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Hezbollah at a Crossroads: Securitization and Adapting to Shifting Realities in the Middle East

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Abstract

The Middle East's geopolitical landscape has been profoundly reshaped by two recent events: the October 7 attacks and the war on Gaza, and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. These developments have placed Hezbollah, which long regarded as Iran's most powerful proxy and Lebanon's dominant armed faction, at a crossroads. Regionally, the collapse of the Assad regime severed Hezbollah's vital supply corridor, increasing its exposure to Israeli and regional countermeasures. Domestically, prolonged confrontations with Israel, compounded by Lebanon's economic crisis and the displacement of more than one million Lebanese, have weakened Hezbollah's political legitimacy and military deterrence. This paper argues that Hezbollah stands at a defining moment: its survival depends on its ability to adapt to rapidly shifting geopolitical dynamics. The study examines how Hezbollah constructs threat narratives to justify its actions, consolidate political authority, and navigate evolving security challenges. It highlights how the organization frames Israel and regional encirclement as existential threats to maintain its influence and mobilize support. These dynamics offer broader insights into how violent non-state actors craft security discourses to adapt within changing geopolitical environments.

Keywords

Hezbollah, Middle East geopolitics, regional power shifts, securitization, Lebanon, Syria

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Introduction

The geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East have undergone a profound transformation in recent years, driven by two pivotal developments: the October 7 attacks followed by the Gaza War and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. These events have not only reshaped regional power dynamics, but have also brought Hezbollah, which long regarded as Iran's most powerful ally and Lebanon's dominant armed force, to a critical crossroads. In the aftermath of October 7, Hezbollah has faced prolonged confrontations with Israel, while the downfall of the Assad regime has posed significant challenges for the organization at both regional and local levels.

The attacks launched by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent outbreak of the Gaza War marked the beginning of a process that directly drew Hezbollah into the conflict. As Iran's most significant armed actor within the so-called Axis of Resistance,¹ Hezbollah initiated attacks against Israel from the Lebanese border with the aim of diverting Israel's military capacity in the north. However, this move was met with heavy Israeli airstrikes and targeted assassinations. During this period, Hezbollah suffered significant losses, including key commanders and members of its combat ranks, notably impacting its military capacity. These military setbacks, compounded by Lebanon's ongoing economic crisis, led to a noticeable erosion of public support for Hezbollah. The displacement of more than one million people from southern Lebanon due to Israeli attacks further intensified criticism of the organization, even within the Shiite community. Additionally, growing pressure from the international community particularly regarding the assertion that the Lebanese state should be the sole bearer of arms, has increasingly called into question Hezbollah's political and military standing.

The most significant regional rupture for Hezbollah has been the collapse of the Assad regime. For years, the Assad administration provided Hezbollah with strategic depth, serving as a crucial transit point for the organization's arms and financial support from Iran. However, with Assad's fall from power, this logistical corridor was severed, forcing Hezbollah to seek alternative supply routes. The constant surveillance of these routes by Israel and other regional actors has made the procurement of weapons and ammunition increasingly costly and risky for the organization. Moreover, Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights has further restricted Hezbollah's operational mobility in the region, intensifying the strategic pressure on the group. This growing constraint on its logistical and strategic capacities has posed severe challenges to Hezbollah's ability to sustain its regional influence.

In light of these developments, Hezbollah stands at a critical crossroads. The organization has suffered significant damage to its military wing, its logistical corridor from Iran has been severed, and it has lost a substantial portion of its experienced and well-trained commanders and combatants. To ensure its survival, Hezbollah must adapt to shifting geopolitical realities, but what options does it have, and how can it navigate the opportunities and threats of such a dynamic context? The military losses following October 7 and the declining public support within Lebanon have driven Hezbollah to seek greater leverage in domestic politics. Meanwhile, the collapse of the Assad regime has weakened the organization's connections with Iran and accelerated its regional isolation. This study examines Hezbollah's transformation in the aftermath of the October 7 conflict with Israel and the collapse of the Assad regime through the lens of securitization theory. It explores how Hezbollah has constructed security

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discourses and shaped its perceptions of existential threats, and how these narratives have influenced both domestic political dynamics in Lebanon and broader regional interactions. The study further analyzes how Hezbollah has developed securitization strategies aimed at legitimizing its position, consolidating public support, and resisting international pressures. By

situating Hezbollah's current position within regional and local dynamics, this research assesses the organization's military capacity, logistical networks, and political legitimacy. It seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Hezbollah's strategic adaptations amid evolving security challenges.

Securitization and Non-State Actors

Securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde) in the 1990s, argues that security is not an objective reality but a discursive construct.² Ole Wæver describes security as a "speech act," where framing an issue as an existential threat through security discourse transforms it into a security concern.³ An issue becomes securitized when it is presented as a vital threat and accepted as such by the relevant audience.⁴ This process involves three key elements: the securitizing actor (those presenting the threat, like political leaders), the referent object (the value or entity under threat), and the audience (whose acceptance is crucial for securitization's success).⁵

Securitization is not limited to states; non-state armed groups, social movements, and transnational organizations can also construct threat narratives to pursue their objectives. In contexts with weak state structures or ineffective authorities, armed groups often act as *de facto* security providers. Lacking formal authority, these actors use securitization discourses to mobilize their communities and legitimize their actions. By identifying threats, crafting narratives, and assuming responsibility for protection, they adopt roles traditionally held by the state. Such actors frame adversaries as “existential threats,” asserting that their communities face danger.⁶ This process helps them legitimize their position, justify actions, and strengthen support within their constituencies.

