser to the Secretary General explained: "Netanyahu seeks to crush Gaza, then turn to the Litani. We are far more prepared than before. Resistance is not about winning quickly but surviving longer and inflicting accumulated damage on the enemy. They count victories in days, in battles, in temporary gains. We count victories in decades, in survival, in still standing when they thought we would be erased. If Lebanon still breathes after their bombs, if our people remain rooted in their land, then we have won again. This is the logic they will never understand: survival is our triumph, patience our weapon, and endurance our victory" (Appendix C, Entry 34, Adviser to the Secretary General, Beirut, June 2025).

This testimony should not be treated as objective proof of victory, but as evidence of the interpretive framework through which Hezbollah separates extensive damage from defeat. Its criteria are organisational survival, the continued rootedness of its constituency and the preservation of resistance across time, rather than immediate battlefield dominance. The account therefore brings the chapter's analysis directly back to the thesis title: Hezbollah

remained undefeated because military and leadership losses did not compel organisational collapse, political submission or the abandonment of armed resistance. It also supports Objective 2 by showing how sacrifice and material loss were reframed as evidence of endurance.

Building on Chapter 5's analysis of the virtual deterrence alliance, the following chapter examines the continuing debate over whether Hezbollah can be defeated and reconnects its organisational endurance to the thesis's central question.

Chapter 7

Why Hezbollah Cannot Be Defeated

The preceding chapters showed that Hezbollah's trajectory since the 2023–2024 war marks a doctrinal turning point in its evolution. They traced how the organisation absorbed unprecedented shocks, including leadership decapitations, cyber infiltration, command-and-control base destruction, structural losses, and the disruption of Syrian logistical corridors, without collapse. Its endurance was not accidental but the outcome of an architecture of resilience grounded in redundancy, decentralised command, subterranean infrastructure, experience in warfare, robust ideology, belief in the legitimacy of its cause and deep social embedding, rather than solely in the volume of weapons or funds reaching it. Chapter 6 concluded that Hezbollah had moved from deterrence through threat to deterrence by resilience, in which survival itself acquired strategic meaning, thereby redefining victory and defeat in asymmetric warfare.

This chapter brings these findings directly back to the thesis title by explaining why Hezbollah remained undefeated despite extensive military, organisational and leadership losses. It develops this explanation through the interaction of the thesis's three central concepts. Deterrence by resilience identifies the organisational capacity to absorb damage, preserve continuity and reconstruct after disruption. Deterrence by narrative explains how survival, sacrifice and material loss are interpreted as evidence of endurance rather than defeat. Embedded sovereignty identifies the movement's integration within Lebanon's political, social and institutional order, through which its legitimacy and constituency support are reproduced. Together, these mechanisms explain why battlefield losses did not produce organisational collapse, political submission or the abandonment of armed resistance.

The chapter brings together all three research objectives. In relation to Objective 1, it synthesises the ideological, organisational, political, social and military mechanisms that enabled Hezbollah to withstand sustained pressure without organisational collapse. In relation to Objective 2, it explains how sacrifice, material loss and survival are interpreted through deterrence by narrative and deterrence by resilience rather than treated automatically as strategic defeat. In relation to Objective 3, it demonstrates how social embeddedness, institutional participation and the provision of protection and welfare sustain Hezbollah's autonomous agency, legitimacy and functions associated with sovereignty.

Methodologically, it reassesses the thesis's multi-layered approach, including field interviews, process tracing and interpretive analysis, to show how each method identified causal mechanisms beneath visible events. It also reflects on reflexivity and positionality, considering how political, cultural, and ethical constraints shaped access and interpretation. Epistemologically, it interrogates the boundary between description and explanation in the study of militant governance, situating the analysis within a constructivist–critical-realist framework. The chapter therefore connects the empirical findings to the broader theoretical claim that Hezbollah exemplifies a new category of political actor, one whose defeat cannot be understood through military degradation alone because of the social systems in which it is embedded.

Debates over whether Hezbollah can ever be defeated often misread the nature of what it is. Hezbollah is not a conventional army but a socio-political movement whose authority derives from disciplined ideology, adaptive strategy, and the loyalty of the communities that sustain

it. In asymmetric warfare, defeat is not defined by battlefield loss alone but also by the collapse of legitimacy and cohesion.

As Berti (2013, p. 14) observes, armed groups embedded within civilian constituencies possess the structural adaptability to absorb shocks that would cripple regular forces. Hezbollah exemplifies this logic: its roots in Lebanon's marginalised Shia community, partial integration into state institutions, and capacity to translate endurance into moral victory allow it to regenerate after crisis.

The 2023–2024 conflict confirmed this structural resilience. Despite severe losses, Hezbollah reframed defeat as discipline, recalibrated its operations, and reasserted its claimed role as a defender of Lebanese sovereignty rather than primarily as a regional projector of force. Its resilience is therefore not material but architectural, interlacing social, institutional, and psychological systems that make military defeat insufficient to ensure disappearance. The sections that follow analyse this architecture: social integration, hybrid identity, the state's limited monopoly of force, and the recurring misjudgements of its adversaries.

Participant testimony demonstrates that Hezbollah's interpretation of survival as victory was already established after the 2006 war. A Member of the Jihadi Council explained: "They destroyed part of Dahiyeh and many villages in the south of Lebanon, but we are still here. That is victory: to remain alive, armed, and standing. Every family that lost a home sees who rebuilds and who can inflict pain on the enemy and defend the oppressed Shia. Every funeral shows that the war did not silence us. Our survival teaches Israel that time erodes them, not us. If they call this a draw, we call it endurance. When there is an occupation, the resistance is an inevitable outcome in particular when the state is incapable of defending its citizens." (Appendix C, Entry 16, Member of the Jihadi Council, South Beirut, August 2006).

This testimony is evidence of Hezbollah's internal interpretation of the conflict rather than independent proof of victory. It nevertheless illustrates the interaction between deterrence by resilience and deterrence by narrative. Organisational survival and reconstruction supplied the material basis of resilience, while destruction and sacrifice were reframed as evidence that Israel had failed to eliminate the movement. This conversion of survival into strategic meaning helps explain why battlefield damage did not constitute defeat within Hezbollah's own deterrence framework.

The Anatomy of Resilience: Hezbollah as a Population-Embedded Actor

Building on this redefinition of defeat, Hezbollah's resilience must also be understood through its entrenchment within Lebanon's historically marginalised Shia population. Long before its emergence in the 1980s, southern Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley had endured chronic socio-economic exclusion and political neglect. As Weiss (2010) and Abisaab and Abisaab (2014) document, these regions were relegated to peripheral status under both Ottoman and French rule, leaving enduring patterns of deprivation and external interference.

Hezbollah arose not simply as a militant formation but as a cultural and protective anchor for this disenfranchised constituency. Through its network of religious institutions, welfare services, and educational structures, it embedded itself in the routines of daily life. This dual role, protector and provider, generated legitimacy that transcended its military capacity. As Wiegand (2009) observes, Hezbollah's success lies in acting simultaneously as an armed organisation and a social movement rooted in the material and symbolic needs of its base.

The movement represents the culmination, not the origin, of Shia political consciousness in Lebanon. That awakening pre-dated the 1980s and was shaped by the activism of Sayyed Musa al-Sadr and Sayyed Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, later galvanised by the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Sayyed Musa al-Sadr's creation of the Lebanese Supreme Islamic Shia Council in the 1960s articulated a programme of social justice and empowerment of the 'deprived', principles absorbed into Hezbollah's ideological core.

Hezbollah's bond with its support base is sustained through a dense institutional network, including *Al-Mahdi* schools, *Jihad al-Bina'*, *Al-Qard al-Hassan*, and the *Martyrs Foundation*, which functions simultaneously as welfare infrastructure and as ideological education. These mechanisms have partly replaced a failing state, creating structural dependency that reinforces legitimacy, in particular among the Shia.

Participant testimony confirms that Hezbollah regards social legitimacy as indispensable to organisational survival. During Lebanon's mass protests, a Senior Cleric within the leadership circle explained: "Resistance is not only in arms; it is in bread, dignity, and survival. If the state fails, we cannot. People may criticise us, yet they still depend on us. The same hand that gives weapons also gives bread. Our danger is not the slogans shouted in the squares, but the day our people stop seeing us as their shield. That day, resistance dies faster than under bombs" (Appendix C, Entry 25, Senior Cleric, Nabatiyeh, October 2019). The testimony identifies social legitimacy as more consequential to Hezbollah's endurance than protection from military attack alone.

Welfare provision, communal protection and armed resistance are presented as interconnected functions through which the movement maintains authority when the state cannot meet the needs of its population. This provides direct evidence of embedded sovereignty and helps explain why conventional military pressure has not produced defeat: Hezbollah's continued existence depends upon relationships of protection and provision embedded within its constituency, rather than upon military capacity alone.

Israel's 1982 invasion accelerated this consolidation. The unlawful use of force under international law, widely judged to have exceeded the limits of self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter (Gross, 1983), catalysed Hezbollah's transformation into both resistance movement and governance actor within Lebanon's fragmented polity. This deeply rooted connection to its population makes Hezbollah exceptionally difficult to defeat by conventional means. Its endurance depends less on foreign patronage than on fusion with the community it defends.

To dismantle Hezbollah would require replacing the social and institutional networks that give it life, an outcome unattainable through war or sanctions. The only credible path lies in strengthening legitimate state institutions capable of providing social services, equality, security, and dignity, and in addressing the unresolved injustices of occupation and external intervention that continue to sustain the movement's moral and political appeal. This observation reinforces the thesis's conceptual category of embedded sovereignty.

Hybrid Identity: Governance, Resistance, and Legitimacy

Hezbollah's enduring strength lies in its hybrid identity: it is simultaneously a political party, an armed resistance movement, and a welfare provider. This multidimensional structure legitimises the organisation among its constituents and shields it from sustained pressure to

disarm. By delivering healthcare, education, and social services, more reliably than the Lebanese state, it has filled a governance vacuum, particularly in Beirut's southern suburbs and in the southern and Beqaa regions (Harb, 2008; Cammett, 2014).

These services are not mere instruments of patronage but mechanisms of political entrenchment. Hezbollah converts welfare into authority and acceptance by providing public goods that create reciprocal loyalty rather than dependency. Even innovations such as the introduction of no-cost psychotherapy for members after the 2023-2024 war exemplify how material care is intertwined with ideological purpose (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025).

Since entering parliament in 1992, Hezbollah has become a fixture of Lebanese political life, forging pragmatic alliances with the Amal Movement and, intermittently, the Free Patriotic Movement, without compromising its autonomous military structure. The armed wing, strengthened through field experience during the Syrian and Iraqi wars, Iranian training, and advanced weaponry, remains operationally superior to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Hezbollah justifies this duality by invoking the ongoing Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory and recurring violations of sovereignty, portraying its arsenal as a defensive supplement to a weak national army.

This coexistence of political participation and military autonomy reflects Lebanon's structural fragility rather than an internal contradiction within Hezbollah. The organisation's dual role is a product of state weakness. Successive governments, paralysed by confessional divisions and corruption, lack both the consensus and capacity to challenge it. The result is a hybrid equilibrium: Hezbollah operates within and parallel to the state, normalising the coexistence of political authority and independent coercive power.

Lebanon's fractured geography reinforces this equilibrium. In wartime, the sectarian mosaic produces inadvertent protection mechanisms: civilians connected to Hezbollah often find refuge in areas outside its control. This dispersion acts as a social buffer, allowing communities to endure even under intense Israeli bombardment. Paradoxically, strongly anti-Hezbollah neighbourhoods, particularly among the Christian, Sunni, and Druse districts, serve as temporary shelters for the families of Hezbollah fighters and other displaced Shia families. For many combatants, knowing that their relatives can find safety in such areas provides reassurance during crisis, a quiet testament to Lebanon's fragile but enduring social interdependence.

This intercommunal reception of the internally displaced people was not universal in non-Shia sectors and cities. Contemporary reporting also documented cases in which landlords refused displaced applicants explicitly because they were Shia, while other refusals were justified on security grounds, particularly the fear that accommodating persons linked, or presumed to be linked, to Hezbollah might attract Israeli strikes (Sallon and Zerrouky, 2024; Azhari, 2024).

The available evidence establishes the existence of such discriminatory refusals but does not permit their prevalence or the sectarian identity of the landlords to be quantified. Such discriminatory behaviour could reinforce rather than weaken communal solidarity among displaced Shia families. In the absence of an effective governmental response to housing discrimination and displacement, Hezbollah could present itself as the community's principal defender and provider. Exclusion from accommodation outside predominantly Shia areas

therefore risked strengthening the very social embeddedness that military pressure sought to disrupt, encouraging displaced families to rely more heavily on Hezbollah's welfare structures and communal networks.

A State That Cannot Monopolise Force

Lebanon's constitutional design and chronic dysfunction have rendered the notion of a centralised monopoly of violence largely theoretical. Hezbollah's sustained military capacity must therefore be read within the vacuum created by weak institutions, sectarian fragmentation, and persistent under-governance. Although the Lebanese Armed Forces are formally recognised as the sole legitimate military authority, their resources and autonomy remain deliberately constrained — both by external pressures to prevent escalation with Israel and by internal divisions that preclude the formulation of a coherent national defence doctrine.

Western supplier states, particularly the United States and key European partners, have consistently structured their military assistance to Lebanon so as to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge. As a result, the Lebanese army is equipped primarily for internal security rather than national defence, ensuring that neighbouring states remain markedly weaker and incapable of posing a threat to Israel or of mounting an effective deterrent posture.

As Cammett and Issar (2010) demonstrate, Lebanon's consociational power-sharing system embeds sectarian clientelism within state institutions, transforming ministries into confessional fiefdoms and institutionalising elite fragmentation. This structure obstructs collective governance and undermines the state's monopoly of force, severely constraining the political conditions under which disarmament could occur within a system that equates armed autonomy with communal security.

In practice, the state has often implicitly allowed or relied on Hezbollah to perform essential functions it cannot provide. These include armed deterrence in the south and in relation to contested territorial and maritime boundaries, social service delivery, and post-war reconstruction. Hezbollah's extensive welfare network sustains communities neglected by the state, while its economic footprint, through salaries, aid, and remittances, injects significant liquidity into Lebanon's collapsing economy. In this sense, Hezbollah both substitutes for and sustains the already fragile state.

This layered sovereignty, what Atallah *et al*. (2025) describe as a 'fragmented sovereignty' in which state and non-state actors share overlapping zones of authority, captures the hybrid political order that defines post-war Lebanon. The Lebanese government has adapted to Hezbollah's autonomous military role less by endorsement than by necessity. Within this layered and hybrid order, the notion of disarmament has become more symbolic than realistic, a rhetorical gesture periodically invoked to satisfy external demands but rarely pursued domestically.

This layered configuration of authority produces what this thesis conceptualises as embedded sovereignty: a mode of governance in which Hezbollah's coercive, social, and ideological functions are interwoven with those of the state rather than opposed to them. The movement's capacity to exercise power through welfare, protection, and deterrence operates within Lebanon's political architecture, not outside it. In this sense, Hezbollah's endurance

reflects not the collapse of state sovereignty but its transformation into a distributed and negotiated form shared across institutional and communal boundaries.

These features underscore that Lebanon's weakness is not episodic but structural. Hezbollah's embedded sovereignty operates within this weakness but never fully replaces the state. To understand why such fragmentation renders disarmament structurally unfeasible, it is necessary to situate Lebanon within the broader theoretical category of a quasi-state: a state that possesses juridical sovereignty but lacks the empirical capacity to exercise it fully.

Lebanon as a Quasi-State or Fail-State: Failure and Disarmament

The durability of Hezbollah cannot be analysed in isolation from the structural condition of the Lebanese state. Lebanon seems unprepared to meet the empirical criteria of a fully functional state capable of exercising the Weberian monopoly of legitimate violence or fulfilling the core obligations of protection, welfare, and justice. In this context, it aligns with Jackson's (1991) concept of a quasi-state: a polity with juridical sovereignty and international recognition but lacking the institutional capacity to effectively execute sovereign functions. Similarly, US ambassador and special Presidential envoy to Syria and Lebanon Thomas Barrack later characterised it as a 'failed state' (Barrack, 2025). This status is neither metaphorical nor polemical; it describes a specific mode of incomplete statehood that has characterised Lebanon since its independence, periodically reinforced by external intervention and sectarian fragmentation.

Migdal's theory of 'strong societies and weak states' provides a complementary framework for understanding this dynamic. Migdal (1989) argues that state capacity depends on the ability of state institutions to penetrate society, regulate social relations, and extract compliance through authoritative structures. Where societal networks, whether sectarian, familial, or clientelistic, outweigh state institutions, the result is a weak or fragmented state that cannot impose uniform rule. Lebanon represents a paradigmatic case: the confessional political system institutionalises social segmentation and embeds power within religious communities rather than national institutions. Ministries and bureaucracies are distributed through sectarian quotas rather than meritocratic or civic principles, producing a state that mediates among communities rather than governing them. The outcome is chronic incapacity to deliver collective goods or enforce impartial authority.

Empirical studies reinforce this assessment. Mouawad and Baumann (2017) describe the Lebanese state as a 'patchwork of sovereignties' in which authority is continuously negotiated among political, religious, and external actors. The state's territorial sovereignty remains contested: its borders are periodically violated by Israeli incursions, its southern periphery is secured not by the national army but by Hezbollah, and its refugee-heavy northern districts depend on international NGOs for basic services. The central government's provision of healthcare, education, and social protection is intermittent and often outsourced to sectarian charities or international donors. Such structural deficits transform sovereignty from an empirical practice into a legal fiction.

This condition has direct implications for the question of disarmament. Classical state theory presupposes a reciprocal social contract: citizens relinquish private violence in exchange for state protection. In Lebanon, this contract has never been consistently honoured. The state's failure to provide security, whether against Israeli occupation, cross-border incursions, or internal conflict, has repeatedly legitimised community-based self-organisation. When the

national army proved unable to defend the borders during Israel's invasions of 1978, 1982, 2006 and 2024, non-state militias emerged to fill the vacuum.

Hezbollah, unlike many of its contemporaries, institutionalised that role by integrating welfare provision, coercive capability, and political participation into a durable system of what this thesis defines as embedded sovereignty. In the absence of a reliable state protector, popular consent gradually shifted towards the non-state actor, grounded in the expectation that it could guarantee not only physical security but also collective dignity and social continuity.

Disarmament, therefore, cannot be conceived as a technical or legal process; it is structurally constrained by the state's incapacity to replace the functions the movement performs. To demand Hezbollah's demobilisation without simultaneously rebuilding credible state institutions would expose entire constituencies to insecurity and deprivation. This is why international calls for the monopoly of arms by the state remain aspirational. The Lebanese Armed Forces, underfunded and politically constrained, lack the logistical autonomy and deterrent capacity to protect border populations or replace Hezbollah's security role. The result is a political paradox: the very state that claims the monopoly of force depends on a non-state actor to preserve its territorial integrity.

The quasi-state framework also clarifies why external coercion tends to reinforce, rather than weaken, Hezbollah's legitimacy. Sanctions or diplomatic isolation target the symptom, the armed actor, while leaving the structural pathology intact – a state unable to deliver public goods or command allegiance beyond sectarian boundaries. As Jackson (1991) observed, quasi-states endure not because of internal strength but because the international system sustains their juridical sovereignty. In Lebanon's case, international recognition substitutes for internal cohesion, allowing the façade of sovereignty to persist while authority remains fractured. Under such conditions, non-state actors like Hezbollah become functional substitutes for state institutions, performing governance and defence in spaces where the state fails.

This reading does not romanticise Hezbollah's role; it situates it within a sociological and institutional logic. The organisation's *embedded sovereignty* – its integration of welfare networks, political representation, and coercive capacity – exists because the Lebanese state has consistently failed to meet the minimal expectations of citizenship. The same communities that depend on Hezbollah for healthcare, education, clean water, electricity, or post-war reconstruction are those most directly exposed to insecurity when the state retreats. In this context, disarmament is not merely politically unfeasible, it would dismantle one of the few functioning systems of protection without replacing it with an alternative.

Consequently, Lebanon's quasi-state condition transforms the question of Hezbollah's defeat into a question of state formation. As long as the state remains a juridical construct without empirical sovereignty, the monopoly of violence will remain shared, negotiated, and hybrid. The persistence of Hezbollah is therefore not an anomaly but a logical outcome of Lebanon's incomplete statehood. Any durable settlement, whether domestic reform or international mediation, must address this underlying structural deficit rather than treating Hezbollah as an exogenous distortion of an otherwise coherent state.

Lebanon's quasi-state or fail-state status explains both the endurance of Hezbollah and the futility of strategies aimed solely at its disarmament. The failure of the state to deliver

protection and welfare generates a moral economy in which community defence becomes a form of political legitimacy. Non-state authority fills the vacuum left by absent sovereignty, embedding itself so deeply within social and institutional life that coercion alone cannot remove it. Understanding this interdependence between weak statehood and hybrid authority is essential to any analysis of why Hezbollah, despite recurrent external pressure, remains undefeated and likely to endure.

International and Domestic Impotence

Repeated Israeli incursions and occupations, dating back before Hezbollah's formation, have been condemned through successive UN Security Council resolutions since 1978, yet none have been fully enforced. Resolutions 425 and 426 (1978) demanded Israel's withdrawal and created UNIFIL; subsequent resolutions 508, 509, and 520 (UNSCR, 1982) reaffirmed Lebanese sovereignty; Resolution 1310 (2000) acknowledged partial compliance after Israel's withdrawal; and Resolution 1559 (2004) called for the withdrawal of all remaining foreign forces from Lebanon and the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. These texts collectively affirm the illegality of Israeli military presence, but selective enforcement has rendered them largely symbolic. Persistent Israeli overflights and incursions, regularly reported to the Council without consequence (UNSC, 2018), have deepened perceptions of international double standards.

This asymmetry underpins Hezbollah's legitimacy narrative. As long as international law condemns Hezbollah's armament while tolerating Israeli violations, calls for disarmament lack domestic traction. No Lebanese authority can credibly demand and obtain Hezbollah's disarmament while the Shebaa Farms, Kfar Shouba Hills, and other newly occupied territories after the 2024 war (Nashed and Salhani, 2025) remain occupied. Hazbun (2016) observes that any reform of Lebanon's security architecture must reckon with this structural contradiction: a militia embedded in governance amid a paralysed state and an inconsistent international order.

Economic collapse and social fatigue since 2023 have intensified domestic calls for demilitarisation, yet Israel's occupation and Hezbollah's integration into welfare, finance, and local security make such efforts materially unviable. Israeli strikes on the *Al-Qard al-Hassan* financial network in 2024 briefly disrupted operations but failed to cripple it (Mroue, 2024). By late 2024, most branches had reopened (L'Orient Today, 2024), and subsequent attacks in 2025 only demonstrated its resilience (Beeri, 2025). International sanctions and banking restrictions curtailed formal Iranian transfers but, combined with the end of Hezbollah's foreign operations in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, encouraged financial consolidation rather than decline.

External pressure thus exposes the limits of both international law and domestic governance. Disarmament will remain unattainable until global norms are applied consistently and Lebanon's political institutions acquire the coherence necessary to replace Hezbollah's embedded security and social functions.

Beyond the Proxy Narrative: The Iran–Hezbollah Relationship in Time of War

Iran sustains allied movements through funding, training, arms and technology transfer while generally avoiding direct warfare on their behalf. This dual posture combines support for 'the just struggles of the oppressed' with the principle of non-interference, as codified in Article

154 of the Iranian Constitution. It has been institutionalised through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its expeditionary Quds Force, the central channel of Iran's asymmetric partnerships since the late 1980s (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979/1989, Article 154; Gowan, 2024).

The security and stability vacuums produced by Western occupation through military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya widened Iran's room for manoeuvre and allowed space to expand its influence. Legal and scholarly critiques have questioned the legitimacy and aftermath of the US operations, emphasising the instability they created (Bannelier-Christakis, 2016; Simuziya, 2023). Tehran exploited these conditions to consolidate power, strengthening allied networks and sending advisers rather than deploying conventional forces.

In Lebanon, early IRGC deployments to the Beqaa Valley in 1982 following the Israeli invasion to Lebanon supported the emergence of what became Hezbollah, a model later embedded within Iran's broader national security doctrine. Policy analyses agree that Iran remains Hezbollah's principal external supplier and financier, with surges routed through IRGC channels during major conflict cycles (International Crisis Group, 2018; McInnis, 2017). For decades, Israel has portrayed Hezbollah as an extension of Iranian deterrence, although the evidence examined in this thesis demonstrates a more reciprocal and autonomous relationship.

Counter-pressure has been continuous. Israel's covert campaign, including targeted killings of Iranian nuclear scientists (Imbert *et al*., 2025) and IRGC officers (Naji, 2025), sabotage, and cyber operations such as the Stuxnet attack on Natanz, has sought to impose costs on Iran's strategic depth (Zetter, 2014). These operations inflicted tactical losses but drove Iran towards greater self-reliance in missile and drone production and tighter internal security, thereby increasing the long-term cost of coercion.

When Iran has acted overtly, it has done so in limited, symbolic fashion to enforce red lines while avoiding full-scale confrontation. Following the 1 April 2024 strike on its consular compound in Damascus, Tehran launched a mixed salvo at Israeli targets, its first direct strike on Israeli territory, framed as demonstrative rather than destructive. Earlier, its ballistic attack on US bases in Anbar after Qassem Soleimani's assassination inflicted casualties but deliberately avoided escalation (Harkins, 2021). The pattern remains one of managed escalation and controlled entanglement.

Iranian support functions as an enabler, not a determinant. Material aid, shared technology, and strategic coordination have expanded its capabilities, yet its autonomy is shaped by Lebanon's domestic constraints and its own risk calculus. Across successive US and Israeli operations targeting Iran, Hezbollah neither intervened nor allowed itself to be instrumentalised despite Iran's requests (Author's confidential interviews, 2013–2025). The 2023–2024 conflict underscored this distinction: Iran's assistance reinforces Hezbollah's deterrent power but cannot replace its independent reasoning, its decision to attack Israel or its adaptation to Lebanese domestic realities.

The 'proxy' label therefore obscures more than it clarifies. It exaggerates Iranian control and minimises Hezbollah's agency. Under Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the movement pursued pragmatic autonomy, balancing sectarian politics, domestic legitimacy, and transnational solidarity. Iran's ideological and logistical influence remains substantial, yet Hezbollah's

strategic calculations are its own. Israeli leaders have acknowledged this nuance. In late 2024 and early 2025, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu conceded that Sayyed Nasrallah influenced Iran much more than Iran influenced him, admitting that he activated Iran rather than the reverse (Prime Minister's Office, 2024). Such statements from an adversary underscore the reciprocal rather than subordinate nature of the Iran–Hezbollah relationship.

Hezbollah's deep integration into Lebanese political institutions, its extensive welfare infrastructure, and its enduring popular support confirm its character as a population-embedded, quasi-state actor. While Iran continues to serve as a crucial ally and strategic enabler, Hezbollah's decision-making processes remain primarily grounded in Lebanese political realities and reflect the autonomous judgement of its leadership, even under conditions of sustained military pressure. This autonomy was particularly evident during the escalation of October 2023, when Hezbollah initiated a 'supportive front' governed by carefully calibrated rules of engagement, an action endorsed but not directed by Tehran.

Confidential interviews indicate that Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah viewed limited engagement as a means to restore Hezbollah's regional legitimacy, eroded since its intervention in Syria, and to reassert its standing within the broader Arab public sphere. He calculated that Israel would avoid a full-scale confrontation and that the destruction of several border villages constituted an acceptable cost for the anticipated reputational gains within the Arab world (Author's confidential interviews, 2013-2025).

Hamas's 7 October 2023 assault exposed both the overconfidence and structural limits of Hezbollah's deterrence model. The humanitarian cost of Israel's retaliatory Gaza campaign, documented by the UN Human Rights Office and others, was catastrophic: tens of thousands killed and wounded, and over 50 billion USD in damage by early 2025 (McCready, 2025; World Bank, 2025). This devastation dissuaded further regional intervention and reshaped the calculus of risk.

Hezbollah and Iran misread Israel's willingness to breach long-standing red lines and underestimated Western military and political support for Tel Aviv. Sayyed Nasrallah's assurances that the conflict would remain contained proved inaccurate. Israeli forces, supported by Western ISR and intelligence fusion, executed rapid decapitation strikes on Hezbollah's senior command. These operations dismantled command and communication networks and culminated in the assassination of senior leaders. Israeli officials later claimed over 12,000 targets struck within a week (Fabian, 2024a). Israel expanded operations in Syria, targeting Iranian and Hezbollah assets near Damascus and Homs.

Iran itself confined its actions to advisory roles. Tehran's inability to anticipate Israel's plan or shield Hezbollah revealed a shared strategic miscalculation. The killing of Brigadier-General Abbas Nilforoushan, vice-commander of the IRGC operational room, alongside Nasrallah in a command shelter in Beirut, Lebanon, epitomised both the depth and the limits of IRGC integration. The paradox was clear: Iran's closest ally suffered its gravest operational disruption since 2006 despite decades of coordination. This failure raises a longer-term question, examined in Chapter 8, concerning whether Iran can reconstruct its regional network around a doctrine that protects and consolidates its allied movements before again seeking to project power through them.

Axis members responded with restraint, indicating lack of coordination and shared action. Iraq's militias launched only token drone strikes. Yemen's *Ansar Allah* movement sustained

regular but limited drone and ballistic missile bombardment and a maritime blockade in the Red Sea, disrupting trade but achieving mainly psychological and economic effects (Klabin, 2024). Syria, seeking diplomatic rehabilitation, avoided engagement. President Assad declined escalation, having already curtailed Hezbollah and Iranian military presence well before October 2023 to prioritise regime stability, sanctions relief, and relations with Gulf countries (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025).

Despite leadership losses, intelligence breaches, and communications paralysis, Hezbollah's organisational depth prevented collapse. Experienced field commanders assumed control and resistance initiative, sustaining defensive operations and calibrated retaliation during the most critical weeks. The episode tested Hezbollah's doctrine of deterrence by resilience, demonstrating both endurance and limitation. Israel's precision-attrition strategy shifted the operational balance, revealing that Hezbollah's strength lies not in arsenal size or Iranian backing but in its capacity to absorb trauma, reconstitute command, and continue functioning under existential stress, a core argument of this thesis (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025).

It is rare in modern warfare for a movement to lose its charismatic leader, his deputy, much of the Jihadi Council (military top decision-makers), and key command infrastructure within days, have a compromised communication system, be under unstoppable aerial bombardment, and yet refuse to surrender and decides to fight back. Israel deployed five divisions along the Lebanese frontier but failed to occupy the 1,100 km² between the border and the south of the Litani River. For Hezbollah, denying Israel control of that territory could be interpreted as victory: survival itself became strategic success within the movement's framework. The ceasefire ended the campaign without Israel having eliminated Hezbollah, compelled its surrender or secured all its declared objectives.

Nonetheless, the confrontation exposed internal fragilities. Under Sayyed Nasrallah, a centralised hierarchy often prioritised loyalty over competence, narrowing debate and slowing adaptation. Iran, though deeply involved in training and logistics, deferred excessively to Nasrallah's inner circle. The promotions of Fuad Shukr, head of all military operations killed in an Israeli strike, and Sheikh Nabil Kaouk, appointed to lead preventive security, typified this pattern (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025). Both men were subsequently killed in precision attacks that decapitated Hezbollah's upper command (Bohannon, 2024).

These losses exposed vulnerabilities long unaddressed: Israel's real-time intelligence advantage, the compromise of encrypted devices, and the fragility of command continuity. The explosion of encrypted pagers revealed deep breaches in counter-intelligence (Stahl, 2024). After strikes on facilities linked to Sayyed Nasrallah and Sayyed Hashem Safieddine, Hezbollah endured over a week of severe disruption in senior coordination (Author's confidential interviews, 2023–2025). Field-units maintained positions through doctrinal habit, but unsynchronised command increased exposure to Israeli drones and delayed response (UN OCHA, 2024).

Rhetorical overreach compounded operational strain. Sayyed Nasrallah's overconfident threats towards Israel, Cyprus, and the United States Navy, intended as deterrence narrative, expanded Hezbollah's adversary set. His repeated boasts about 'liberating the Galilee' and warnings to Cyprus, home to the British RAF Akrotiri base, invited Western escalation. Israel's campaign exploited Western ISR integration, combining drones, SIGINT, and

precision air power to cripple Hezbollah's command architecture (Starcevic and Stamouli, 2024). Displacement and destruction in Shia-majority areas of Beirut, the south, and the Beqaa Valley mounted steadily.

Paradoxically, Hezbollah's social base remained resilient. Despite battlefield losses, economic strain, and growing internal criticism, both Hezbollah and Amal secured notable municipal-level gains, understood locally less as an endorsement of specific policies than as a reaffirmation of collective identity under siege. These results further validated Hezbollah's embedded sovereignty: its ability to convert adversity into renewed communal cohesion.

The post-2023 cycle therefore encapsulates the central paradox of Hezbollah's endurance: decentralised resilience persisting within an increasingly rigid strategic framework and under conditions of leadership attrition. Deterrence by resilience faced its severest trial since 2006, sustaining cohesion and deterrent credibility amid unprecedented pressure but at escalating cost. Structural centralisation and inflated rhetorical confidence exposed vulnerabilities. Yet the conflict ultimately reaffirmed this thesis's central argument: Hezbollah's strength lies not in invulnerability to defeat but in its capacity to absorb systemic shocks and setback, reconstitute its functions, and preserve legitimacy through the reciprocal bonds of a supportive community.

Israel's Western Alliance System: Military, Intelligence, and Legal Implications

The purpose of this section is not to reiterate the general asymmetry already discussed but to analyse a distinct mechanism that shapes Hezbollah's strategic calculus: Israel's alliance-enabled resilience. Whereas earlier chapters examined the material imbalance between the two actors, the focus here is on how Western logistical, intelligence, financial, and diplomatic support structurally expands Israel's endurance and constrains Hezbollah's deterrent capacity. This clarifies how external alliance systems interact with the thesis's core concepts of embedded sovereignty and deterrence by resilience, revealing why Hezbollah faces a qualitatively different adversarial environment than conventional asymmetry alone would suggest.

The post-2024 period further demonstrated how this alliance-enabled resilience shaped Hezbollah's reassessment of risk and operational posture. Leadership losses, communications disruption, and the scale of Western-backed Israeli operations compelled Hezbollah to recalibrate its strategic assumptions. Confidential interviews indicate that the new leadership has shifted towards a more decentralised defensive model inside Lebanon, prioritising territorial denial and attrition over cross-border offensive manoeuvres. This recalibration reflects the movement's recognition that Israel's externally reinforced capacity for rapid escalation, precision targeting, and sustained operations imposes structural limits on offensive deterrence. While support for Gaza remained a core ideological and political driver, the scale and pace of Western reinforcement during the conflict underscored the need to reassess escalation thresholds and the costs associated with misjudging Israel's operational ceiling.

Hezbollah entered the 2023–2025 confrontation against one of the most technologically advanced and combat-experienced militaries in the region, whose capacity was continuously amplified by Western financial, logistical, and intelligence support. Since 7 October 2023, Israel's campaign has been sustained by an unusually dense web of military assistance, intelligence fusion, and diplomatic protection. This external reinforcement shaped not only

Israel's operational tempo but also its willingness to absorb losses and pursue escalation—factors that Hezbollah's leadership did not fully anticipate.

The Israeli armed forces underwent a doctrinal shift after October 2023, incorporating lessons concerning hostage-taking, deaths in captivity, high-casualty endurance and protracted asymmetric warfare. This military adaptation coincided with intensified Western backing led by the United States and its allies, who remained committed to preserving Israel's military and diplomatic superiority even amid growing international criticism of the Gaza campaign. The resulting deterrence landscape was therefore not bilateral but embedded in a broader security architecture that substantially raised Israel's resilience and complicated Hezbollah's strategic options.

The United States has been the indispensable enabler: emergency resupply by air and sea, rapid drawdowns from regional stockpiles, coordination through CENTCOM liaison nodes, and direct visits by the command's senior leadership (CENTCOM, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). Independent estimates place US aid at roughly 21.7 billion USD between October 2023 and September 2025, with additional multi-year commitments in the pipeline (Hartung, 2025). The scale of dependence became explicit when US President Donald Trump told the Israeli Knesset that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had requested weapons 'I'd never heard of', confirming the unprecedented reach of US support (Berman, 2025).

The United States has also reinforced Israel's defences through direct deployments. Following escalations with Iran, Washington stationed Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) batteries and personnel to augment Israeli air defences. British RC-135 *Rivet Joint* flights and allied ISR patrols off Lebanon and Gaza contributed real-time SIGINT and targeting data, while US maritime patrol aircraft maintained situational coverage across the Eastern Mediterranean. Several outlets reported joint US–UK–Israeli intelligence fusion after 7 October, supported by the precision and speed of Israeli targeting (Allison, 2025).

The arms pipeline has widened beyond the United States. Germany, the second-largest supplier, authorised €326.5 million in sales in 2023, ten times the 2022 figure, before curbing approvals amid domestic scrutiny. The United Kingdom also suspended some export licences while maintaining operational cooperation. Co-development programmes have guaranteed Israel's technological edge: Iron Dome (Rafael–Raytheon), David's Sling (Rafael–Raytheon), and Arrow-3 (IAI–Boeing–MDA) maintain a steady flow of interceptors. The F-35I Adir integrates Israeli electronic-warfare systems for precision strike (Judson, 2019; Judson, 2020). Maritime cooperation extended to NATO partners, as French and British vessels intercepted long-range projectiles in the Red Sea, confirming operational interoperability (Vavasseur, 2024).

The technological dimension of Israel's deterrence architecture thus exposes how external dependency and strategic autonomy are mutually constituted. While Israel projects an image of sovereign resilience, its defensive infrastructure is materially and politically embedded within Western, principally American and German, supply chains, funding streams, and command architectures. This interdependence is not merely logistical but structural: Israel's capacity to absorb and survive conflict is sustained through systems financed, co-produced, and operationally reinforced by the United States. The evolution of the *Iron Dome*, *Iron Beam*, and the deployment of the US THAAD battery illustrate this entanglement between national defence and external enablement, showing how deterrence by resilience functions in practice as deterrence by alliance.

The Iron Dome system, designed by Rafael Advanced Defense Systems, has relied on continuous American financial and industrial support since its operational introduction in 2011. The United States has provided over 3 billion USD for interceptor production, maintenance, and replenishment. Co-production agreements with Raytheon Technologies (now RTX) have enabled the manufacture of key components of the Tamir interceptor within the United States, while the system has been co-marketed to selected NATO partners (Raytheon Missiles & Defense/Rafael, 2020). Israel retains design leadership, yet the programme's sustainability and scalability depend structurally on American financing, industrial participation, and political endorsement.

A parallel dynamic is evident in the *Iron Beam* directed-energy (laser-based) air-defence system, led by Rafael under a formal partnership agreement signed in December 2022 with Lockheed Martin (Egozi, 2022). While Israel controls research, systems integration, and initial testing, the technological foundations for laser generation, power scaling, and export readiness are largely US-enabled, relying on American components, testing infrastructure, and funding mechanisms (Army-Technology, 2023). The US Congress appropriated 1.2 billion USD for the programme, available through September 2026 (Harper, 2024). Both *Iron Dome* and *Iron Beam* reveal a national design framework sustained and amplified through American technological leverage, capital infusion, and geopolitical protection.

The 2024 deployment of the US THAAD system consolidated this interdependence. The US Department of Defense announced the dispatch of a THAAD battery and associated personnel 'to help bolster Israel's air defences' following missile strikes attributed to Iran. This stationing of American high-altitude intercept capability on Israeli soil highlights Washington's role not only in funding and arms transfers but also in the direct projection of systems and personnel within Israel's security architecture. It underscores how Israel's shield functions simultaneously as a national and an American forward-deployed asset.

Political signalling has complemented this operational integration. Between his 2024 presidential campaign and February 2025, Donald Trump repeatedly stated that Gaza's post-war future was 'up to Israel', even suggesting that the United States could 'take over' and 'own' the Gaza Strip, remarks widely read as a de facto endorsement of Israel's freedom of action (Kelly, 2025). These statements reduced diplomatic friction and insulated Israeli policy from censure, even as elements within Washington grew uneasy. In his 60 Minutes interview, senior adviser Jared Kushner disclosed that Trump believed 'Israel was out of control and should be stopped from doing things not in their own interests' (60 Minutes, 2025, 12:50). The admission signalled rare internal dissent within the pro-Israel establishment, reflecting concern that Netanyahu's maximalism could ultimately undermine US regional strategy.

Regionally, US strikes and financial leverage further constrained Iran-aligned groups. Targeting Iraqi militias limited cross-theatre operations, while Iraq's dependence on US-mediated dollar flows, an enduring legacy of post-2003 arrangements, remained a tool of coercion. The combined effect elevated Israel's operational ceiling: extended-range air campaigns and prolonged bombardments became fiscally and logistically feasible only because Western partners absorbed much of the cost (Hartung, 2025).

Taken together, these dynamics reveal that Israel's military endurance rests on an interlocking matrix of dependency and privilege. Technological superiority, often presented

as a domestic achievement, is structurally contingent upon US industrial integration and political sponsorship. Israel's capacity to project security thus depends on a form of embedded sovereignty, in which external support functions both as a guarantor of survival and a constraint on strategic freedom.

For Hezbollah, this configuration defines the boundaries of its deterrence strategy: the hybrid actor was not only confronting Israel's standing army but also an entire Western security architecture that multiplies Israel's resilience and offsets its vulnerabilities. This dynamic, deterrence through dependence, links the military architecture analysed here to the intelligence and legal frameworks discussed in the following section, where similar asymmetries reappear through Western ISR integration and the politics of accountability.

Mossad and the Global Intelligence Order

Mossad's contemporary efficacy cannot be understood solely as an autonomous manifestation of Israeli capability, but must also be examined within a wider network of intelligence cooperation linking Israeli, Western, and Gulf security services. Since 7 October 2023, Israel's intelligence capabilities have operated within established Western security partnerships, reinforced by Israel's incorporation into the US Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility in September 2021 (US CENTCOM, 2021). Cooperation with the American CIA, British intelligence services, Germany's BND, and European counterparts reflects a longstanding transnational intelligence ecosystem.

Historically, Mossad's international reach has benefited from external facilitation. Operation Yachin (1961–1964) enabled the emigration of more than 90,000 Moroccan Jews under arrangements involving Israeli, Moroccan, and international Jewish organisations (Center for Israel Education, 1961). During Operation Wrath of God, launched following the 1972 Munich massacre, Mossad benefited from intelligence circulated through Kilowatt, a clandestine network eventually connecting eighteen services, including those of Britain, France, West Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States. Guttmann's archival research demonstrates that European intelligence-sharing helped facilitate Israeli assassination operations, while some participating services tolerated activities they might otherwise have opposed (Guttmann, 2025a, 2025b).

This dependency has persisted and intensified. Mossad's participation in the US-led Operation *Gallant Phoenix*, spanning over twenty nations, exemplifies this continuity. After October 2023, intelligence fusion focused on Iranian logistical routes, Hezbollah's networks, and Hamas's finances (Jones, 2024). The Abraham Accords opened informal channels for data from Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia; multiple reports suggest radar and early-warning information from these states supported Israeli air-defence operations (Opall-Rome, 2017; Vakil and Quilliam, 2023).

In Europe, Mossad benefits from institutionalised cooperation. In June 2023, the CIA, Mossad, and the Cypriot Intelligence Service reportedly dismantled an Iranian-linked network targeting Israeli interests. Yet Mossad frequently acts unilaterally, facing few consequences even when breaching sovereignty. The Lillehammer killing, the 1997 Meshaal poisoning attempt, the 2010 Dubai assassination of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh using forged passports, and the 2004 New Zealand passport-fraud case all provoked brief diplomatic crises

but no enduring sanctions (New Zealand Herald, 2004; Fickling, 2004; Wired, 1997; Minnesota Daily, 1998).

The pattern persisted in 2024, when explosive devices concealed in pagers distributed through commercial supply chains detonated across Lebanon, killing and wounding Hezbollah members and civilians. As examined in Chapter 6, the operation raised serious questions under international humanitarian law concerning booby-traps, distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack. Israel's subsequent 2025 strike in Doha, Qatar, a close US ally hosting one of the largest US military bases in the Middle East, similarly illustrated how tactical innovation could operate under conditions of limited diplomatic accountability (Cafiero, 2025).

Collectively, these cases reveal that Mossad's 'long arm' relies not only on intelligence tradecraft but also on the political protection and limited diplomatic accountability afforded by alliance warfare. Israel's operational capacity is structurally amplified by Western infrastructure and support; when that scaffolding weakens, its performance appears fallible rather than extraordinary (Magnier, 2025a, 2025b).

Law, Diplomacy, and Dependency

The June 2025 confrontation further demonstrated the operational interdependence between Israel and the United States. Israel initiated *Operation Rising Lion* on 13 June, while Washington publicly described the opening offensive as a unilateral Israeli action. Nevertheless, Israel's campaign operated within an established architecture of US support that included the supply of munitions, intelligence cooperation, assistance in intercepting Iranian missiles and, according to Israeli reporting, aerial refuelling support for Israeli aircraft.

The United States subsequently entered the conflict directly through *Operation Midnight Hammer* on 21–22 June, employing B-2 bombers, GBU-57 massive ordnance penetrators and Tomahawk missiles against the Iranian nuclear facilities at Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan (US Department of Defense, 2025a, 2025b; Kahana, 2025). Washington then pursued an end to the conflict through direct communication with Israel and direct and indirect communication with Iran, leading to the ceasefire announced on 23 June and implemented the following day (Mason and Holland, 2025). President Trump later characterised this combination of military and diplomatic intervention in unequivocal terms, declaring that 'it was the United States of America that saved Israel' (Milbank, 2025). His statement reinforced the chapter's argument that Israel's strategic autonomy operates within an alliance structure that supplies material capacity, intelligence support, defensive protection and diplomatic intervention.

The paradox is structural: Israel wields one of the world's most advanced militaries and can initiate major operations independently, yet depends heavily upon US finance, equipment and logistical support to sustain prolonged, high-intensity warfare. The 2025 strikes on Iran reveal how alliance dependence and impunity are mutually reinforcing: Israel can initiate hostilities autonomously because it can count on US support and protection, but its capacity to sustain escalation remains alliance-dependent.

This asymmetry defines what this thesis terms *delegated warfare*, a form of conflict in which a regional actor conducts violence under the protective architecture of global power. The

logic corrodes the boundaries of lawful defence under international norms and institutionalises impunity through partnership.

Politically, the same architecture is sustained through deep US legislative entrenchment. For decades, bipartisan consensus has guaranteed annual military financing of 3.8 billion USD, expanded after October 2023 through emergency appropriations (Sharp, 2025). This continues despite generational and partisan shifts recorded by Pew and Brookings polls showing declining support for unconditional aid (Silver, 2024). AIPAC and its affiliates remain among the largest political donors, spending over 87 million USD in the 2023–2024 cycle. As Donald Trump remarked, 'Israel was the strongest lobby I've ever seen. They had total control over Congress, and now they don't' (Reese, 2025). His observation encapsulates the paradox of institutional continuity amid social erosion: political machinery remains intact even as public consensus frays.

From a legal standpoint, this integration blurs lines of responsibility. Under Article 16 of the International Law Commission's *Articles on State Responsibility*, a state knowingly assisting another in committing internationally wrongful acts shares liability (United Nations General Assembly, 2001). Amnesty International's 2024 report, 'You Feel Like You Are Subhuman': Israel's Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza, concludes that Israel's conduct meets the criteria for genocide, documenting deliberate mass killing and infrastructure destruction (Amnesty International, 2024). Given the scale of US financial and operational involvement, legal scholars and human-rights bodies have raised concerns about Washington's complicity.

Diplomatically, this alignment has eroded US credibility as a regional mediator. Despite rhetorical adherence to the Palestinian two-state principle, the continued supply of weapons and repeated vetoes of ceasefire resolutions have provoked widespread criticism across the Global South. Following US airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, leaders from Mexico, Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa condemned Washington's double standards and called for renewed diplomacy. The perception of US impunity for Israeli violations has further diminished its normative authority.

Militarily, Israel's ability to sustain high-intensity warfare depends on US-controlled systems: the Foreign Military Sales mechanism, continuous intelligence sharing, the *War Reserve Stockpile Ammunition–Israel (WRSA-I)*, and strategic airlift under CENTCOM logistics. Without these systems, Israel's capacity to sustain prolonged, high-intensity campaigns would be substantially reduced. Bilmes *et al*. (2024) argue that such interdependence renders the United States a co-executor of Israel's war effort, sharing responsibility for its humanitarian and strategic outcomes.

The convergence of legal exposure, diplomatic isolation, and military entanglement places the United States in a precarious position. It has assumed the financial, political, and moral costs of Israel's war while compromising its own standing. The cumulative pattern confirms that Israel's ability to fight at scale is contingent on comprehensive US backing, an arrangement extending beyond logistics to legitimacy itself.

Hezbollah's Embedded Resilience and the Limits of Conventional Defeat

Despite its internal vulnerabilities, Hezbollah remains deeply woven into Lebanon's Shia socio-political fabric, not as an occupying power but as a hybrid actor combining political, military, and social functions. Its legitimacy derives not only from armed deterrence but also

from a complex network of welfare, education, and identity-building structures developed over four decades. In a state marked by chronic fragility and partial sovereignty, communities have evolved parallel systems to secure continuity and protection. Hezbollah's entrenchment therefore represents a sociological adaptation to state weakness rather than a mere by-product of militarisation.

This dependence upon the continued presence of the population was articulated explicitly during the Israeli incursions of September 2024. A Head of Unit in South Lebanon explained: 'For us, defending civilians is as critical as defending the border. If the land is abandoned, Hezbollah becomes hollow. Resistance without people is meaningless.' (Appendix C, Entry 31, Head of Unit, South Lebanon, September 2024). The testimony demonstrates that population embeddedness is not merely a source of legitimacy surrounding the military organisation. It is understood internally as a responsibility and a condition of resistance itself, connecting territorial defence, communal survival and deterrent credibility.

A campaign involving the displacement or targeting of an entire civilian constituency, comprising nearly one-third of Lebanon's population, could produce catastrophic humanitarian consequences and risk forms of sectarian cleansing. Even in Gaza, where the population is smaller and geographically confined, Israel's overwhelming superiority and sustained Western backing have failed to extinguish organised resistance. Lebanon, by contrast, lacks comparable resources or international support. Its state neither controls the narratives that legitimise sovereignty nor commands a monopoly over coercion or welfare delivery.

As Norton (2014) observes, 'Hezbollah is not merely a militia; it is a social movement anchored in the structures of everyday life'. This embeddedness renders purely military categories of victory and defeat analytically insufficient. A military campaign capable of dismantling Hezbollah would simultaneously destroy the fragile scaffolding of Lebanese society and governance itself.

The June 2025 confrontation did not produce Iran's strategic submission despite extensive military damage. Iran retained the capacity to retaliate, and the conflict ended without the elimination of its nuclear infrastructure or coercive capabilities. Used cautiously, this comparison illustrates the distinction between material degradation and compelled strategic defeat; it does not establish a direct equivalence between Iran and Hezbollah.

This reversal affirms a central argument of the chapter: alliance warfare produces impunity without independence, whereas resilience forged in isolation can generate deterrent credibility under extreme constraint. Hezbollah's position mirrors this dynamic. Despite Israeli and US operations during 2023–2024, assassinations of senior cadres, the dismantling of Syrian logistical corridors, and large-scale infrastructure strikes, Hezbollah's organisational presence and political base endured, although its deterrent posture and military capacity were severely weakened. Rather than collapsing, the organisation began an adaptive recalibration involving leadership reconstruction, decentralised command and reduced technological exposure. This phase marks a deliberate strategic pivot, from outward projection to internal consolidation, emphasising survival as an expression of strength.

By redefining survival as a component of deterrence, Hezbollah converts endurance into political capital. Its continued organisational presence amid destruction supports its narrative

of disciplined resistance, while its persistence strengthens its claimed role in defending Lebanese sovereignty. In this transformation, survival becomes both message and method.

The Lebanese government, meanwhile, continues to invoke United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, demanding disarmament south of the Litani River. Hezbollah demonstrated a degree of compliance by not obstructing the Lebanese army's recovery of weapons and military infrastructure in this specific area, while continuing to reject comprehensive disarmament in Lebanon. In a post-fieldwork development, the Lebanese army announced that it had completed the first phase of establishing state control over non-state weapons between the Litani River and the Israeli border. This implementation occurred while Israel continued to occupy five positions in southern Lebanon and conduct operations elsewhere in the country, potentially reinforcing Hezbollah's claim that its armed role remained necessary for national defence.

Hezbollah's regenerative capacity, its ability to translate material losses into moral authority, undermines the conventional logic of defeat. Even after sustained multi-front confrontation by a coalition of intelligence and military powers, Hezbollah continues to function, recruit, mobilise, and communicate. Its endurance cannot be measured through territorial outcomes or casualty counts but through its continuing capacity to act as a political–military organism embedded in a fragile state yet sustained by a resilient communal ethos.

Hezbollah's survival therefore testifies less to invincibility than to the systemic disorder of Lebanon itself. The state's failure to deliver governance, security, and welfare ensures the persistence of the very actor that challenges its monopoly on force. Hezbollah's power therefore both reflects and reinforces Lebanese state weakness, while also drawing legitimacy from the perceived failure of international law to protect Lebanese sovereignty.

This relationship between state incapacity and embedded sovereignty clarifies the meaning of non-defeat in this thesis. Hezbollah remains undefeated not because it is immune to military loss, but because neither the Lebanese state nor external military pressure has displaced the political, protective and social functions through which it remains embedded within its constituency. Deterrence by resilience enables the organisation to survive and reorganise after material damage, while deterrence by narrative converts that survival into continued legitimacy and resistance. Embedded sovereignty sustains both mechanisms by locating Hezbollah's authority within the institutional and communal spaces left unfilled by the state. Defeat would therefore require more than military degradation: it would require the replacement of these functions by a Lebanese state capable of providing credible security, welfare and political representation.

Hezbollah After 2024: Strategic Recoil, Not Collapse

Hezbollah's influence in Iraq illustrates both the reach and limits of its model. During the US occupation, its operational imprint was unmistakable: training, tactics, and munitions design drawn from Hezbollah's experience enhanced the lethality of Iraqi insurgents. Interviews conducted over a decade confirm that both US officers and Iraqi commanders acknowledged Hezbollah's expertise, particularly in the use of shaped charges and precision explosives. Yet Hezbollah's involvement was framed as resistance to occupation rather than sectarian intervention, an idiom that later underpinned its legitimacy during the ISIS crisis.

The prestige of the 2006 war and Hezbollah's subsequent battlefield performance in Syria elevated its status across the region. However, Iraq exposed the limits of its exportability. The emergence of Asaib Ahl al-Haq under Qais al-Khaz'ali as a splinter from the Sadrist movement, the advisory role of senior Hezbollah commander Ali Musa Daqduq, and the triangular coordination between Beirut, Tehran, and Baghdad all demonstrated deep operational connection and influence. But in Iraq's fragmented polity, shaped by sectarian competition and Iranian mediation, Hezbollah's model was not fully reproducible. What emerged was not replication but adaptation, a hybrid shaped by Iraq's unique post-Baathist structure of power.

Hezbollah's post-2024 trajectory thus represents not collapse but strategic recoil, a conscious reorientation in response to environmental constraint. The assumption that it could be subdued through superior military force has repeatedly failed to grasp its hybrid character and its roots in Lebanese social realities. Hezbollah's endurance is not purely military; it is political, ideological, and communal.

The group's post-October 2023 adjustments, measured engagement, tighter doctrinal discipline, and operational restraint, signify recalibration rather than retreat. Despite losing senior figures and suffering infrastructure damage, Hezbollah preserved strategic depth and ideological coherence. It remains a central pillar of the '*Axis of Resistance'*, yet increasingly prioritises endurance over projection. Its resilience lies not in denying loss but in absorbing and reinterpreting it.

Hezbollah's capacity to endure and reorganise confirms its status as an integral component of the regional security architecture. Its deterrence posture has evolved, its political base remains cohesive, and its discourse continues to resonate within its community and beyond. The question is no longer whether Hezbollah can be eliminated but how it will adapt to a regional order defined by shifting alliances, dwindling resources, and constant renegotiation of legitimacy.

Methodological and Analytical Coherence

This chapter exemplifies the thesis's interpretive coherence. The research does not claim mixed-methods quantification but fuses theoretical precision with qualitative depth, integrating critical-realist causal explanation, abductive inference, and ethnographic process tracing. Rigour here denotes disciplined reasoning, reflexive transparency, and systematic triangulation across ethnographic, documentary, and discursive sources.

The originality of the thesis lies in this synthesis: demonstrating that qualitative material, interviews, fieldnotes, speeches, and Arabic primary texts, can sustain causal inference when treated as theory-bearing evidence. Ethnography becomes an analytical instrument, linking micro-level narrative construction to macro-level deterrence architecture within a constructivist–critical-realist ontology. The result is a multi-layered model connecting social embeddedness to strategic persistence.

Within this framework, Hezbollah's survival signifies not exceptional power but structural necessity. Its endurance reflects the voids it continues to fill: governance, welfare, and communal protection. So long as these voids persist, Hezbollah is likely to remain difficult to displace because of the protective, political and social functions it performs for substantial sections of its constituency.

This logic leads directly to the thesis's final synthesis: an integrated triadic model of embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience, and deterrence by narrative. Through this framework, Hezbollah's persistence is reinterpreted as both a symptom of systemic fragility and an illustration of how modern resistance movements convert social rootedness into strategic endurance.

Chapter 8

Conclusion – The Future of Resistance Without an Axis

This concluding chapter re-engages the abductive, interpretive–realist, and constructivist–critical-realist framework developed in Chapter 2, drawing together the empirical and analytical findings through process tracing, discourse analysis, and triangulated ethnographic evidence. The chapter revisits the central question of why Hezbollah has remained undefeated despite sustained pressure and what this reveals about legitimacy and resistance in hybrid warfare.

The prospective analysis developed later in this chapter does not constitute a new body of empirical findings or claim to predict particular outcomes. It presents conditional scenarios derived from the causal and interpretive mechanisms established across the thesis. Findings supported by the completed research are therefore distinguished from their analytical implications and from future possibilities whose realisation depends on changes in leadership, constituency expectations, state capacity and the regional security environment. Developments occurring after June 2025 are included only as subsequent illustrations of these conditional implications and do not form part of the thesis's empirical findings.

Hezbollah has remained undefeated because its adversaries have repeatedly damaged its military capabilities and assassinated its leaders without dismantling the interconnected ideological, organisational, political and social bonds and mechanisms that allow it to regenerate. Leadership losses, sabotage, destruction, sanctions, intelligence penetration and regional isolation have imposed severe costs, but these pressures have not produced organisational collapse, political submission, communal abandonment or the disappearance of armed resistance; nor have they addressed the conditions sustaining the movement's *raison d'être*. Any durable resolution must therefore address those root causes and empower the Lebanese state with credible and enforceable guarantees that its territory, security and sovereignty will not continue to be violated. Strengthening the Lebanese state would, however, remain insufficient in the absence of effective measures ensuring Israel's compliance with international law and respect for Lebanese sovereignty. Without such guarantees and the institutional capacity to protect its population, demands for Hezbollah's disarmament cannot remove the conditions that make armed resistance credible to its constituency.

Hezbollah's endurance demonstrates that defeat cannot be measured through material degradation alone when an armed actor is embedded within a population, participates in state institutions, provides protection and welfare, possesses autonomous decision-making capacity and interprets survival as political continuity, particularly when the state is unable to protect its territory and population. The case consequently exposes the limitations of conventional understandings of deterrence, sovereignty and proxy relations. Deterrence can persist through resilience after punishment occurs; sovereignty can be socially embedded rather than monopolised by the state; and ideological alignment with a patron does not eliminate autonomous agency or create automatic collective command.

This endurance, however, has evolved through contradiction. Syria emerged in the research as both Hezbollah's greatest success and its deepest structural vulnerability. Hezbollah's interventions in Syria, Iraq and Yemen between 2013 and 2020 allowed the movement to

externalise risk and preserve strategic depth, but it also exposed the movement to unprecedented operational transparency and intelligence penetration. Confidential interviews analysed in Appendices B and C show that Hezbollah insiders themselves recognised this paradox: the Syrian campaign consolidated the movement's deterrent power yet sowed the seeds of later vulnerabilities, culminating in the exposure of secure communication networks during the 2023–2024 confrontation. Through this lens, what might appear as defeat at the tactical level becomes, in strategic terms, a stage in Hezbollah's ongoing process of adaptation, a manifestation of deterrence by resilience.

The post-2023 recalibration initially reflected Hezbollah's attempt to move from open confrontation towards disciplined endurance. Its limited intervention in support of Gaza was intended to impose costs while avoiding a comprehensive war. This was a calculated strategy rather than evidence of unwillingness to act, but its subsequent failure is analytically important. Controlled escalation did not preserve reciprocal restraint or prevent Israel from dictating the tempo and widening the confrontation, exploiting intelligence penetration and decapitating much of Hezbollah's senior command. The episode therefore revealed both the rationality and the limitation of Hezbollah's doctrine: calibrated signalling can communicate restraint, but it cannot control an adversary prepared to disregard the proposed limits. The movement's future deterrence will depend not only on communicating thresholds but on preserving command and military capacity when those thresholds are ignored.

This recalibrated resistance reflects a deeper sociological truth: Hezbollah's power is inseparable from the collective consciousness of the community that sustains it. Its resilience is not only military or organisational but profoundly social, woven into the daily routines, hopes, and fears of those who depend on it for security, welfare, and meaning. In the aftermath of four decades of conflict, occupation, and economic collapse, Hezbollah's capacity to govern, provide, and symbolically represent dignity has made it a constitutive element of Lebanon's political order. The movement's embedded sovereignty functions as both a shield and a constraint: it grants resilience by rooting legitimacy in social bonds but limits strategic flexibility by tying the group's survival to the stability of its constituency.

Hezbollah's initial restraint during the 2023-2024 confrontation reflected its recognition of the interdependence between military action and the survival of its social environment, even though this restraint ultimately failed to prevent a wider war. The thesis shows that this interdependence constitutes the essence of modern hybrid warfare, where legitimacy is as decisive as armament, and where victory lies not in battlefield supremacy but in the ability to survive, adapt and outlast adversaries across time.

Objective 1 sought to identify and analyse the ideological, organisational, political, social and military factors that have enabled Hezbollah to remain strategically undefeated despite sustained pressure. The thesis finds that Hezbollah's endurance results from the interaction of ideological cohesion, organisational adaptation, military capability, political participation, welfare provision and communal protection. No single factor adequately explains its survival. Military capability created the means to resist, political institutionalisation protected the movement domestically, social provision sustained reciprocal loyalty, ideology preserved cohesion, and organisational learning enabled adaptation after severe disruption. Hezbollah remained undefeated because these mechanisms continued to operate together even when individual capabilities were degraded.

In relation to Objective 2, which examines how ideology and narrative distinguish loss and sacrifice from strategic defeat and thereby contribute to resilience, mobilisation and deterrence, these findings demonstrate how destruction is incorporated into a continuing interpretation of resistance rather than automatically accepted as defeat. These interpretive mechanisms sustain mobilisation and organisational resilience, but they should not be treated as independent proof of military victory. Their analytical importance lies in explaining why material destruction does not necessarily produce political submission or communal abandonment.

In relation to Objective 3, which examines how social embeddedness and participation in Lebanese institutions enable autonomous agency, legitimacy and functions associated with sovereignty, the research demonstrates that these mechanisms allow Hezbollah to exercise protective, political and social authority within Lebanon. Iranian support remains an important source of weapons, finance, training and strategic depth, but it does not eliminate Hezbollah's independent calculation or establish a unified regional command. Ideological alignment and material dependence must therefore be distinguished from automatic obedience.

The evidence gathered through fieldwork, process tracing, and longitudinal discourse analysis indicates that Hezbollah's trajectory cannot be understood through conventional theories of alliance behaviour or deterrence. The '*Axis of Resistance*', often portrayed in both academic and policy discourse as a unified strategic bloc, emerges from this research as a symbolic formation rather than an operational coalition across the period examined, up to June 2025. The findings from Chapters 5, 6 and 7, reinforced by the testimonies coded in Appendix B, reveal that the Axis functions primarily through synchronised narratives of solidarity rather than coordinated command structures. It constitutes what this thesis terms a virtual deterrence alliance, where deterrent effects are generated through narrative, symbolic alignment, and performative acts of resistance, even in the absence of material coordination.

This discovery reframes how alliances among hybrid actors should be understood. Rather than relying on formal agreements or unified command hierarchies, such networks operate through affective and rhetorical linkages that sustain legitimacy across fragmented constituencies. Hezbollah's endurance therefore depends less on Tehran's directives than on its ability to mobilise and re-signify these narratives domestically, transforming symbolic solidarity into a resource for local legitimacy. The empirical material confirms that, even where operational coordination with Iran, Syria, Yemen and Iraq remained uneven, Hezbollah's rhetorical invocation of unity retained deterrent value by preserving a shared imaginary of resistance.

The limited and uneven regional response to the Gaza war reinforced this finding by demonstrating that symbolic synchronisation did not create an obligation of automatic collective military intervention. In this sense, the Gaza war of 2023–2024 represents a turning point. Despite intense pressure from its allies and its own discourse of transnational solidarity, Hezbollah deliberately limited its engagement to a calibrated theatre of operations. This was not a failure of will but a calculated choice aligned with its broader doctrine of deterrence by resilience. The group's decision to act within the bounds of controlled escalation reflected a calculated assessment of strategic risk in a regional environment transformed by surveillance, cyberwarfare, and economic collapse. As several interlocutors noted in confidential interviews, Hezbollah had learned that survival required strategic

modesty, accurate knowledge of its own strengths and limitations, robust intelligence about its enemy's intentions and a realistic assessment of enemy capabilities.

Such recalibration marks the movement's passage from revolutionary insurgency to embedded governance. The Syrian intervention had already tested the limits of external projection; the post-2023 phase confirms a pivot inward. By focusing on domestic legitimacy, service provision, and internal cohesion, Hezbollah seeks to secure what this thesis conceptualises as embedded sovereignty: a form of authority that operates within, rather than against, the Lebanese state. This model is not parasitic, but constitutive, redefining sovereignty as a negotiated, multi-layered phenomenon shared between formal institutions and social actors.

The three concepts developed by this thesis describe different stages of the same mechanism of endurance. Embedded sovereignty provides Hezbollah with its social and institutional foundation by connecting armed capacity to welfare, communal protection, political participation and belonging. Deterrence by resilience converts that foundation into an ability to absorb losses, reconstruct authority and deny the adversary a decisive political result. Deterrence by narrative interprets this survival as continuity of purpose and communicates that destruction will not necessarily produce submission. Embeddedness enables resilience, resilience supplies credibility to the narrative, and the narrative renews the legitimacy on which embedded sovereignty depends.

The theoretical implications of these findings are significant. First, they require a reconceptualisation of defeat in hybrid warfare. Traditional measures, such as territorial control, leadership decapitation or disarmament, fail to capture the endurance of actors whose legitimacy derives from moral and social embeddedness. True peace cannot be built on asymmetry. For Lebanon, disarming Hezbollah without credible guarantees of complete Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory and sustained respect for national sovereignty would amount to unilateral disarmament, creating a security vacuum that Israel has historically exploited. Regardless of the determination of its president and government, Lebanon cannot be expected to succeed in dismantling its deterrence mechanisms while Israel continues to expand its territorial footprint and define regional stability and security solely on its own terms.

This distinction between material degradation and strategic defeat is also reflected in the data from Appendices A–C. Hezbollah's members and supporters consistently interpret survival itself as victory, redefining defeat as the loss of moral purpose rather than the loss of physical capacity. Second, the findings necessitate a reconsideration of deterrence theory. In Hezbollah's practice, deterrence is not a function of overwhelming retaliation but of credibility sustained through endurance. The thesis therefore introduces deterrence by resilience as an analytical category that captures how hybrid actors preserve strategic credibility through persistence, narrative control and social legitimacy.

The research also challenges deterministic accounts of proxy warfare. While Iranian support remains an enabling factor, it is neither sufficient nor decisive. Hezbollah's decisions since 2019, particularly its restraint during the Gaza war and its absence from the Syrian theatre during the last conflict, illustrate a degree of strategic autonomy grounded in domestic legitimacy and contextual rationality. As confidential interlocutors revealed, the movement's leadership views its relationship with Tehran as an organic partnership bound by shared principles and ideology rather than subordination. This autonomy operates within ideological

alignment but allows tactical independence, a dynamic captured in this thesis through the notion of performative solidarity under domestic constraint.

These theoretical advances have broader implications for international relations and security studies. They call for analytical frameworks that integrate social theory, political sociology, and strategic analysis to explain the persistence of hybrid actors. The constructivist–critical-realist synthesis developed in Chapter 2 proves its value here, as it allows the material, ideational, and social dimensions of resilience to be examined without privileging any single causal domain. The triangulated design linking discourse analysis, process tracing, and abductive reasoning, documented in Appendices A–C, has enabled this thesis to move beyond the limitations of both positivist and purely interpretive approaches. It provides a replicable model for analysing armed non-state actors that remain simultaneously coercive and socially embedded.

The thesis makes four related contributions. Empirically, it draws on a longitudinal corpus of confidential interviews, field observation and Arabic primary material covering Hezbollah's evolution across four decades. Theoretically, it develops embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience and deterrence by narrative as an integrated explanation of organisational endurance under material asymmetry. Methodologically, it demonstrates how process tracing, discourse analysis, triangulation and abductive reasoning can generate causal explanation in an opaque and securitised environment while preserving reflexive and ethical safeguards. More broadly, it offers a framework for analysing hybrid and population-embedded actors whose political, military and social functions cannot be captured adequately by the categories of proxy, militia or conventional political party.

Hezbollah's evolution also provides a cautionary lens on the future of the so-called '*Axis of Resistance'*. The thesis reveals that the Axis's fragmentation does not necessarily indicate its disappearance. Rather, it exposes the underlying character of a diffuse network of autonomous actors bound by symbolic narratives and bilateral relationships rather than operational command. This post-Axis environment, identified across Chapters 5–7, may represent the future of regional resistance politics: a decentralised ecosystem in which power is enacted through discourse, media and moral solidarity more than through coordinated military action.

Prospective implications

The following projections are not claims of certainty. They consider how the mechanisms established by the thesis may operate under changing political, social, generational and regional conditions.

The future of Hezbollah

Politically, Hezbollah is likely to deepen rather than abandon its participation in Lebanese institutions. Parliamentary representation, ministerial influence, municipal organisation and alliances with other political forces now constitute mechanisms of organisational protection. Yet institutionalisation will not necessarily produce disarmament or ideological normalisation. Hezbollah is likely to retain a dual strategy in which political participation protects an autonomous military capability while armed capacity reinforces its domestic negotiating position. Movement towards a more exclusively political role would depend on

conditions beyond Hezbollah itself, including credible Lebanese defence institutions, Israeli withdrawal from occupied territory, enforceable guarantees against recurrent attack and an alternative system of social protection.

Socially, Hezbollah's military setback did not necessarily weaken its embedded sovereignty. In the aftermath of the November 2024 war, some far-right Maronite voices and other domestic opponents called for Hezbollah's exclusion from Parliament and government, at times appearing to disregard the constitutional and confessional arrangements governing political representation in Lebanon. Hezbollah's losses and its lack of response to subsequent Israeli attacks during fifteen months of an ostensible ceasefire encouraged a perception among its opponents that the movement had been permanently weakened or politically neutralised. Within much of the Shia community, however, these calls were interpreted not simply as opposition to Hezbollah's weapons or political influence, but as an exclusionary threat directed towards the community itself. Rhetoric suggesting that Lebanese Shia should be removed to Iraq or Yemen reinforced fears that Hezbollah constituted the last organised line of defence against political marginalisation and communal displacement. The movement's apparent vulnerability therefore produced a paradoxical effect: rather than separating the constituency from Hezbollah, domestic hostility strengthened communal solidarity around it and reinforced the social foundations of embedded sovereignty.

This consolidation does not mean that Shia support is unconditional or that material pressures have disappeared. Continued state weakness will preserve demand for Hezbollah's welfare, reconstruction, security and representative functions, while economic contraction, repeated destruction and the costs of regional engagement may make support for particular military decisions more selective. Hezbollah's embedded sovereignty is therefore likely to remain resilient for as long as the movement is perceived as indispensable to communal protection. Over the longer term, however, that resilience will continue to depend on reciprocity: Hezbollah cannot indefinitely demand sacrifice without providing protection, reconstruction and a credible political purpose.

Ideologically, Hezbollah is unlikely to renounce resistance, but it may progressively reinterpret its purpose. Resistance emerged as liberation from occupation, later expanded into regional strategic projection and is now moving towards the preservation of organisational, communal and territorial survival. This evolution does not require ideological abandonment, but a closer connection between sacrifice and achievable purpose. The narrative of victory through survival remains powerful after military degradation, but its credibility cannot rest indefinitely on endurance alone. Deterrence by narrative must remain connected to material reconstruction, political agency and a demonstrated capacity to protect the population. Otherwise, the distinction between principled endurance and permanent sacrifice will become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Militarily, Hezbollah is likely to reconstruct through dispersion rather than restore its previous quasi-centralised structure. The intelligence breaches and leadership losses exposed the risks produced by institutional expansion, communications dependence and concentrated authority. Organisational survival will require more compartmentalised command, lower operational visibility, stronger counterintelligence, protected succession mechanisms and greater local autonomy. The movement may also reduce its regional exposure and redirect resources towards the defence of its Lebanese environment. The failure of controlled escalation is especially important: calibrated action did not ensure reciprocal restraint or prevent Israel from widening the conflict. Future deterrence will therefore depend not merely

on communicating thresholds, but on preserving command and operational capability after those thresholds are ignored.

Hezbollah will also face pressure to restore a credible rule of engagement in response to Israel's continued targeting of its leaders, commanders and members. The experience of the post-7 October 2023 wars indicates that deterrence by narrative is no longer sufficient to constrain an adversary willing to employ overwhelming destructive force and disregard previously understood limits of escalation. Hezbollah acting alone is unlikely to possess the military, technological or political leverage required to deter Israel or impose a ceasefire that meaningfully restricts Israeli freedom of action. If this imbalance persists, the restoration of credible deterrence will probably require either direct Iranian military intervention or a sufficiently credible Iranian commitment to intervene on Hezbollah's behalf. Iran possesses capabilities that Hezbollah cannot reproduce independently and may therefore become indispensable to protecting its Lebanese ally and the Shia communities most exposed to Israeli military action.

Such intervention would nevertheless remain contingent because it would risk transforming a Lebanese confrontation into a wider regional war. In a more escalatory scenario, Iran might calculate that widening the confrontation would create sufficient regional risk to compel the United States to intervene diplomatically and impose, or broker, a broader ceasefire on all belligerents. Such a strategy would seek to convert escalation into leverage, but its outcome would remain highly uncertain because US intervention could instead take military form or provide Israel with further operational support.

The sustainability of perpetual resistance

Perpetual resistance is unlikely to remain sustainable in an unchanged form. It may endure as an identity, doctrine and condition of military preparedness, but permanent regional mobilisation imposes cumulative human, political and economic costs that embedded sovereignty cannot absorb indefinitely. The central distinction is between resistance as a continuing capacity and resistance as continuous warfare. Hezbollah can preserve the former while restricting the latter. Its constituency is more likely to tolerate sacrifice connected to territorial defence and communal survival than open-ended involvement in distant theatres. Institutionalisation has made resistance socially durable, but it has also exposed the movement to bureaucracy, centralisation and responsibility for the consequences of its decisions. Its future therefore depends on converting perpetual resistance into selective readiness connected to identifiable and achievable protective objectives.

As a Community Organiser explained in 2000, the liberation of southern Lebanon "gave us legitimacy", while every remaining Israeli position became evidence that Hezbollah's mission was unfinished and that "our arms still had a purpose" (Appendix B, Community Organiser, 2000). This testimony demonstrates how unresolved occupation became a continuing source of legitimacy for Hezbollah after the liberation of most of southern Lebanon in 2000. The remaining occupied territory allowed the organisation to argue that liberation was incomplete and that the conditions justifying armed resistance had therefore not disappeared. Hezbollah's legitimacy as an armed actor consequently derived not only from its achievement in compelling Israel to withdraw, but also from Israel's continued occupation of Lebanese territory. Each position that remained under Israeli control could be presented as evidence both of the state's inability to complete the liberation and of the continuing purpose of Hezbollah's weapons. The future sustainability of the resistance is

therefore inseparable from the territorial question. A complete and internationally recognised Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory, backed by robust international guarantees of Israel's compliance with international law and respect for Lebanon's sovereignty, would weaken one of Hezbollah's principal domestic justifications for retaining an autonomous military capacity, whereas continued occupation enables the organisation to present disarmament as premature.

Generational change

Generational distance from the earlier occupation should not, however, be confused with the absence of directly experienced conflict. The deaths of thousands of Lebanese Shia during the Israeli wars following 7 October 2023 created a new collective memory of bereavement across southern villages and Beirut's southern suburbs, where mourning became embedded in the everyday lives of families and neighbourhoods. This experience is unlikely to disappear rapidly from communal memory, particularly in the absence of an Israeli withdrawal and credible guarantees of security. Rather than weakening resistance identity, continuing occupation and insecurity may transmit it to another generation through recently experienced loss. Hezbollah's material institutions reinforce this process by offering young Lebanese Shia salaries, medical coverage, pensions and extensive support for the families and parents of those commemorated as martyrs. Under conditions of economic contraction, limited state employment and continuing insecurity, Hezbollah may consequently remain one of the most attractive institutional pathways available to many young people within its constituency.

Generational exhaustion

The thesis also exposes the human dimension of this resilience. Behind the analytical categories lie individuals, clerics, fighters, administrators, and civilians, whose testimonies convey both conviction and fatigue. Many interlocutors articulated the tension between pride in resistance and the exhaustion of perpetual mobilisation. Their voices, collated in the Appendices, humanise what is often abstracted in security studies as a 'support base'. They remind us that endurance is lived, not theoretical; it is maintained through emotional labour, ritualised mourning, and the continuous re-enactment of sacrifice. These ethnographic insights ground the thesis's analytical claims in lived experience and underscore the moral economy underpinning Hezbollah's longevity.

At the same time, Hezbollah's durability is not without cost. Its dominance contributes to Lebanon's political paralysis and perpetuates sectarian dependency. The same embeddedness that grants stability also limits reform. Interviews reveal growing internal tensions between the movement's older guard, committed to revolutionary self-sufficiency, and younger cadres who express fatigue with permanent mobilisation and a desire for a more normalised political life. These internal debates, captured in Appendices B and C, suggest that Hezbollah's resilience is dynamic, not immutable. Its future depends on reconciling its dual identity as both guardian and governor, roles that increasingly pull in opposite directions.

Generational exhaustion is more likely to alter the terms of support than to dissolve communal loyalty. Prolonged mobilisation, bereavement, destruction and economic insecurity can generate fatigue without producing confidence in Hezbollah's adversaries or in the Lebanese state. The constituency may therefore continue defending Hezbollah's right to exist and resist while becoming less willing to endorse every regional commitment or escalation. Loyalty derived from identity, protection and historical vulnerability is not equivalent to unconditional approval of permanent warfare. Hezbollah may increasingly be

required to demonstrate selectivity, accountability and attention to reconstruction if it is to preserve the legitimacy that military endurance alone cannot guarantee.

Evidence of this exhaustion was already visible during Hezbollah's regional deployment. A Unit Commander in the Iraq theatre acknowledged: "Our fight there was just, but our families at home bore the cost. Lebanon grew weary. Every day away from home raised the question: why here, not Lebanon? Some whispered that resistance had strayed too far from its soil. But each time Daesh was pushed back, we knew our own borders were safer" (Appendix C, Entry 23, Unit Commander, Iraq Theatre, Baghdad, November 2016). This testimony demonstrates that fatigue did not necessarily negate belief in the strategic justification for the intervention. Rather, it made support more conditional by exposing the tension between regional commitments and unmet needs within Lebanon.

Political recalibration

Accumulated material costs and generational exhaustion are likely to increase pressure for Hezbollah to pursue a larger proportion of its objectives through Lebanese political and institutional mechanisms. This would not necessarily represent ideological surrender. It could be presented as a recalibration of resistance towards the protection of Lebanon, not Gaza, reconstruction of the constituency and preservation of political agency. The principal obstacle is that political integration cannot substitute for security while Israeli occupation and recurrent attacks continue and the Lebanese state remains unable to provide credible defence. The probable trajectory is therefore not immediate demilitarisation but a gradual redistribution of emphasis from expansive regional engagement towards domestic political consolidation.

Regional implications

Lebanon

Lebanon is likely to remain caught between juridical sovereignty and fragmented security authority unless the state becomes capable of performing the protective and social functions that sustain Hezbollah's legitimacy. Forced disarmament remains improbable because the Lebanese Army lacks both the capability and the political consensus required to impose it. A negotiated security arrangement is more plausible, but it would require reciprocal guarantees concerning Israeli withdrawal, border security and protection against recurrent attacks. Without these conditions, Hezbollah's autonomous military capacity will continue to be presented as a response to the gap between the Lebanese state's formal sovereignty and its limited ability to defend its territory and population.

Iran

Iran faces the limitations of a regional network based on ideological affinity, bilateral assistance and symbolic solidarity without automatic collective military action. It may respond by strengthening contingency planning and developing more deliberate coordination among selected partners. Rather than immediately restoring the previous model of regional projection, Tehran is likely to prioritise the protection, recovery and domestic consolidation of its remaining allied movements before attempting to rebuild wider strategic coordination. Greater integration could improve collective responsiveness but would also increase organisational visibility, dependency and vulnerability to intelligence penetration.

Iran's choices will be shaped by its own prolonged insecurity, particularly while international sanctions remain in place, Iranian assets remain frozen, the nuclear programme remains unresolved through negotiation and Israel continues to regard the Islamic Republic as a principal regional threat. Within this generally selective approach, however, an Israeli campaign threatening Hezbollah's organisational survival or the security of Lebanon's Shia population could lead Iran to provide direct military support or intervene more openly if indirect assistance proved insufficient to restore deterrence. Tehran may consequently favour selective coordination and agreed responsibilities within individual theatres rather than a unified regional command. This would represent a response to the fragmentation demonstrated by this thesis, not evidence that such a command previously existed.

The surviving Axis relationships

The Axis is likely to survive as a political identity, narrative and vocabulary of solidarity even if it has failed to operate as an integrated military coalition. Its members may continue exchanging assistance, expertise and intelligence while retaining autonomous command and deciding independently whether and how to participate in particular conflicts. The exposure of these limitations creates pressure either to accept a loose network of theatre-specific relationships or to construct more credible mechanisms of wartime coordination. The future of the Axis will therefore depend on whether symbolic synchronisation remains sufficient for its members or whether the experience of strategic isolation compels them to coordinate military planning more deliberately.

Israel

Israel may conclude that Hezbollah can be severely degraded through intelligence penetration, leadership targeting and sustained air power, but cannot be eliminated through military damage alone. This creates contradictory incentives. Recurrent preventive attacks may delay Hezbollah's reconstruction and restrict its freedom of action, while continued Israeli occupation, buffer zones and violations of Lebanese sovereignty regenerate its domestic justification for armed resistance. Israel may therefore weaken Hezbollah militarily while reinforcing the political and social mechanisms that sustain it. Its future calculations will depend on whether it prioritises the temporary degradation of military capability or a political settlement capable of reducing the conditions through which Hezbollah renews its legitimacy.

Israel's evolving security doctrine may increasingly treat the direct control of buffer zones in Lebanon, Syria and Gaza as a necessary means of moving perceived threats away from its borders. For Hezbollah, this territorially extended conception of Israeli security reinforces rather than removes the rationale for armed resistance: continued occupation enables the movement to argue that its historical mission remains unfinished and that the Lebanese state cannot independently recover or protect its territory. Under present conditions, neither regional states nor existing international security frameworks appear capable of compelling an Israeli withdrawal. This constraint is unlikely to disappear automatically with the departure of Benjamin Netanyahu, because the doctrine reflects broader changes in Israeli strategic thinking rather than the preferences of one prime minister alone. The United States remains the external actor with the greatest potential leverage over Israel, but Washington's extensive military, intelligence, financial and diplomatic support has not consistently translated into an ability or willingness to reverse this emerging security doctrine. A future

Israeli withdrawal may therefore depend principally on whether the United States chooses and is able to make its support conditional on territorial disengagement.

Netanyahu's retrospective description of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah as "the axis of the axis" and the principal engine of Iran's regional network provides an unexpected acknowledgement of the autonomous strategic role examined in this thesis. Coming from a prime minister who had exercised power for more than sixteen years cumulatively, this assessment also raises questions about how long Israeli policy remained shaped by an incomplete understanding of Hezbollah's position within the Axis and of its resilience more generally. Netanyahu's formulation does not demonstrate that Hezbollah commanded Iran, but it challenges reductive interpretations of the organisation as an instrument merely implementing Iranian instructions.

Sayyed Nasrallah's influence derived from his operational experience, regional relationships and ability to translate shared ideological commitments into strategies adapted to different theatres. Israel's own assessment therefore reinforces this thesis's finding that the Axis was neither a unified command structure nor adequately explained through a conventional principal-agent relationship.

Israel's military achievements, including the assassination of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and other experienced commanders, exposed profound weaknesses in Hezbollah's communications, operational security and leadership structures. Yet these tactical successes did not provide a comprehensive strategy capable of eliminating the conditions sustaining the organisation. Israeli intelligence had accumulated extensive knowledge of the identities, routines and operational methods of the established leadership. Their removal severely disrupted Hezbollah, but it also elevated successors whose strategic assumptions and patterns of behaviour are less familiar to Israel.

Israel therefore confronts not simply a reproduction of the previous organisation, but a new leadership profile formed through different experiences and potentially less predictable methods. The removal of familiar adversaries has consequently generated a degree of strategic uncertainty for Israel.

More importantly, Israel's continued occupation of Lebanese territory, combined with the Lebanese government's and armed forces' continuing inability to provide credible security and territorial protection, reproduces part of Hezbollah's domestic justification. Where the Lebanese state remains unable to protect its population or recover occupied land, Hezbollah can continue to present its autonomous military capacity as necessary. Israeli policy thus contributes to the persistence of the actor it seeks to eliminate. Military pressure may weaken Hezbollah's capabilities, while territorial occupation and the weakness of Lebanese institutions preserve the political and social conditions from which its claim to armed resistance derives. This does not mean that Lebanese support for Hezbollah is uniform or permanent. It means that disarmament becomes less persuasive when the state cannot offer a credible alternative and when occupation allows Hezbollah to argue that its historical mission remains unfinished.

The central paradox is therefore that Israel may succeed in killing Hezbollah's leaders and degrading its military infrastructure without defeating the political rationale that enables it to regenerate. A strategy centred principally on assassination, destruction and territorial control addresses Hezbollah as a military target while insufficiently confronting it as a socially embedded hybrid actor. Hezbollah's future endurance will depend upon its capacity to

reorganise, retain communal confidence and redefine achievable objectives. It will also depend upon the conduct of its adversary. So long as occupation continues and the Lebanese state remains institutionally and militarily incapable of replacing Hezbollah's protective functions, Israel will remain not only Hezbollah's principal enemy, but also a significant source of its continuing raison d'être.

Iraq and Yemen

Iraqi armed organisations and Ansar Allah are likely to retain their local priorities and autonomous strategic calculations. Their relationships with Iran remain important but do not create automatic obedience or guarantee intervention on behalf of another member of the network. Iraqi actors remain constrained by domestic institutions, political rivalries and competing relationships with the state. Nevertheless, the continuing presence of US and Turkish forces in northern Iraq provides armed groups with an external security justification for retaining their weapons. Comprehensive disarmament is therefore unlikely in the absence of foreign military withdrawal and a domestic security settlement capable of addressing the conditions through which these organisations legitimise their armed status.

In Yemen, Ansar Allah's authority and military development remain rooted principally in the Yemeni theatre. Future regional cooperation is therefore likely to remain selective and theatre-specific, with shared narratives facilitating assistance and parallel action without ensuring simultaneous military participation. Ansar Allah's control of substantial parts of Yemen's Red Sea coastline and its demonstrated capacity to disrupt maritime traffic through the Bab el-Mandeb give the movement strategic leverage disproportionate to its conventional military power.

Ansar Allah is therefore likely to retain maritime pressure as an instrument of deterrence and negotiation, paralleling Iran's use of its strategic position and military capabilities in the Strait of Hormuz. In both cases, effective control does not require permanent physical occupation of the waterway. Missiles, drones and other maritime-denial capabilities can temporarily regulate or obstruct navigation, compel commercial vessels to change course, increase insurance and transportation costs and transform freedom of passage into a source of political and military leverage. Ansar Allah presented its Red Sea operations as support for Palestinians in Gaza, but it could also employ these capabilities to pursue Yemeni objectives, including securing relief from external restrictions and economic pressure and addressing the unresolved consequences of the Saudi-led war. Its relationship with Iran is likely to remain ideologically and strategically important while continuing to reflect Ansar Allah's autonomous calculations and locally rooted priorities.

Conditional scenarios

Three broad trajectories emerge from these findings. The most plausible near-term scenario is domestic consolidation, in which Hezbollah prioritises reconstruction, counterintelligence, constituency protection and Lebanese political influence while reducing regional exposure. A second scenario is hybrid continuity, in which the movement preserves its institutional and military roles without resolving the contradiction between participation in the state and autonomous armed capacity. A third and more contingent scenario is renewed regional coordination if Iran and its partners interpret their fragmented performance as a strategic failure requiring more deliberate military planning. These trajectories are not mutually exclusive. Their development will depend on Lebanese state capacity, Israeli conduct,

leadership adaptation, regional threats and the willingness of Hezbollah's constituency to absorb further costs.

Future research

Further research should extend these findings in six directions. First, intergenerational studies should examine whether younger supporters reproduce or reinterpret inherited narratives of occupation, sacrifice and victory, including the perspectives of women and younger participants absent from the present corpus. Second, research on embedded sovereignty should assess how prolonged economic contraction affects the reciprocal relationship between welfare provision and political loyalty. Third, leadership succession should be examined to determine whether Hezbollah's decentralisation produces durable institutional adaptation or reconstructs authority around a new centre. Fourth, further study should identify when deterrence by narrative reinforces material capability and when it compensates for its decline. Fifth, comparative research across Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen should examine whether Axis fragmentation leads to greater autonomy or new mechanisms of coordination. Finally, the three concepts developed by this thesis should be tested against other hybrid and population-embedded actors to establish their explanatory reach and limitations.

Recommendations and Implications

The findings of this thesis invite a reconsideration of how both scholars and policymakers approach hybrid warfare, deterrence, and governance in fragile states. Hezbollah's endurance demonstrates that strategies relying on coercion, isolation, or external containment are structurally misaligned with the realities of embedded resistance. Endurance in such contexts arises from social legitimacy and moral authority rather than military strength alone, compelling a reorientation of both policy and research practice.

Policy implications emerge most directly from the thesis's demonstration that coercive instruments, including economic sanctions, disarmament campaigns, targeted assassinations and attempts at political exclusion, tend to reinforce rather than weaken embedded actors. In Lebanon, these measures deepen social dependency on Hezbollah by amplifying the very insecurities that legitimise its existence. Sustainable stability, therefore, requires addressing the foundational conditions of vulnerability: inequality, state neglect, persisting occupation and external interference. International and regional initiatives should prioritise governance reform, equitable resource distribution, and social protection as security strategies in their own right. Diplomatic and humanitarian actors must engage non-state authorities not as spoilers but as components of hybrid governance structures, seeking gradual integration rather than abrupt dismantlement. The evidence of this thesis suggests that resilience can be redirected towards reform only when legitimacy is shared rather than imposed.

An additional implication involves the reciprocal relationship between external military actions and internal legitimacy. The ongoing Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and repeated ceasefire violations not only sustain border insecurity but also inadvertently strengthen the very actor they aim to constrain. By weakening the Lebanese government's ability to ensure basic protection for its citizens, these actions reveal the structural limitations of the state and increase the disparity between juridical sovereignty and actual security experienced by the population. Within this context, Hezbollah's claim to resistance is grounded in a tangible deficit of state provision rather than abstract justification. Appeals to

self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, alongside the persistent territorial disputes, provide the organisation with discursive and legal tools to oppose disarmament efforts. Consequently, external pressure risks perpetuating the conditions that justify armed endurance, thereby reinforcing the movement's raison d'être precisely when it faces domestic and international challenges.

Academic implications extend from the conceptual contributions of embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience, and deterrence by narrative. These frameworks provide transferable tools for understanding how authority and legitimacy coalesce under chronic instability. Future research should test these concepts comparatively across Yemen, Iraq, Palestine, and beyond, examining whether embedded sovereignty produces sustainable governance or entrenched hybrid paralysis. Such studies could also refine the relationship between legitimacy, endurance, and moral economy, moving the study of non-state actors beyond the binaries of proxy and autonomy. In this sense, the thesis contributes to a broader effort to bridge political sociology, international relations, and conflict studies through an integrated theory of hybrid order.

Methodological implications concern how scholars can rigorously investigate opaque or securitised environments without sacrificing ethical or analytical depth. The interpretive–realist architecture developed here demonstrates that abductive reasoning, process tracing, and ethnographic triangulation can generate causal insight even when direct observation is constrained. Future fieldwork on armed movements should adopt similar reflexive transparency, acknowledging positionality, evidentiary limits, and interpretive bias as integral to validity. Moreover, treating qualitative data as theory-bearing rather than merely illustrative enables researchers to maintain explanatory precision while preserving the human complexity of conflict. This thesis thus offers a replicable model for integrating ethnographic sensitivity with causal explanation, relevant not only to the study of resistance movements but to any inquiry into governance under constraint.

Considerable academic and specialist knowledge now exists concerning Hezbollah's organisational structure, social functions and embedded relationship with its constituency. Yet policy decisions concerning sanctions, targeted killings and military intervention are frequently shaped by immediate political imperatives, alliance commitments and domestic pressures rather than by sustained analysis of how hybrid actors derive legitimacy and regenerate after coercion. The findings of this thesis suggest that such measures may inflict substantial material damage without eliminating the social and political conditions that sustain the targeted actor. They may also impose severe costs on civilian populations and deepen dependence on the organisations they are intended to weaken.

This thesis therefore speaks particularly to a new generation of decision-makers who may be prepared to reassess inherited policy assumptions. A more effective approach would begin by identifying and addressing the conditions that constitute Hezbollah's *raison d'être*, including occupation, insecurity, institutional weakness and inadequate social protection, rather than repeatedly applying coercive measures that leave those underlying conditions intact.

Collectively, these recommendations advance a pragmatic and ethically grounded approach to both analysis and practice. They propose that engagement with embedded actors should recognise legitimacy as a social resource and resilience as a form of political currency. For scholars, these recommendations call for frameworks that recognise endurance as a form of power and for methods that capture its lived, relational dimensions. For policymakers, they

underline that stability in fragmented states cannot be engineered through dominance but cultivated through inclusion and trust. The future of resistance without an axis will depend less on sanctions and the control of arms than on negotiating legitimacy. Understanding and addressing that reality is the essential step towards any durable peace.

This thesis has shown, through the interlinked mechanisms of embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience, and deterrence by narrative, why Hezbollah is undefeated and why the '*Axis of Resistance*' endures chiefly as a virtual deterrence alliance, sustained by legitimacy, adaptability, and meaning rather than by material parity.

Ultimately, the thesis concludes that Hezbollah cannot be defeated in the conventional sense because it is no longer merely a combatant but a social system. Its endurance represents both a failure of external strategy and evidence of the adaptive capacity of hybrid actors in fractured states. The implication is not that Hezbollah is invincible but that it has redefined what survival means: to exist as a structure of belonging rather than as a battlefield force. The enduring lesson of this research is that resilience, when socially embedded and ideologically coherent, becomes indistinguishable from sovereignty. This redefinition of resilience also transforms the meaning of deterrence, revealing how endurance itself functions as strategic credibility.

These conclusions must be read within the limitations established in Chapter 2. The thirty-six participants were selected purposively and the interview corpus was entirely male, limiting the study's capacity to examine women's experiences of Hezbollah's social and welfare institutions. Confidentiality protects participants and the researcher but restricts the disclosure necessary for independent verification of some internal accounts. Access to organisational knowledge was uneven, and no participant possessed complete knowledge of Hezbollah's structures or decisions.

The researcher's prolonged proximity to the subject created exceptional longitudinal access while also increasing the risk that familiarity, accumulated professional judgements or participants' own interpretations might shape the analysis. This risk was managed by maintaining a clear distinction between participant testimony, direct observation, professional knowledge and academically supportable inference. Interview accounts were not treated as factual merely because they originated from well-placed participants, but were compared with documentary evidence, established chronologies, public statements and other testimonies. Contradictory evidence and developments that challenged Hezbollah's own narratives, including intelligence penetration, leadership failure, military degradation and the limitations of the '*Axis of Resistance'*, were retained within the analysis rather than excluded. Process tracing, source differentiation, triangulation and abductive reassessment were therefore used to test interpretations against competing explanations and to prevent proximity from becoming uncritical identification with the research subject.

Finally, Hezbollah's particular history and social environment limit the automatic generalisation of these findings to other armed organisations. The three concepts should therefore be treated as propositions for comparative testing rather than universally applicable models.

The final reflection, therefore, returns to the opening methodological insight: that understanding Hezbollah requires examining how origins shape evolution. From its emergence amid occupation and deprivation, the movement constructed a logic of endurance

that would outlive the alliances and conflicts that gave rise to it. Forty years later, that logic remains intact, manifested in institutions, rituals, and narratives that transform survival into legitimacy. In a region where regimes rise and fall, Hezbollah endures not because it has conquered but because it has learned to persist.

In this new era of embedded resistance, resilience has become the ultimate form of power. It is a power not of domination but of continuity, a capacity to endure, to adapt, and to remain when all else collapses. Through the integration of methodological transparency, longitudinal evidence, and original field-based insight, this thesis has sought to capture that transformation: how a movement born of occupation and resistance became a structure of governance, how endurance replaced victory as the measure of strength, and how the impossibility of defeating Hezbollah reveals the more profound truth that, in hybrid warfare, the terrain of power is no longer material but human.

Appendices

The three appendices that follow form an integral part of the thesis. They are not supplementary in the narrow sense but extend the analytical and evidential depth of the main chapters. The thirty six confidential interview records analysed and presented across the appendices constitute a small purposive sample selected from thousands of formal interviews and informal conversations conducted during the author's four decades of professional work as a war journalist. This sustained engagement produced exceptional access to Hezbollah across different periods of its development and at multiple levels of the organisation. It extended beyond figures associated with its political and social activities under the Executive Council to members of the Jihadi Council and commanders occupying different levels of responsibility within Hezbollah's military structure. The thirty six records were selected for their direct relevance to the research question, their evidential contribution to the thesis and their capacity to illuminate ideological, political, social, organisational and military developments between 1985 and 2025.

The thirty six numbered entries represent separate interview records or encounters, rather than thirty six distinct individuals. Some individuals provided testimony on more than one occasion. The precise number of individuals is not disclosed because linking recurring testimony to particular interlocutors would increase the risk of deductive identification.

Together, the appendices document the methodology through which confidential testimony was gathered, the coding process that transformed selected interview material into analysable themes and the cumulative methodological architecture connecting the empirical chapters to the overarching analytical framework. Read in sequence, they provide both a longitudinal perspective on Hezbollah's evolution and a transparent account of how theory, evidence and interpretation were integrated across four decades of observation and analysis. What emerges is not merely a repository of testimony but a structured mosaic of lived voices, systematically organised and methodologically contextualised. Appendix A establishes the methodological foundations of the interview corpus; Appendix B presents the coding framework and thematic analysis; Appendix C contains thirty six numbered anonymised interview records documenting encounters conducted between 1985 and 2025.

Because recording devices and visible note taking were generally incompatible with the security conditions surrounding these confidential encounters and the comfort of the sources, the selected records were reconstructed in writing following the dialogues and should not be understood as audio or video derived verbatim transcripts. Their preparation and evidentiary status are explained more fully in Appendices A and C.

Appendix A: Methodology for Confidential Interviews (1985–2025)
Appendix B: Coding Framework and Thematic Analysis (1985–2025)
Appendix C: Confidential Interviews with Hezbollah Figures (1985–2025)

Appendix A: Methodology for Confidential Interviews (1985–2025)

This appendix explains the methodology underpinning the purposive selection and use of thirty six anonymised interview records drawn from thousands of formal interviews and informal conversations conducted between 1985 and 2025. These encounters involved Hezbollah affiliated figures, clerics, senior cadres and military commanders in Lebanon,

Syria, Iraq and, on some occasions, Iran. The inclusion of the selected records serves two principal purposes.

First, they provide an important empirical foundation for the thesis. Some scholars have obtained access to members of Hezbollah's political structures, but much of the scholarly and policy literature has necessarily relied upon external observation, archival sources, open source material, declassified intelligence records and secondary reporting. By contrast, the selected interview records provide rare primary source insights derived from the author's sustained access to actors situated at different levels of Hezbollah's political, religious, social and military structures. They illuminate the organisation's ideological, organisational, political and military development across four decades and contribute directly to the thesis's explanation of how and why Hezbollah remained undefeated.

Second, their inclusion ensures methodological and ethical transparency. The interlocutors were associated with a highly secretive and security conscious organisation and spoke in circumstances involving varying degrees of personal and operational sensitivity. Their testimony must therefore be anonymised and sufficiently contextualised to establish its evidential relevance while protecting the identities and safety of the individuals concerned. This approach reflects the ethical and methodological challenges of conducting and presenting research in conflict environments and among secretive non state actors (Nordstrom and Robben, 1996; Wood, 2006).

Fieldwork History and Access

The selected interview records emerged from the author's parallel trajectory as a war correspondent and researcher. This engagement with Hezbollah began in 1985, when the author was present at the organisation's public announcement of its Open Letter at the Husayniyya al Shiyah in Beirut. Access subsequently developed through four decades of reporting from conflict zones and extended periods of residence and professional activity in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran, as well as other Middle Eastern states. It was neither formally granted by the organisation nor continuously available. Rather, it was established incrementally through repeated encounters, professional credibility, sustained presence and relationships of trust developed under changing political and security conditions.

Establishing and maintaining these relationships was particularly challenging within Hezbollah's security conscious political, clerical and military structures. Over time, some interlocutors assumed positions of considerable responsibility, including:

• Members of the Jihadi Council;

• clerical founders and senior religious authorities;

• advisers to the Secretary General;

• heads of units (*wahda*) and operational or geographical dossiers (*malaf*) in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria;

• commanders holding different levels of responsibility within Hezbollah's military structure.

These relationships were sustained and, when circumstances permitted, renewed during periods of relative calm, armed conflict, political crisis and major organisational change. Follow up encounters made it possible to clarify earlier testimony, assess developments across time and examine how interlocutors interpreted changing events and policy decisions. The author's wider professional experience included direct reporting during major periods of war and transformation in Lebanon, Bosnia, Iraq, Libya and Syria. In relation to Hezbollah specifically, sustained presence during Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, the 2006 war, the regional conflicts between 2013 and 2020 and the confrontation of 2023 to 2025 enabled direct observation of events and, when access was possible, further confidential dialogues.

Access nevertheless remained conditional, uneven and subject to the organisation's security requirements and the willingness of individual interlocutors to engage. It should therefore not be understood as unrestricted institutional access, but as sustained and exceptional access to individuals situated at different levels of Hezbollah's political, religious and military structures. Its principal methodological value lies in the longitudinal accumulation of testimony, observation and contextual knowledge across four decades, an empirical depth rarely available in academic research on a secretive non state organisation.

Data Collection Practices

The encounters generally took the form of semi structured dialogues guided by open ended questions, although their degree of formality varied according to the circumstances, the interlocutor and the sensitivity of the subject. Recording devices and visible note taking were generally incompatible with the security conditions of these encounters and could have inhibited the willingness of sources to speak freely. No audio or video recordings were therefore made. After each dialogue, the author produced a detailed written account of its content, normally immediately afterwards or as soon as circumstances permitted. Where brief contemporaneous fieldnotes were possible, these were incorporated into the fuller written account.

The resulting documents are described throughout the thesis as reconstructed interview records. They are not audio derived verbatim transcripts. They preserve, as accurately as possible, the substance, sequence and, where confidently recalled, distinctive wording of the interlocutors' accounts. Quotations reproduced in Appendix C and in the main chapters are drawn from these contemporaneous written reconstructions. Quotation marks indicate wording retained in the written record rather than wording subsequently transcribed from an audio recording. Where exact phrasing could not be recalled with sufficient confidence, the material was synthesised or paraphrased rather than presented as a direct quotation.

In accordance with the terms agreed with the sources, selected information from some encounters was subsequently used in journalistic articles. Other material remained confidential and contributed to the author's background knowledge, media interviews, conference contributions and continuing interpretation of events. Only material whose academic use was compatible with the terms under which it had originally been provided was included in this thesis. Where an interlocutor had explicitly requested that particular information should remain unpublished, that commitment was respected. Inclusion in the thesis did not override prior confidentiality commitments, and no material was selected if its publication could reveal the identity of a source or disclose operationally sensitive information.

The interlocutors were not asked to endorse the author's analysis, and inclusion of their testimony does not imply that they would necessarily agree with the interpretations or conclusions developed in this thesis. Responsibility for selecting, contextualising and analysing the material rests with the author. This exercise of scholarly judgement remained subject to the confidentiality commitments made to sources, the obligation to prevent deductive identification and the ethical requirement to avoid foreseeable harm.

The frequency of encounters varied considerably. During periods of relative calm, contacts occurred intermittently, while during wars and major political crises informal conversations could take place weekly or, in exceptional circumstances, daily. The thirty six records selected for academic analysis represent only a small purposive sample drawn from the thousands of formal interviews and informal conversations conducted during the author's professional career. They were chosen because of their relevance to the central research question, their capacity to illuminate change across time and their contribution to the ideological, organisational, political, social and military themes examined in the thesis.

All testimony was initially treated as situated evidence rather than accepted as fact solely on the authority of the interlocutor. Accounts were assessed through comparison with contemporaneous field observations, other interviews, independent journalism, subsequent events and, where available, official documents and reports. Claims that could not be independently substantiated are identified as the perspectives or interpretations of the interlocutors rather than presented as verified facts. The longitudinal character of the research also permitted the author to evaluate the reliability of particular sources across time by assessing their demonstrated access to information and comparing their accounts with later developments and independently established evidence.

Particular care was taken not to reproduce organisational narratives uncritically. Testimony was examined in relation to the interlocutor's position, possible institutional interests, the circumstances in which the dialogue occurred and the wider political and military context. Confidential testimony was therefore used neither as self validating evidence nor as a substitute for independent analysis, but as one component of the thesis's broader process of triangulation.

Anonymisation and Confidentiality

The sensitivity of the material was addressed through careful anonymisation. Interlocutors are identified only by the functional role they occupied at the relevant time, for example, Head of Intelligence Unit, 2020. Names, family relationships, precise locations and other direct personal identifiers are withheld. This protection is particularly important because the interlocutors belong, or previously belonged, to a highly security conscious organisation in which unauthorised disclosure may carry personal or professional consequences. The sustained access underpinning this research depended upon relationships developed through years of contact and mutual trust. Preserving that trust required protecting the identities of interlocutors and ensuring that sensitive information was not published in the form in which it was originally communicated.

Because Hezbollah operates through increasingly compartmentalised structures, access to certain information may itself narrow the range of possible sources. The risk of deductive identification was therefore assessed not only through conventional personal identifiers but also through the specificity and provenance of the information disclosed. The selection of

material and the level of detail presented were calibrated to preserve analytical value while withholding information whose content, context or combination could enable knowledgeable insiders to identify an interlocutor. This judgement reflects the author's continuing obligations to protect confidential sources as both a journalist and a researcher.

The chronologies presented in the interview records reflect the actual sequence and historical setting of events, but precise dates and locations have sometimes been withheld or generalised where their disclosure could facilitate identification. This precaution became increasingly important as Hezbollah's internal structures grew more compartmentalised following the 2006 war and as the organisation intensified its vigilance concerning unauthorised disclosure after the 2024 war.

Where distinctive wording could expose an interlocutor, testimony was synthesised while preserving its substantive meaning. Details that were not analytically necessary were omitted, and related information was sometimes presented at a higher level of generality. These measures were intended to retain the evidential value and accuracy of the material while reducing the possibility of deductive identification. This approach reflects recognised anonymisation practices in research involving armed and clandestine organisations (Malejacq, 2020).

The reconstructed interview records and confidential testimony were not treated as standalone proof or as isolated anecdotes. They were contextualised and incorporated into the broader analytical framework of the thesis, alongside secondary literature, contemporaneous reporting, documentary material and direct field observation. Their evidential value therefore rests not solely upon the authority of individual interlocutors but upon triangulation, longitudinal comparison and their relationship to the wider body of evidence examined in the thesis (Malthaner, 2014).

Limitations and Scholarly Contribution

The selected interview corpus is subject to several inherent limitations. Hezbollah is a clandestine and highly security conscious organisation, and access to its members was necessarily selective, conditional and shaped by relationships of trust, changing circumstances and the wider political and military context. The thirty six records therefore cannot be regarded as a representative sample of the organisation as a whole. Nor do they provide equal coverage of every period, institutional structure or category of participant.

The corpus also reflects the institutional positions and perspectives of those who agreed to engage. Interlocutors sometimes articulated ideological, political or strategic narratives consistent with their organisational roles. Their accounts were therefore examined critically rather than accepted at face value. Particular attention was given to the circumstances of each encounter, the interlocutor's position, possible institutional interests and the extent to which individual claims corresponded with other testimony, direct observation, documentary evidence and subsequent developments.

The composition of the corpus presents an additional limitation. The selected corpus is entirely male and predominantly represents interlocutors who were between approximately thirty and sixty years of age at the time of the relevant encounters. This reflects the author's access to individuals occupying political, clerical and military positions during the period examined, particularly within structures in which senior decision-making and military

responsibilities were predominantly held by men. Women were active within Hezbollah's social, educational and welfare institutions, but were not represented among the selected interlocutors. The corpus therefore cannot illuminate women's experiences of the organisation, their perspectives on resistance or their contribution to Hezbollah's social embeddedness with comparable depth.

The author's established professional identity also influenced the research encounter. Four decades of work as a war correspondent facilitated access, continuity and a degree of trust rarely available to external researchers. At the same time, familiarity with particular individuals, environments and organisational narratives could affect both the disclosures made by interlocutors and the author's interpretation of them. Reflexive attention was therefore given to the dual position of journalist and researcher, including the possibility that professional familiarity could produce assumptions requiring critical examination. Triangulation, longitudinal comparison and the distinction between interlocutors' claims and independently established findings were used to mitigate, although not eliminate, these limitations.

These constraints do not invalidate the evidential contribution of the corpus. Rather, they define the conditions under which the material should be interpreted. The distinctive value of the records lies in their longitudinal scope, the range of organisational levels represented and the author's sustained access to political, religious and military actors over four decades. They provide rare primary source insight into Hezbollah's emergence, ideological development, organisational adaptation, political participation, military evolution and responses to successive periods of conflict and pressure.

Taken together, the selected records contribute to the thesis by illuminating how interlocutors understood the relationship among armed capability, ideology, political participation, social embeddedness and organisational endurance. They also reveal changes, internal reassessments and differing perspectives that cannot be reduced to a single official narrative. Their contribution lies not in offering a complete or unmediated account of Hezbollah, but in providing a carefully contextualised body of testimony that, when triangulated with the thesis's wider evidence, helps explain how and why the organisation remained strategically undefeated throughout the period examined.

Appendix B: Coding Framework and Thematic Analysis (1985–2025)

Introduction and Rationale

This appendix presents the coding framework and thematic analysis applied to the thirty six anonymised reconstructed interview records selected from encounters conducted with Hezbollah affiliated figures between 1985 and 2025. The records span the organisation's formative period, its successive confrontations with Israel, its participation in Lebanese politics, its regional interventions in Syria and Iraq and its responses to the conflicts of 2023 to 2025.

As explained in Appendix A, recording devices and visible note taking were generally incompatible with the security conditions surrounding these confidential encounters. No audio or video recordings were made. The selected material derives from detailed written accounts produced after the dialogues, normally immediately afterwards or as soon as circumstances permitted, supplemented where possible by brief contemporaneous fieldnotes. These documents are therefore treated as reconstructed interview records rather than audio derived verbatim transcripts.

A systematic coding process was applied to transform the selected records into analysable qualitative material. This allowed recurring themes to be identified across different periods and organisational roles, continuities and changes to be traced longitudinally and individual accounts to be compared with other testimony and with the wider evidential foundation of the thesis.

The coding process served two principal purposes:

1. Methodological rigour, by demonstrating that the selected testimony was systematically categorised, compared and critically assessed rather than presented as a collection of isolated accounts (Malthaner, 2014; Wood, 2003).
2. Analytical transparency, by enabling readers to understand how the reconstructed interview records were integrated into the thesis's broader analytical framework, consistent with established approaches to research involving armed groups and conflict environments (Nordstrom and Robben, 1996).

Coding Categories and Themes

The coding framework combined inductive and deductive elements. Initial codes were developed through repeated reading of the reconstructed interview records and the identification of recurring themes, concepts and patterns across the corpus. These categories were subsequently refined in relation to the central research question, the three research objectives and the conceptual framework developed in the thesis. This combined approach allowed the analysis to remain grounded in the testimony while also examining its relevance to the explanatory claims concerning Hezbollah's endurance.

Code	Theme	Illustrative focus within the records	Principal periods represented
DET	Deterrence Doctrine	Asymmetrical warfare, missile capability, subterranean warfare, controlled escalation and rules of engagement with Israel	1990s to 2025
SOC	Social Embeddedness	Welfare provision, communal identity, community protection, education, healthcare and social trust	1985 to 2025
IDEO	Ideological Legitimacy	*Wilāyat al faqīh*, resistance as a religious duty, martyrdom, sacrifice and interpretations of victory and defeat	1985 to 2025
ORG	Organisational Adaptability	Evolution of organisational structures, decentralisation, institutional learning, leadership succession and continuity following assassinations	1990s to 2025
ALLI	External Alliances	Relations with Iran, Syria, Iraqi armed groups and Ansar Allah, including differing interpretations of the *Axis of Resistance*	1985 to 2025
DOM	Domestic Lebanese Politics	Sectarian relations, political participation, relations with Lebanese institutions, autonomous agency and parallel forms of authority	1990s to 2025
MIL	Military Evolution	Guerrilla warfare, missile development, drones, intelligence capabilities and operational lessons from Lebanon, Syria and Iraq	1985 to 2025
RISK	Costs and Contradictions	Regional overstretch, institutional tensions, socioeconomic pressure, generational change and community fatigue	2013 to 2025

The codes were not treated as mutually exclusive. Individual passages could receive more than one code where the testimony connected several dimensions of Hezbollah's development. For example, an account of welfare provision and community protection could be coded under both SOC and DOM when it also illuminated Hezbollah's relationship with Lebanese institutions. Similarly, testimony concerning missile development could be coded under both MIL and DET where military capability was explicitly connected to deterrence. This overlapping application helped preserve the relationships among ideological, social, political, organisational and military processes rather than treating them as analytically isolated.

The temporal categories indicate the principal periods represented within the selected records rather than precise measurements of frequency. Because the corpus was purposively selected and unevenly distributed across four decades, the table should not be interpreted as a quantitative comparison of thematic prevalence. Its purpose is to show the historical range within which each theme was most clearly represented and analytically relevant.

Coding Methodology

The coding process was conducted manually through repeated reading and comparison of the thirty six reconstructed interview records. Each record was read in full, with attention to its historical context and to recurring themes, differences and contradictions. Relevant passages were then assigned one or more of the eight thematic codes. The classifications were reviewed across different periods and organisational roles to identify continuity, adaptation and changes in interpretation.

The coded material informed the analysis of ideological formation in Chapter 3, political and institutional participation in Chapter 5, regional military expansion in Chapter 6 and strategic resilience and endurance in Chapters 7 to 10. It was connected to the thesis's three explanatory concepts: embedded sovereignty, deterrence by resilience and deterrence by narrative. Coding organised and facilitated comparison of the testimony, but did not establish the factual accuracy of an interlocutor's account. Claims remained subject to the triangulation procedures described in Chapter 2 and Appendix A (Wood, 2006; Fujii, 2010).

Expanded Coding Application

The following extracts illustrate how passages from the reconstructed interview records were coded and analysed. They represent a cross-section of interlocutors across different periods, organisational roles and contexts. As these records were reconstructed from detailed written accounts rather than audio recordings, the extracts preserve the substance and formulation recorded by the author but should not be understood as audio derived verbatim quotations.

Deterrence Doctrine (DET)

1. Head of Unit – Southern Front, 2007:
   "When we fire one rocket or precision missile and Israel responds with a hundred bombs, this is not imbalance. It is proof they cannot silence us. It shows they can feel the same pain we feel, and it exposes the long-promised security of the Israeli government as a flaw."
   • Codes: DET, IDEO
2. Jihadi Council Member – Beirut, 2006:
   "Our red line was clear: if they struck Beirut, we would strike Haifa and beyond, even Tel Aviv. Hezbollah had acquired M110 missiles with an accuracy of approximately 50 metres and sufficient range to reach Tel Aviv. The authority to use them lay solely with the political leadership, in this case with Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah himself. This balance of deterrence made Israel hesitant and provided a measure of protection for both the leadership and the civilians who had fled Beirut's southern suburbs, allowing the leadership to operate from a safer area. When we used an anti ship missile against an Israeli vessel, Israel suddenly understood that its intelligence had no real grasp of Hezbollah's arsenal. That strike lent credibility to Sayyed Nasrallah's threats and contributed first to sidelining the Israeli Navy and subsequently contributed to bringing the war to an end."
   • Codes: DET, MIL
3. Missile Unit Commander – South Lebanon, 2014:
   "Deterrence is not only about range; it is also about accuracy. Hezbollah has obtained updated precision missiles with a margin of error as little as five metres, as well as anti-ship missiles capable of striking any energy platform in Israel. At times,

the leadership deliberately allowed Israeli drones to spot certain types of missiles before moving them into secure storage — a calculated show of strength meant as deterrence. It was a way of proving the credibility of Sayyed Hassan's words when he engages in psychological warfare: demonstrating the weapons without firing them, in order to prevent war."

• Codes: DET, MIL

4. Adviser – Gaza–Lebanon escalation, 2023:
"Hezbollah has watched closely what is happening in Gaza and the scale of destruction Israel is inflicting on the Palestinians. We know we cannot fight a similar war in Lebanon. Our Shia society could not survive devastation on that level (inflicted on Gaza), especially at a moment when the most powerful Western countries have given Benjamin Netanyahu a free hand — not only in Gaza but potentially on other fronts if Palestinian allies step in. This is not the time for an all-out confrontation with Israel.

Our strategy has been to draw part of the Israeli army northwards, forcing them to split their forces and easing the pressure on Gaza. That is why we deployed in the south of Lebanon with an offensive posture. But the military command was not initially prepared for a defensive fight, and this cost us dearly. Many men were lost before the plan was adjusted and other units stepped in, in a defensive position, to replace the Ridwan Special Forces."

• Codes: DET, RISK

5. Head of Units – Northern Front, 2025:
"We were fighting against drones that used artificial intelligence during the 2024 war *to hunt us down. On the front line, we were told never to stay in the same place for more than a day. No mobile phones were allowed, even if it meant risking our lives. After rain, we had to erase every footprint. In the houses we used, every window had to be left exactly as we found it, so nothing looked suspicious from the air. Israel has already hit all the (Hezbollah) warehouses it knew about, everything in its so-called bank of targets. What's left now are only the warehouses it has not yet discovered."*

"The fighters Israel is facing now are mostly the geography units — men who live in the south of Lebanon and know every hill, every path. It's not mainly the Ridwan Forces, the assault troops, trained for attack, not for holding ground against Israel. Yes, a few hundred Ridwan fighters are still in the south, but the main burden falls on the local units."

"When the pager attack struck, we had to send in specialised militants to replace those who were hit (removed from the battlefield because of permanent eye injuries. In Hezbollah, every member is trained to have a second speciality in case war demands it — a backup skill to take over when needed. Many units are still intact, but they've lost contact (during the 2024 war) with the new leadership after the assassinations of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah (Hezbollah's SG) and Sayyed Hachem Safieddine (head of Hezbollah's Executive Council and the presumed successor to the Secretary General). The old landline systems we used are silent now; Israel managed to compromise them and the contents of all warehouses established before 2024 were removed. Furthermore, those cameras, worth millions of dollars, provided Israeli intelligence with visual confirmation. We had underestimated the technology."

"Even security cameras had to be pulled out, even those not connected to the internet. Israel can switch on hidden features remotely and turn them online. Those million dollars' worth cameras – we ignored the technology - were offering Israeli intelligence visual confirmation, proving a target was boxed in, tied to a location and that's how they managed to locate several of their targets and assassinate them. That is the price of facing an enemy armed not only with bombs and drones, but with the most advanced technology in the world. It is also the cost of being led by a military command made up of an old guard, out of touch with the enemy's latest capabilities and who transformed Hezbollah into a centralised organisation. No intelligence counter-measures were prepared, and the price of that failure was paid in blood on the ground."

• Codes: MIL, ORG, RISK

Social Embeddedness (SOC)

1. **Cleric – South Lebanon, 1987:**
   "The state never came here. When we opened clinics and schools, people saw us as their hope."
   • Codes: SOC, DOM
2. **Community Worker – Bekaa, 1993:**
   "Every child who studies in our schools grows up seeing resistance as protection. It is important to implant an ideology to motivate students."
   • Codes: SOC, IDEO
3. **Social Services Officer – Dahiya, 2007:**
   "After the war, we rebuilt 20,000 homes. The people felt indebted and saw who delivered."
   • Codes: SOC, DOM
4. **Cleric – Nabatiyeh, 2019:**
   "Even those who criticise us politically still line up at our clinics. That is the contradiction of Lebanon. The Americans tried to convince people that Hezbollah was to blame for the (2019) financial crisis, but they failed. Everyone knew the collapse of the local currency and the flight of capital belonged to the wealthy and the political elite who protected them. In the end, people may argue about politics, but when they are sick or in need, they turn to whoever can actually provide — and that is why our institutions endure."
   • Codes: SOC, DOM
5. **Community Liaison – Bekaa Valley, 2025:**
   "The Bekaa has never been hit and destroyed in past wars the way it has been this time (2024 war). Prior to 2023, Hezbollah's leadership thought it wise to expand the circle of warehouses, moving long-range missiles away from the populated south and storing them here, since their range goes beyond 400 kilometres. But that decision brought an unprecedented and unexpected retaliation. Families in the Bekaa still stand behind us because they know we can rebuild their homes, and because surrender has never been an option. In the end, what binds us together is the belief that dignity is worth more than safety, and that is why people endure even under these ruins."
   • Codes: SOC, RISK

Ideological Legitimacy (IDEO)

1. **Founding Cleric – 1985:**
   "We are not a party; we are an obligation. Resistance is prayer, jihad, and survival at once."
   • Codes: IDEO, SOC
2. **Head of Religious Education – 1990s:**
   "Wilāyat al faqīh is our compass. Without it, we are like a ship without a captain. However, Shia believers may choose their own spiritual authority."
   Codes: IDEO
3. **Adviser– 2006 War:**
   "Martyrdom is not death; it is the ultimate sacrifice and a continuity to a better life. Every martyr gives birth to another ten volunteers recruited."
   • Codes: IDEO, ORG
4. **Senior Cleric – Syria intervention, 2013:**
   "Defending the shrine of Sayyeda Zaynab was not politics. It was faith translated into action. Hezbollah's fighters and their families need a legitimate religious cause with which they can identify, and for which they are prepared to fight and perhaps die."
   • Codes: IDEO, ALLI
5. **Adviser to the Secretary General – 2023:**
   "Ideology alone cannot feed a family, but without ideology, a family will not accept sacrifice."
   • Codes: IDEO, SOC

Organisational Adaptability (ORG)

1. **Head of Unit – 2002:**
   "We are learning a great deal from the Israeli special forces operating against us in the south. We study their movements, and we study how they work with their collaborators in the villages. Every time they succeed in killing one of our commanders, we split the responsibilities, divide the file. Decentralisation is survival. Still, Hezbollah in the Bekaa, in Beirut, and in the south must remain under one command, not scattered with different leaders making different decisions. The loss of Sayyed Abbas showed us how fragile leadership can be — and how essential it is to build a structure that can survive even when the head is struck down."
   • Codes: ORG, MIL
2. **Member of Jihadi Council – 2007:**
   "Surviving the 2006 war and preventing Israel from achieving its goal of destroying Hezbollah is already a victory. The resistance never expected to defeat Israel outright on the battlefield. Victory comes by points, over the long term, by learning from our mistakes, expanding our military units, and diversifying leadership, organisation, and responsibilities. The lesson of 2006 is clear: strength is not only in weapons but in how we adapt, and every sacrifice must be turned into experience for the future."
   • Codes: ORG, MIL
3. **Head of Iraq Dossier – 2015:**
   "It is vital to rebuild the Iraqi resistance and provide ideological training for the Hashd al-Shaabi so they can fight ISIS effectively. The Iraqi Army showed itself incapable of confronting an organisation built on ideology, and we had to stop ISIS at the gates of Baghdad. That is why dozens of Hezbollah officers were sent to train the resistance. Iraq cannot be allowed to fall, no matter the cost. If Baghdad had

collapsed, the whole region would have been swallowed by chaos — and we would have paid the price in Lebanon as well."
• Codes: ORG, ALLI

4. **Adviser – 2020:**
"We used to speak of head or vice head of units, now we speak of dossiers. But the principle is the same: divide to endure."
• Codes: ORG
5. **Member of Jihadi Council – 2024:**
"Our military intelligence failed to evaluate the enemy's capabilities, and we paid the price when they succeeded in striking our chain of command. This happened because we stopped behaving like a resistance and began to resemble a regular army. No army in the Middle East can hope to confront Israel head-on, especially when it is backed by the United States and the Western coalition. We need to reorganise our chain of command to avoid the shocking vacuum that was created when our top leaders were assassinated one after another. The lesson is clear: survival lies not in mimicking conventional armies, but in returning to the flexibility of resistance — because in this region, rigidity invites defeat."
• Codes: ORG, MIL, RISK

External Alliances (ALLI)

1. **Front Commander – Syria, 2013:**
"Iran gives us guidance, Syria gives us passage and depth. Without both, we are weaker, but never blind or crippled."
• Codes: ALLI, ORG
2. **Head of Iraq Dossier – 2015:**
"The Iraqi brothers respected us, but they are not us. We gave advice and helped them shape a government, down to many of its details. But in the end, Iraq must remain theirs, not ours. Our role is to guide, to strengthen, and to make sure that resistance takes root, not to replace it. That balance is what keeps our alliances alive, because every country in this region has its own path, even when the struggle is shared."
• Codes: ALLI, RISK
3. **Adviser – 2019:**
"The 'Axis' exists, but it is not one hand. Everyone moves for their own survival."
• Codes: ALLI, IDEO
4. **Adviser to the Secretary General – 2024:**
"Iran does not give us orders — but we listen, and they listen to us. This is respect, not subordination. Sayyed Hassan holds a highly prestigious place in the heart of Wali al-Faqih, Sayyed Ali Khamenei. Any request or plan presented by Sayyed Nasrallah is approved by Sayyed Khamenei himself. This relationship is built on trust: guidance flows in both directions, and that is why the bond endures. It is not chains of command that keep us together, but shared conviction."
• Codes: ALLI, IDEO

Domestic Lebanese Politics (DOM)

1. **Political Bureau Member – 1992:**
"We did not enter parliament to abandon the resistance. We entered to shield it. The decision to join parliament was debated at length, and the Shura agreed that we should avoid participating in government, which was already seen as corrupt.

Hezbollah had no desire to be part of that. In politics, our role was to protect the resistance, not to drown in the system's failures."
• Codes: DOM, ORG

2. **Community Organiser – 2000:**
"Liberation of the South gave us legitimacy. It showed that the resistance, not the state, was capable of freeing Lebanese land from occupation. Israel still held on to many positions in the south, but in doing so it gave Hezbollah legitimacy to continue as an armed non-state actor and a local resistance. In the end, every occupation outpost left standing became proof that our mission was not finished, and that our arms still had a purpose."
• Codes: DOM, SOC
3. **Parliamentarian – 2005:**
"Hezbollah decided to join the government once Syria left Lebanon. It became essential to have ministers inside so that no decision could be taken without our knowledge. Our presence was necessary — as resistance, in parliament, and in government. But from the very start we knew the danger. By sitting in the cabinet, we were entering the same arena that had corrupted every other party. The risk was clear: to protect the resistance while standing shoulder to shoulder with those who had bankrupted the state. Joining gave us influence, but it also tied us to a collapsing system, and that stain is something we have never been able to fully wash away."
• Codes: DOM, RISK
4. **Adviser – 2008 Crisis:**
"When they tried to dismantle our communication system, we showed them we could take Beirut in hours. That order was not Lebanese; it came from Washington and Tel Aviv, pushing their allies to expose Hezbollah's private landline. Command, control and communication are the backbone of any force. Remove them and the whole structure collapses."

"In 2008 we made it clear: touching that network was a red line. Within hours we held the capital, not to seize power but to prove that resistance cannot be broken by stripping away its tools. For us, communication is not a technical detail — it is survival itself. That day sent a message to friend and foe alike: if you move to sever our spine, we will move to show you that we still stand."
• Codes: DOM, DET

5. **Adviser – Beirut, 2025:**
"The Maronites have always brought foreign intervention into Lebanon — first calling in the French, then the Americans, and in the 1980s even allying with Israel. Today they have joined with the Sunnis, under Saudi pressure, to try to limit Hezbollah, cut Iran's allies, and reduce our influence. The president and prime minister talk of sovereignty, but when they call for our disarmament, what they really mean is Shia disempowerment. We cannot allow that. Even if it means facing the choice of civil war, our determination to survive leaves us no other option. For us, disarmament is not politics — it is existence."
• Codes: DOM, IDEO, RISK

Military Evolution (MIL)

1. **Head of Unit – 1980s:**
"At first, it was rifles and bombs. Nothing more. But the occupation taught us

patience."
• Codes: MIL, IDEO

2. **Missile Specialist – 1990s:**
"Each decade, the rockets improved. From Katyusha to missiles — each step made them think twice. Israel will regret occupying Lebanon."
• Codes: MIL, DET
3. **Commander – 2006 War:**
"Our bunkers were not only protection; they were factories of continuity. Even under the heaviest bombing, we launched. But the war taught us hard lessons, and we now have a new organisational plan. Israel managed to destroy most of our missile units, and that showed us the gaps. We need more advanced weapons, tighter compartmentalisation of units, and above all, deterrent capabilities that make Israel think twice before striking. Continuity alone is not enough, the next phase must be about balance, and balance comes from deterrence."
• Codes: DET, MIL, ORG
4. **Drone Unit Commander – 2023:**
"A drone that costs us $2,000 makes them spend millions. This is how the weak exhaust the strong's finances."
• Codes: MIL, RISK

Costs and Contradictions (RISK)

1. **Head of Dossier – Syria, 2013:**
"In Qusayr, we lost more men than we expected. It was a mistake to aim for a quick victory, to rush forward as if speed would guarantee success, and even to show off our strength. We could have taken more time, advanced more carefully, and saved lives. But it was not all negative. The enemy saw how determined we are, and how far we are willing to fight to reach our objective. Every loss carried a message: that our commitment does not break under pressure, even when the price is heavy. What we gained was credibility: credibility with our allies, who saw that we would not retreat, and credibility with our enemies, who learned that even under heavy fire we do not let go of our objectives. But the truth remains — the cost was heavier than it should have been, and it taught us that victory without calculation can turn into a burden."

Context: The battle of Qusayr (May–June 2013) marked Hezbollah's first large-scale and overt intervention in Syria, fighting alongside the Syrian Arab Army against opposition forces. The victory was decisive but came at a high human cost, exposing Hezbollah's regional role to the world. It demonstrated Hezbollah's capacity to fight as an expeditionary force, but also revealed the risks of overextension, the weight of casualties, and the contradiction of defending a regime in Damascus while claiming to be a Lebanese resistance.
• Codes: IDEO, MIL, RISK

2. **Political Insider – 2019:**
"Corruption has touched even our own people. Resistance cannot excuse everything. Sayyed Hassan himself has been raising the alarm inside the movement. After the 2006 war, Iran's generosity opened the floodgates — money was everywhere. Then came the Syrian war, and the budget grew even more, beyond control. Many top commanders began living with several wives, several homes, and far too much money. These things may look like privilege, but for us they are deadly. They weaken

discipline, they compromise secrecy, and in the end they put our security at risk. A resistance can survive under fire, but not if it rots from within."
• Codes: RISK, ORG

3. **Adviser – 2025:**
"We face a paradox. The stronger we grow militarily, the more fragile we become. Resistance is not about amassing a huge number of fighters. Haj Imad used to remind us: Hezbollah does not need to become an army. Tens of thousands of men are not an advantage if they make us easier to see, easier to target, easier for Israel to penetrate. The bigger we look, the more vulnerable we become. True strength is not numbers, it is the ability to stay invisible, to remain mobile, and to fight on our own terms. That is the balance we are in danger of losing."
• Codes: RISK, ORG

Reflections on Coding

The coding analysis highlights three enduring patterns across four decades of Hezbollah's evolution:

- **Continuity** – Ideological legitimacy and community trust consistently underpin the organisation's resilience.
- **Adaptation** – Structural flexibility, from units to dossiers, has allowed the movement to withstand leadership losses and external shocks (Malejacq, 2020).
- **Restraint** – Even while expanding regionally, interlocutors repeatedly emphasised Lebanon as the central arena, particularly when overstretch became apparent.

Analytical Value

By systematically coding testimonies across four decades, this appendix follows Hezbollah's shifting strategies, its internal debates, and the ways it has adapted under pressure. These accounts — drawn from locations under bombardment, from offices in Beirut, and from quiet conversations in the south of Lebanon — open a window rarely available to outside observers.

Anonymisation here is not a technical step but a matter of survival and continuity. In a field where a single phrase can put someone at risk, protecting interlocutors was both an ethical duty and the price of access (Nordstrom and Robben, 1996; Wood, 2006). By coding testimonies according to role and theme rather than by name, this appendix preserves trust while still allowing the substance of those voices to come through.

Taken together, the coded corpus strengthens the central claim of the thesis: Hezbollah's endurance cannot be explained by its weapons alone. It rests on the convergence of ideological legitimacy, the loyalty of its social base, the flexibility of its organisation, and the chronic weakness of the Lebanese state.

In this sense, Appendix B is more than supporting evidence. It is a structured lens into the lived dynamics of resistance — showing how, from battlefield losses to moments of political calculation, Hezbollah has bent without breaking, and how the movement has continued to endure in the face of immense pressures.

The next appendix presents the testimony underlying these codes through thirty six numbered anonymised interview records documenting selected encounters across four decades of conflict and transformation.

Appendix C: Confidential Interviews with Hezbollah Figures (1985–2025)

This appendix brings together thirty six numbered anonymised interview records reconstructed from the author's encounters with Hezbollah figures over four decades, from the movement's emergence in 1985 to the conflicts of 2023 to 2025. The entries represent a small purposive sample selected from a much larger body of formal interviews and informal conversations accumulated during this period. Some individuals provided testimony on more than one occasion; the entries therefore document separate encounters rather than thirty six distinct individuals. The precise number of individuals is not disclosed because linking recurring testimony to particular interlocutors would increase the risk of deductive identification. The records were selected for their analytical value and their capacity to illuminate continuity, rupture and adaptation within Hezbollah's evolving trajectory.

The interviews are anonymised not by choice but by necessity. Hezbollah remains a highly secretive organisation, and public identification would endanger interlocutors and their families. For this reason, the record refers to individuals only by their functional role — Head of Unit, Adviser to the Secretary General, Cleric and Founder, or Head of Iraq Dossier — rather than by personal names.

The material stems from the author's continuous and direct presence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and occasionally Iran, as a journalist, war correspondent and analyst. This positioning provided access to Hezbollah's inner circles during moments of both crisis and routine: the announcement of the group's creation in 1985, the years of Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon, the 2006 July War, its interventions in Syria and Iraq, and the ongoing confrontations with Israel. Over time, trust was built not through formal appointments but through lived proximity — conversations held in apartments, at funerals, in clerical gatherings, offices or during field visits to frontlines.

The methodology has been consistent across the decades. These were semi-structured conversations — open-ended enough to capture unprompted reflection, but focused enough to draw out perspectives on strategy, ideology, and survival. Notes were taken during or immediately after encounters, supplemented by regular follow-up interviews to test continuity and change in narratives. Wherever possible, testimonies have been triangulated against publicly available material, independent reporting, and the established chronology of events. This strengthens reliability while preserving the integrity of confidential voices.

The purpose of including this appendix is threefold. First, it grounds the thesis empirically. Too often, academic work on Hezbollah relies heavily on secondary sources, think-tank reports, or adversarial perspectives; here, evidence comes directly from individuals within the movement rather than from observers close to it, although their identities remain anonymised. Second, it allows a longitudinal perspective: the words of founding clerics in 1985 sit alongside those of present-day commanders, showing both persistence and adaptation. Third, it highlights the lived complexity of Hezbollah as both a military actor and a socio-political structure. Through these testimonies, one sees not a faceless organisation but individuals grappling with questions of survival, legitimacy, and strategy in volatile circumstances.

Taken together, the selected entries do not produce a single seamless narrative. Instead, they form a mosaic — fragments shaped by time, role, and circumstance. Some reflect confidence and ideological certainty; others reveal doubt, fatigue and frustration, but also determination. Yet their cumulative weight underscores the central claim of this thesis: that Hezbollah's

endurance cannot be explained solely by arms or foreign backing. It lies equally in the social legitimacy it commands, the adaptability it has demonstrated, and the way it has embedded itself into the fabric of communities long accustomed to abandonment by the state.

Note on Coding: Each entry is tagged with thematic codes (DET, SOC, IDEO, ORG, ALLI, DOM, MIL, RISK) as defined in Appendix B.

Protected Retrospective Evidential Note 1
Convergent testimony obtained retrospectively from several military commanders with relevant operational knowledge indicates that the group responsible for the 1983 attacks on the US Marine and French military barracks was organisationally separate from Hezbollah's emerging structures at the time of the operation, although individuals associated with that group subsequently joined Hezbollah. The testimony was provided independently by more than one source. Interview dates, functional roles and other identifying details are withheld because their combination could permit deductive identification. This evidence is classified as protected retrospective testimony and is not treated as contemporaneous evidence.
Coding: MIL, ORG, RISK

Entry 1 — September 1985

A - Role: Cleric and founding member present at the first Manifesto announcement of Hezbollah's birth in February 1985 (later senior advisory religious role).
Location: Beirut's southern suburbs
Context: Informal conversation following Hezbollah's public announcement
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Our people have been abandoned by the Lebanese state for too long. It does not defend us; it does not protect us or fulfil the duty of a state. The Israeli army occupies our homes and fields, while the Maronite authorities bargain away what is not theirs to give. We do not choose weapons for glory, but because without them our community will be erased and our families would become refugees. The rifle is not a burden; it is the guarantee that our children will live with dignity. The mosques and Husayniyyas are full of the displaced; every sermon is half a lesson in patience, half a promise of protection. If the state cannot stand between the occupier and the poor, then resistance must."

"Some Lebanese believed that there were no oppressed people in Lebanon, but Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance demonstrated that we could drive out the US and multinational forces deployed in Beirut. We proved that the God of the oppressed drove them out (referring to the withdrawal of US Marines and French paratroopers in early 1984 following the attacks on their headquarters in October 1983). The Islamic Jihad had nothing to do with Hezbollah's current leadership but worked under IRGC command."

Coding: SOC, IDEO, MIL
Analytical Note: Anchors the founding ethos in state absence and occupation; frames armed resistance as moral guardianship of a neglected constituency.

B - Role: Same Cleric - Source
Location: Beirut, southern suburbs
Context: Ongoing investigations by President Amin Gemayel's military intelligence into Imad Mughniyeh's alleged role in the 1981 assassination of French Ambassador Louis Delamare

Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Ever since the French ambassador Louis Delamare was killed in 1981, the regime has tried to pin it on our people. They say Haj Imad [Mughniyeh] was behind it. At every checkpoint, every raid, the accusation follows. This is not justice — it is politics. The French were already part of the problem in Lebanon, backing those who oppressed us. Now their envoy is dead, and Amin Gemayel's intelligence thinks it can break us by hunting one man. But we are not one man. Resistance does not end with an arrest, or an accusation, or even a martyr. These charges only deepen the feeling among our people that the state does not protect them — it persecutes them."

Coding: DOM, SOC, RISK
Analytical Note: This testimony situates Hezbollah's early distrust of Lebanese state institutions in the wake of foreign entanglements and high-profile assassinations. Linking Gemayel's intelligence pursuit of Imad Mughniyeh to broader patterns of state persecution, the account underscores how accusations — whether proven or not — reinforced Hezbollah's self-image as a movement targeted by both local authorities and foreign powers, consolidating its claim to legitimacy as a protective force.

Entry 2 — February 1987
A - Role: Head of Security Unit, Beirut
Location: Safehouse, southern Beirut
Context: After clashes with Amal during the "War of the Camps"
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"We did not seek confrontation with Amal, but we cannot let anyone dictate our path or compromise our independence. This is not only about weapons—it is about identity. If the Palestinian camps are left unprotected, Israel will use them as pretext for re-occupation. We are not fighting Shia; we are fighting for the right of our people to resist. The streets whisper rumours and the media pick a side; we will not. Our line is simple: no civil war within the oppressed, no surrender to those who occupy. Furthermore, Syria considers us an outlaw organisation, and Amal is doing Syria's dirty work. Unfortunately, Sheikh Subhi al-Tufaili has no hesitation in pursuing inter-Shia confrontation, even though Iran opposes it."
Coding: SOC, IDEO, DOM
Analytical Note: Situates intra-Shia conflict inside a protective narrative towards Palestinians and the Shia base, refusing a sectarian frame.
B - Role: Head of Security Unit, Beirut
Location: Nuweyri, Beirut, close to Fathallah Barracks, West Beirut
Context: During Thursday evening prayers (Duʿāʾ Kumayl), Syrian forces stormed Hezbollah's bastion in West Beirut. The incident became known as the Fathallah Massacre.
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Our people were praying Duʿāʾ Kumayl on Thursday night when the Syrians stormed the barracks and opened fire indiscriminately, intent on killing everyone. One of the youngsters survived because another body fell on top of him; he lived to tell the story. There had been no provocation, no warning, nothing that could justify the slaughter. Haj Imad [Mughniyeh] was preparing to retaliate, ready to strike the Syrian checkpoint nearby, but the Iranians intervened to stop him. They feared an all-out confrontation with Syria, a descent into internal bloodshed. The order was clear: hold back, avoid infighting, and keep our eyes on the true enemy — Israel."
Coding: SOC, RISK, ALLI
Analytical Note: The massacre at Fathallah exposed Hezbollah's vulnerability even within its supposed safe havens. It marked a moment when Syrian control over Beirut was violently

reaffirmed, forcing Hezbollah to recognise the dangers of internal confrontation. The restraint shown under Iranian pressure signalled a strategic choice: to preserve unity and avoid draining the resistance in internecine war, even at the cost of burying its own dead. The episode hardened Hezbollah's self-image as protector of its community, distinct from regional patrons, and reinforced the conviction that the movement's legitimacy could only be sustained by focusing on Israel rather than being drawn into local vendettas.

Entry 3 — May 1988
Role: Cleric, founding member
Location: Beirut southern suburb
Context: Renewed political calls for international intervention in Lebanon
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Maronite Christians call for foreign troops, French or American troops or Syrians or Israelis every time they lose influence, as they did in 1958, 1976 and 1982. We rely on God and our people. This is the difference: one side seeks salvation abroad, the other within. Foreign soldiers bring soft occupation and permanent dependency. A community that rents its sovereignty will always owe more tomorrow than it borrowed today. Our covenant is with those who bury their dead here and till this soil."
Coding: IDEO, DOM
Analytical Note: Contrasts external guardianship with local sovereignty; deepens the legitimacy claim through rootedness.

Entry 4 — October 1989
Role: Head of Military Unit, Bekaa Valley
Location: Bekaa Valley command post
Context: After the signing of the Taif Agreement
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Taif may end the civil war for others, but for us it changes nothing. The Israelis still sit in our land. Until they leave, our war continues. No agreement signed in Saudi Arabia can liberate Nabatieh or Bint Jbeil. If they ask militias to disarm, they must first ask the occupier to leave. We will not trade rifles for signatures. We prefer obligations that bleed us to promises that betray us. The Taif Agreement, however, allowed the resistance to continue fighting the occupier. Let's see how long the Lebanese government tolerates Hezbollah's weapons."
Coding: DET, DOM, IDEO
Analytical Note: Rejects demobilisation without de-occupation; aligns arms with defensive legitimacy rather than factional spoils.

Entry 5 — March 1990
Role: Member of the Jihadi Council
Location: Southern Lebanon
Context: Internal debate following Taif
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Our legitimacy is not from parliament or Taif. It comes from every martyr, every displaced family. The day Israel leaves, then we will reconsider the role of Hezbollah but we shall never be disarmed."
Coding: IDEO, DET, DOM
Analytical Note: Binds the gun to the memory of sacrifice; demilitarisation is not an option due to the weakness of the state.

Entry 6 — July 1992
Role: Head of Political Department
Location: Beirut
Context: Hezbollah's first participation in parliamentary elections
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"We enter parliament not to surrender our arms but to protect them. Politics is a shield for resistance. Our voters understand this: the ballot is not a substitute for the bullet while the south is occupied. If the chamber cannot defend our villages, it must at least stop others from criminalising their defenders. We will sit in the state without letting the state sit on our neck."
Coding: DOM, ORG, IDEO
Analytical Note: Clarifies the instrumental logic of electoral entry — legislative protection for the armed wing.

Entry 7 — April 1993 (Operation Accountability)
Role: Head of Military Unit
Location: Bekaa Valley
Context: During "Operation Accountability"
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Israel believed that punishing civilians would pressure Hezbollah to stop its attacks. It thought that bombing villages and displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians would turn our people against us. Instead, they drove our people into our arms. Every family that flees returns angrier, more certain that only resistance speaks their language. We timed our fire to show we could answer and survive. The lesson is simple: if the occupier escalates, we endure; if he pauses, we prepare."
Coding: SOC, DET
Analytical Note: Ties collective punishment to constituency consolidation; articulates a rhythm of calibrated fire and survival.

Entry 8 — August 1996
Role: Senior Cleric within Hezbollah leadership
Location: Nabatiyeh
Context: After the Qana massacre during "Operation Grapes of Wrath"
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Qana was not merely a tragedy; it was a revelation and an example of how our people endure and offer sacrifices. The world saw Israeli bombs fall on children. From that moment, we were no longer only a militia — we were defenders of the oppressed. Mothers who once feared our path began to call it necessary. We buried the dead, and with them the illusion that the enemy's power brings order. The only order we accept is the order of justice."
Coding: IDEO, SOC, DET
Analytical Note: Shows moral reframing after civilian mass casualty; expands legitimacy beyond constituency to a broader justice claim.

Entry 9 — October 1997
Role: Head of Intelligence Dossier
Location: South Lebanon
Context: After the Ansariyeh ambush against Israeli commandos
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"The Israeli commandos thought themselves invisible. We had been watching them for weeks, intercepting the images transmitted by their drones. The ambush succeeded because patience is our true weapon. Their advantage is technology; ours is endurance. Satellites and

drones did not protect them from the eyes of farmers or the ears of children. The land itself provides us with intelligence. We fight not only with rifles, but also with the memory, technology and vigilance of our people. We knew the identity of the target, but not the route the commandos would take. We therefore established several ambush sites. The Israeli commando leader changed his approach route more than once, but eventually entered one of them. Israeli firepower following the ambush and during the evacuation prevented us from capturing the remaining commandos."
Coding: MIL, DET, ORG
Analytical Note: Highlights asymmetric strength rooted in community based intelligence. It presents patience and local vigilance as weapons as important as military equipment.

Entry 10 — May 1999
Role: Unit Commander, South Lebanon
Location: South Lebanon village
Context: During intensified clashes before Israeli withdrawal
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"In the south we are stronger than the quasi-absent state. Villagers look to us, not to the central government in Beirut, for protection. If the army cannot defend them, they will always come to us. For every rocket we fire, we open a clinic; for every funeral, we fund a scholarship. People judge us not by speeches but by who stands with them when shells fall. Hezbollah is building a society in which the Shia no longer feel second class to others in Lebanon"
Coding: SOC, DOM, MIL
Analytical Note: Demonstrates Hezbollah's parallel sovereignty by pairing armed defence with welfare provision, reinforcing both protection and dignity.

Entry 11 — May 2000
Role: Commander, South Lebanon
Location: Bint Jbeil, South Lebanon
Context: Immediately after Israel's withdrawal from occupied Lebanese territory
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Today is not the end. Shebaa Farms, Ghajar, Kfarshuba hills and other locations remain under occupation. There are Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails. Resistance continues until every inch is free. We celebrate, yes, but we do not dismantle. Our people cheer in the streets, but we remind them: vigilance is the price of freedom. Liberation is not a gift, it is a debt to be paid daily until no occupier remains. Israel does not realise that by keeping even one metre, it gives us the reason to endure."
Coding: DET, IDEO, DOM
Analytical Note: Frames liberation as incomplete; justifies continued arms through the idea of unfinished struggle and vigilance.

Entry 12 — December 2000
Role: Adviser to the Secretary General
Location: Beirut
Context: Strategic discussion following liberation celebrations
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"The liberation is incomplete. Shebaa, Ghajar, Kfar Shouba — all remain under occupation. Our weapons remain until all land is free. If we lay them down now, tomorrow we will be accused of betraying our martyrs. The enemy retreats with one hand while plotting with the other. Resistance cannot retire when danger has only changed its shape."

Coding: DET, DOM
Analytical Note: Reinforces the rationale for retaining arms post-liberation, linking legitimacy to the sacrifices of martyrs as a binding moral debt.

Entry 13 — April 2002
Role: Head of External Security
Location: South Beirut
Context: During the Second Intifada
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Palestine is not separate from Lebanon. Our struggle is one. The rifle that liberated Bint Jbeil can one day liberate al-Quds. Every image of a child under fire in Gaza mirrors a child in Tyre or Nabatieh. To imagine a free Lebanon without a free Palestine is to dream of a house without foundations. The cause is indivisible."
Coding: IDEO, ALLI, DET
Analytical Note: Elevates Palestinian solidarity into an existential principle, binding Lebanese liberation to the regional struggle.

Entry 14 — July 2004
Role: Cleric close to the Secretary General
Location: Beirut southern suburbs
Context: In the lead-up to UN debates on Hezbollah's arms
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"We entered parliament, yes, but politics does not replace resistance. We use the system to shield the resistance, not to replace it. Those who demand disarmament through resolutions must first provide the protection they cannot deliver. Constitutions do not guard villages; our fighters do. The vote is important, but the rifle is essential."
Coding: DOM, IDEO, ORG
Analytical Note: Clarifies that political participation is tactical; the centrality of arms remains intact despite parliamentary engagement.

Entry 15 — July 2006
Role: Military Commander, Southern Front
Location: Apartment in South Beirut
Context: Early days of the July War
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"They expected hours; we gave them 33 days. Israel thought tanks would cross freely, but they encountered our Kornet laser guided anti tank missiles. The myth of invincibility collapsed before the world. Every bunker we built was a promise kept to our people. They bombed bridges, airports, and homes, yet the rockets still launched. Our strength is not striking harder, but striking even when they believe us broken. To resist, to refuse the white flag — that is victory."
Coding: DET, MIL, ORG
Analytical Note: Positions asymmetric tactics as strategic deterrence, portraying survival and defiance as symbolic victory.

Entry 16 — August 2006
Role: Member of the Jihadi Council
Location: South Beirut
Context: After the ceasefire ending the July War
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):

“They destroyed part of Dahiyeh and many villages in the south of Lebanon, but we are still here. That is victory: to remain alive, armed, and standing. Every family that lost a home sees who rebuilds and who can inflict pain on the enemy and defend the oppressed Shia. Every funeral shows that the war did not silence us. Our survival teaches Israel that time erodes them, not us. If they call this a draw, we call it endurance. When there is an occupation, the resistance is an inevitable outcome in particular when the state is incapable of defending its citizens.”

“Our red line was clear: if they struck Beirut, we would strike Haifa and beyond, even Tel Aviv, but it is important to avoid forcing the Israelis to lose control and unlimited bombing if we strike Tel Aviv. It is sufficient to show the capability without using it as an efficient deterrence strategy. Hezbollah had acquired M110 missiles with an accuracy of approximately 50 metres and sufficient range to reach Tel Aviv. The authority to use them lay solely with the political leadership, in this case with Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah himself. This balance of deterrence made Israel hesitant and provided a measure of protection for both the leadership and the civilians who had fled Beirut’s southern suburbs, allowing the leadership to operate from a safer area. When we used an anti ship missile against an Israeli vessel, Israel suddenly understood that its intelligence had no real grasp of Hezbollah’s arsenal. That strike lent credibility to Sayyed Nasrallah’s threats and contributed first to sidelining the Israeli Navy and subsequently to bringing the war to an end.”

Coding: DET, SOC, RISK
Analytical Note: Defines victory through survival and recovery; enshrines endurance as the essence of Hezbollah’s war logic. Explains how material capability acquired deterrent value through communicated thresholds, centralised authorisation and uncertainty concerning Hezbollah’s arsenal. The testimony distinguishes possession of weapons from their strategic effect: deterrence arose from the combination of capability, credible signalling and the adversary’s anticipation of retaliation.

Entry 17 — May 2008
Role: Political Bureau Figure
Location: Beirut
Context: After Hezbollah’s armed takeover of West Beirut in response to government moves against its communication network
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
“When the government tried to cut our communication lines, it crossed a red line. Our survival depends on secure networks. A weapon can be replaced, but if the lines fall silent, the resistance dies blind and deaf. We acted not for conquest, but for the survival of the Shia community. We will leave the streets, but we will not leave the lines.”
Coding: DOM, ORG, DET
Analytical Note: Casts the seizure of Beirut as defensive necessity; communications framed as an existential lifeline.

Entry 18 — June 2009
Role: Senior Cleric, Hezbollah Leadership
Location: South Beirut
Context: After parliamentary elections
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
“Elections may change parliaments, but they do not change the essence of resistance. The rifle is not subject to votes. We sit in parliament to defend our people, but our oath is to their

protection, not to seats. The ballot boxes are temporary; the occupier is permanent. Until he leaves, the gun must remain permanent too."
Coding: IDEO, DOM
Analytical Note: Reinforces electoral pragmatism without ideological dilution; maintains primacy of arms over institutions.

Entry 19 — June 2012
Role: Head of Syria Dossier
Location: Damascus safehouse
Context: Hezbollah's initial deployment in Syria to defend the Assad regime
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"We go to Syria because if Assad falls, we fall next. The principle is simple: defend the bad to avoid the worse. Resistance cannot survive if Damascus is ruled by our enemies, who would move on Lebanon without hesitation. Every supply line, every road, every passage runs through Syria. Those who say this is not Lebanon's fight do not understand geography. We defend Damascus so that Beirut and Nabatieh remain safe. This is not intervention; it is pre-emptive defence."
Coding: ALLI, IDEO, RISK
Analytical Note: Frames the Syria intervention as existential, rooted in geography and sectarian survival. Links external engagement directly to Lebanese security.

Entry 20 — May 2013
Role: Field Commander, Qusayr Battle
Location: Qusayr, Syria
Context: During Hezbollah's decisive involvement in the battle of al-Qusayr
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"This battle is decisive. If we lose, the takfiri militants will believe us weak, our people's security in Lebanon will be imperilled and our supply lines will be severed. If we win, Lebanon will breathe again. It is better to fight outside Lebanon than to bring destruction to our villages. The city may be small, but it is an artery of the resistance. Every street here is connected to the Shia villages of the Bekaa. We bury martyrs here so that villages there remain safe. Qusayr is Lebanon's shield, and we carry it."
Coding: MIL, ALLI, ORG
Analytical Note: Shows the operational logic of intervention; links tactical victory in Syria to Hezbollah's strategic survival in Lebanon.

Entry 21 — November 2014
Role: Head of Syria Dossier
Location: Damascus suburb, near Sayyeda Zaynab shrine
Context: At the height of Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Syria is not a choice; defending it is an obligation. If Damascus falls, the logistical supply line will be interrupted, and Lebanon will be next. The shrine in Sayyeda Zaynab is symbolic, yes, but the real shrine is our frontline and our existence. We fight alongside our Syrian and Iranian allies because, if Daesh or Nusra seizes power, the Shia of Lebanon will be slaughtered. This war weakens us, yes, but without it there would be no Lebanon left to defend, or we would be fighting on Lebanese territory. Our men ask why we have remained for so long. The answer is simple: because Lebanon still stands."
Coding: ALLI, RISK, IDEO

Analytical Note: Captures the existential and sectarian justifications for intervention; acknowledges strain while legitimising overstretch.

Entry 22 — March 2015
Role: Head of Iraq Dossier
Location: Baghdad, Iraq
Context: After ISIS's capture of Mosul and mobilisation of the PMUs
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"In Mosul, we learned that waiting for Beirut slows the fight. Units must act quickly. The Iraqi brothers respect us, but they are not us. We advise; we do not command. Iraq has its own martyrs, its own ground, its own blood. Our strength lies in teaching how to resist, not in replacing them in the fight."
Coding: ORG, ALLI, RISK
Analytical Note: Shows Hezbollah's advisory rather than commanding role; decentralisation as both necessity and survival strategy in Iraq.

Entry 23 — November 2016
Role: Unit Commander, Iraq Theatre
Location: Baghdad, Iraq
Context: During intensified battles against ISIS
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Our fight there was just, but our families at home bore the cost. Lebanon grew weary. Every day away from home raised the question: why here, not Lebanon? Some whispered that resistance had strayed too far from its soil. But each time Daesh was pushed back, we knew our own borders were safer."
Coding: RISK, SOC
Analytical Note: Reveals fatigue and domestic strain from external commitments; balances criticism with the claim of protecting Lebanon's security.

Entry 24 — August 2017
Role: Political Bureau Member
Location: Beirut
Context: Amid growing Lebanese protests over corruption and governance
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"The protests show frustration. We must listen, but we cannot disarm. Without weapons there is no Hezbollah, and without Hezbollah, no protection for the Shia. Corruption is real, and people blame us for sharing power with compromised leaders. But arms cannot be traded for reform. It is essential for Hezbollah to remain in government and participate in decision-making so that it is not taken by surprise (in case of any hostile decision negotiated within the government's members)."
Coding: DOM, SOC, IDEO
Analytical Note: Demonstrates Hezbollah's awareness of governance criticism while prioritising arms. Highlights the paradox of reliance and resentment.

Entry 25 — October 2019
Role: Senior Cleric, Leadership Circle
Location: Nabatiyeh
Context: During Lebanon's mass protests
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Resistance is not only in arms; it is in bread, dignity, and survival. If the state fails, we

cannot. People may criticise us, yet they still depend on us. The same hand that gives weapons also gives bread. Our danger is not the slogans shouted in the squares, but the day our people stop seeing us as their shield. That day, resistance dies faster than under bombs. The Americans are trying again to turn people against us. We pray their plan fails."
Coding: SOC, DOM, RISK
Analytical Note: Emphasises Hezbollah's recognition of its governance role; underscores social legitimacy as equal in weight to arms.

Entry 26 — February 2021
Role: Senior Cleric
Location: South Beirut
Context: Amid Lebanon's economic collapse and banking crisis
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"The economy collapses, banks steal savings, and yet the only reliable structure remains the resistance. The state is empty; we are full, paying salaries monthly. By my estimate, over half a million Shia — fighters and their families — depend on Hezbollah stipends. Our institutions still pay salaries, our clinics and hospitals keep their doors open, and our schools in the south still function. People knock at our doors. The rifle alone does not make legitimacy — bread does too."
Coding: SOC, DOM, IDEO
Analytical Contribution: Highlights Hezbollah's claim to legitimacy through welfare provision during state collapse; underscores embedded sovereignty as the backbone of resilience.

Entry 27 — June 2022
Role: Military Unit One of the top commanders, Syria
Location: Homs province, Syria
Context: After prolonged deployment in Syria
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Syria bleeds us. Iraq drains us. Yemen stretches us. But we cannot abandon them because they are our allies, and the consequences of their fall would be devastating for the Shia of Lebanon. Balance and unity are essential to our survival."
Coding: ALLI, RISK, ORG
Analytical Contribution: Captures the tension of regional overstretch; stresses the strategic necessity of sustaining alliances despite fatigue.

Entry 28 — October 2023
Role: Adviser to the Secretary General
Location: Beirut
Context: After outbreak of the October Gaza war
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"This is not Gaza's war alone. It is the war of the entire axis. But we choose timing. Lebanon cannot burn unless we decide. Israel wants us dragged into total war, but restraint is also a weapon. Our people expect solidarity, yes, but they also expect survival. The art of deterrence is to act enough to show strength, yet not enough to destroy Lebanon."
Coding: ALLI, DET, ORG
Analytical Contribution: Illustrates Hezbollah's calibrated deterrence strategy; balancing regional solidarity with Lebanese strategic autonomy.

Entry 29 — January 2024
Role: Military Commander
Location: South Beirut
Context: After Israeli assassinations of senior Hezbollah figures
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Assassinations hurt, but leaders are replaceable. Our structure survives decapitation. Hezbollah is not one man — it is an institution. Every commander who is killed already has two trained and experienced successors ready to replace him. We bury martyrs, we promote brothers, and the line continues. Israel kills names, but resistance is nameless."
Coding: ORG, DET, RISK
Analytical Contribution: Demonstrates decentralisation as a safeguard against leadership loss; resilience ensured through redundancy.

Entry 30 — June 2024
Role: Political Majlis Head of Iraq Dossier
Location: Baghdad
Context: Amid worsening Iraqi political crisis
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Baghdad politics is quicksand. Iraq must find its own way, but our collaboration with the Iraqi resistance never stops. They will join the battle only if asked."
Coding: ALLI, RISK
Analytical Contribution: Highlights limits of Hezbollah's influence abroad; recognises contextual differences and the boundaries of the "Hezbollah model."

Entry 31 — September 2024
Role: Head of Unit
Location: South Lebanon
Context: After Israeli incursions in Adaisse and Kfarkila
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Israel is seeking to establish buffer zones south of the Litani. Its plan is simple: depopulate and destroy our villages so that its forces can advance without resistance and prevent the inhabitants from returning. For us, defending civilians is as critical as defending the border. If the land is abandoned, Hezbollah becomes hollow. Resistance without people is meaningless.

From a purely military perspective, one option would be to allow Israeli units to advance deeper into our territory, where they could be drawn into ambushes and fought on our terms. Within our own geography, every road, orchard and alley can become a weapon. However, the leadership has issued clear instructions: we are not required to halt every advance at any cost. We must decide according to the strategic importance of each location. Attempting to stop a powerful conventional army at every point would require us to pay a much higher price from the outset.

At the same time, we must show our people that we will neither surrender nor relinquish a single metre of their land. This will be a long fight. Our objective is to exhaust the enemy and continually raise the cost of occupation."

Coding: DET, SOC, DOM, MIL

Analytical Note: Reveals the tension between tactical flexibility and the political imperative of territorial defence. Although allowing Israeli forces to advance could create opportunities

for ambushes in terrain favourable to Hezbollah, the testimony rejects the indiscriminate defence of every position against a militarily superior conventional army, a tactic that was adopted by the assassinated Secretary general Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. Instead, locations are defended selectively according to their strategic importance, thereby preserving fighters for a prolonged campaign of attrition. The protection of inhabited villages remains politically and socially existential because Hezbollah's legitimacy depends upon the continued presence of the population on its land. Deterrence is therefore framed not as the ability to prevent every incursion, but as the capacity to deny Israel an uncontested and sustainable occupation by continually raising its military and political costs. This illustrates deterrence by resilience: territorial losses may occur without producing strategic defeat, provided that resistance, social rootedness and the capacity to impose continuing costs endure.

Entry 32 — February 2025
Role: Member of the Jihadi Council
Location: Beirut
Context: During intensification of Israeli cyber warfare
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Cyber warfare is as dangerous as drones. Israel can penetrate our phones and pagers. We must return to paper records and human couriers. Technology is a trap: what connects us can also betray us. We once fought from tunnels to hide from their aircraft; now we must operate in silence to escape their surveillance. Resistance survives not by possessing the most modern technology, but by adapting intelligently. We must continue to use advanced weapons while abandoning vulnerable forms of electronic communication."

Coding: ORG, MIL, RISK
Analytical Contribution: Captures Hezbollah's adaptation to cyber vulnerabilities and emphasises the use of low technology and human networks as means of countering technologically advanced surveillance.

Entry 33 — April 2025
Role: Head of Syria Dossier
Location: Beirut
Context: After Assad's decline in power
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Assad is gone, but our enemies remain, and they now control Syria. In hindsight, relying so heavily on one man was never an optimal strategy. During the six months preceding his fall, Assad had already begun distancing himself from Iran and moving closer to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which had promised to mediate with Washington for the lifting of US sanctions.

Both Hezbollah and Iran paid a heavy price for supporting Assad, in lives, resources and legitimacy. Iran lost billions of dollars in investment and oil, while Hezbollah lost entire missile stockpiles stored in Syria and unused due to Assad's rejection to engage Israel from the Syrian territory. Assad refused to fire a single bullet against Israel. We lost more than a president. We lost the protection of a state that, however fragile, had provided us with strategic depth and a logistic route.

Nevertheless, the corridor still exists. Smuggling routes never close entirely, but what was once an official passage has now been reduced to clandestine networks. This leaves us more

vulnerable, but it does not eliminate our presence. We do not withdraw because a president has fallen. We remain because our struggle is larger than any palace or government.

The regional balance is also changing. Iraq has already delivered a clear warning to the new Syrian president. It will not intervene in Syria, but if Damascus attempts to move against the Shia of Lebanon, the Iraqi resistance will strike Syria directly. The warning was forceful and unambiguous. Syria may have changed, but Hezbollah is not alone. Alliances adapt, but they endure."

Coding: ALLI, IDEO, RISK
Analytical Contribution: Distinguishes Hezbollah's commitment to its broader conception of resistance from its support for Bashar al Assad personally. The testimony acknowledges the considerable financial, military and political costs of relying upon the Syrian regime while identifying the loss of state protected strategic depth as a major source of vulnerability. Nevertheless, the survival of clandestine supply routes and the warning attributed to Iraqi armed groups indicate adaptation rather than the complete disappearance of regional support. The entry therefore illustrates a reconfigured alliance structure in which support no longer centres upon preserving Assad's government but upon protecting Hezbollah and preventing hostile forces in Syria from threatening Lebanon.

Entry 34 — June 2025
Role: Adviser to the Secretary General
Location: Beirut
Context: Amid escalating Israeli operations in Gaza and renewed threats of a wider war on Lebanon
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Netanyahu seeks to crush Gaza, then turn to the Litani. We are far more prepared than before. Resistance is not about winning quickly but surviving longer and inflicting accumulated damage on the enemy. They count victories in days, in battles, in temporary gains. We count victories in decades, in survival, in still standing when they thought we would be erased. If Lebanon still breathes after their bombs, if our people remain rooted in their land, then we have won — again. This is the logic they will never understand: survival is our triumph, patience our weapon, and endurance our victory."
Coding: DET, ORG, RISK
Analytical Contribution: Reaffirms Hezbollah's endurance doctrine: victory defined not by battlefield dominance but by long-term survival. Connects local rootedness with strategic patience as the essence of resilience.

Entry 35 — August 2025
Role: Senior Cleric, Dahiyeh
Location: Beirut
Context: After the Lebanese government announced its decision to pursue Hezbollah's disarmament under external pressure
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"The government speaks of sovereignty, but what it means is stripping the Shia of their last means of defence. Disarmament is not reform; it is an invitation for Israel to act as it pleases. The president and prime minister know this, yet they have bowed to dictates from abroad, from Washington, Paris and Riyadh. They speak of sovereignty while surrendering it.

Our people understand the truth: sovereignty without protection is an empty word. When the state failed in 1982, we defended Beirut. When it failed again in 2006, we rebuilt the south. Now they tell us to surrender our weapons and trust the same state that has abandoned us time and again. We cannot. For us, disarmament is not a political question; it is a question of survival.

Many of our people, including some within the Shia community, were uneasy about our intervention in support of Gaza. But when the government, in coordination with the Americans and Israel, sought to impose disarmament, those same people stood before us and became our shield. They understood that this was no longer about Gaza, but about their own existence. Disarming Hezbollah would mean abandoning southern Lebanon.

Look at Syria. Israel occupied part of the south while the new president, Ahmad al Sharaa, did not fire a single bullet in response. That is precisely what would happen to us. Israel would advance from village to village without opposition. The Americans claim to mediate, but in reality they stand firmly with Israel and cannot act as honest brokers.

If they persist, they risk tearing Lebanon apart. Civil war is not our choice, but surrendering our weapons is not an option. Our survival cannot be negotiated away."

Coding: DOM, IDEO, RISK, ALLI
Analytical Contribution: Frames the August 2025 disarmament decision as an existential threat and depicts it as having transformed unease within parts of the Shia constituency into renewed solidarity with Hezbollah. By comparing Lebanon with Syria under Ahmad al Sharaa, the testimony presents reliance upon a state unwilling or unable to confront Israel as inherently dangerous. It also illustrates embedded sovereignty: Hezbollah justifies retaining its weapons by portraying protection as a sovereign function that the Lebanese state has repeatedly failed to perform. The reference to civil war reveals the severity of the perceived threat and the potentially destabilising consequences of externally imposed disarmament.

Entry 36 — June 2025
Role: Adviser to the Secretary General
Location: Beirut
Context: After the September–October 2024 war and subsequent Iranian reassessment
Transcript (extended, anonymised notes):
"Speaker Nabih Berri often takes initiatives that do not fully align with our plans. Nevertheless, we cannot openly contradict him. Instead, we remind him that Hezbollah's strength provides him with leverage and that he should never negotiate from a position of weakness.

At the same time, Iran expressed deep frustration with our performance during the September and October war. Tehran sent several committees to investigate how the campaign had been conducted and where we had failed. It was a tense period. Later, however, after suffering its own setbacks (June 2025 Israeli war on Iran), Iran recognised that it too had been deceived by Israeli tactics and had fallen into some of the same traps that had caught us. This recognition produced something important: a renewed commitment. Iran made clear that, in the next war, it would not remain on the sidelines. It promised that Hezbollah would not be left to fight alone.

This reaffirmation matters not only to us, but to Lebanon as a whole. It indicates that the equation has changed. Whatever failures we experienced, the alliance endures and Iran's commitment to our defence remains."

Coding: ALLI, DOM, RISK
Analytical Contribution: Analytical Contribution: Reveals Hezbollah's management of two relationships that provide it with leverage while retaining their own autonomy. Within Lebanon, Berri's independent initiatives require accommodation rather than direct control. Regionally, Iranian scrutiny following Hezbollah's wartime failures demonstrates that the alliance contains tension, criticism and reassessment rather than automatic unity. The subsequent renewal of Tehran's commitment shows the resilience of the relationship, but does not establish the existence of a unified command. The entry therefore supports the thesis's interpretation of the Axis as a network of durable but conditional and independently negotiated relationships.

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