Securitization discourses are crucial for non-state actors in mobilizing their constituencies. By framing an existential threat, these actors activate collective fears, legitimizing even extraordinary sacrifices. This process helps them establish dominance or gain consent from their audience. Non-state armed groups often use charismatic leaders and sophisticated propaganda to spread fear-based narratives, fostering a collective defensive reflex. This strategy enhances their capacity for militant recruitment, financial mobilization, and civilian support. The more significant the perceived threat, the more likely the audience is to endorse radical actions they might otherwise reject. Thus, securitization becomes a strategic tool for consolidating power, maintaining group cohesion, and legitimizing actions deemed essential for the community’s survival.

The securitization efforts of non-state armed groups extend beyond their own communities, as they also employ security discourses to gain legitimacy on the international stage. While national or religious rhetoric is used to consolidate local support, a different narrative is crafted for global audiences. For example, an organization identifying itself as a “resistance movement” may portray the opposing state as a “tyrannical power violating human rights” to the international community. This framing presents their acts of violence as “resistance against oppression” and as measures to “ensure the security of a persecuted people.” As part of this strategy, some groups instrumentalize international law and norms, selectively invoking human rights discourse, humanitarian principles, or legal

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frameworks to align their actions with global moral and legal standards. This dual approach enables non-state armed groups to maintain internal cohesion while mitigating external pressures and garnering sympathy or political support from international actors. Through such securitization strategies, these groups navigate both local and global political landscapes, shaping narratives that serve their strategic interests.

The Ideological Foundations of Hezbollah: Resistance, Islamism, and the Palestinian Cause

Hezbollah's ideological foundations are rooted in the Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) doctrine, inspired directly by Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini's political-religious teachings. Emerging in the early 1980s as a resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, Hezbollah quickly evolved into a significant regional actor. Its 1985 manifesto explicitly rejects Israel's existence, underlines its connection to Iran, and emphasizes its role as part of the broader Islamic ummah. Originally aiming to establish an Islamic state in Lebanon, Hezbollah shifted its strategy toward Islamist socialization, gradually Islamizing society through grassroots initiatives, thereby allowing greater adaptability within Lebanon's complex political environment.⁷

Shiite Islamism and resistance against Israel are central to Hezbollah's ideology. The Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine asserts that Islamic jurists hold political authority in the absence of Imam Mahdi, which aligns Hezbollah closely with Iran's theocratic state model. Hezbollah has served as Iran's proxy, militarily and financially supported to extend Iranian influence across the Middle East. Its anti-Israel and anti-imperialist narratives position the organization as the defender of Lebanon's Shiite community and a counterweight to Western policies, presenting Israel as an imperialist force threatening regional autonomy.

Hezbollah's ideological discourse heavily integrates the historical Shiite Karbala narrative,⁸ framing its contemporary struggle against Israel and Western powers as a continuation of Imam Hussein's resistance against oppression.⁹ Martyrdom is central in mobilizing its supporters, symbolizing both religious sacrifice and political resistance, thus reinforcing communal solidarity. Hezbollah portrays the Shiite community as perpetually victimized by external forces, particularly Israel and Western powers, legitimizing its actions as defensive necessities.

The Palestinian cause occupies a pivotal ideological and strategic position in Hezbollah's framework. Since its inception, Hezbollah has articulated unwavering support for Palestine as an integral part of its broader resistance narrative against imperialism and Zionism. Palestine is portrayed as a sacred cause, deeply intertwined with Hezbollah's religious obligations under the Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine and framed within its anti-imperialist stance. Hezbollah views the liberation of Palestine and particularly Jerusalem as a religious imperative, crucial to the eschatological narrative of the Mahdi's eventual return.¹⁰

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While Hezbollah's identification with Palestine has ideological dimensions rooted in the Islamic Revolution, practical strategic interests also underpin this solidarity. The historical Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon significantly influenced Hezbollah's anti-Israel stance, creating a shared experience of oppression with the Palestinian people. Hezbollah has actively provided military, logistical, and intelligence support to Palestinian resistance groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, reinforcing its regional leadership within the resistance narrative. This support enhances both Hezbollah's operational capabilities and its legitimacy across the broader Arab and Islamic worlds.

Hezbollah employs strategic religious symbolism, equating the Karbala narrative to the Palestinian resistance.¹¹ In speeches, Hassan Nasrallah frequently aligns Palestinian resistance with Imam Hussein's struggle, characterizing Israel as analogous to Yazid, the oppressor in the Karbala story. These parallels reinforce Hezbollah's ideological framing of the Palestinian cause as inherently tied to the Shiite ethos of sacrifice and resistance.

Hezbollah's consistent opposition to peace processes with Israel underscores its ideological position that armed resistance is the only legitimate and effective strategy. This position was reinforced by Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, portrayed by Hezbollah as a decisive victory validating its resistance doctrine. Hezbollah's media channels, notably Al-Manar TV, propagate these ideological narratives, emphasizing resistance and critiquing any negotiations or concessions to Israel.

However, Hezbollah's ideological commitments have faced challenges, notably during the Syrian conflict. Its alliance with the Assad regime and direct military involvement created tensions within the Axis of Resistance,¹² particularly with Hamas due to sectarian divisions and strategic realignments. Despite initial strains, strategic pragmatism has recently facilitated renewed collaboration against common adversaries, reaffirming Hezbollah's role within the regional resistance framework.

Thus, Hezbollah's ideological foundations are multidimensional, blending Shiite religious doctrine, resistance against Israeli occupation, and solidarity with the Palestinian cause into a coherent ideological and strategic narrative.¹³ This ideological coherence enables Hezbollah to navigate complex regional dynamics, maintaining its legitimacy and mobilizing both local and broader regional support amidst shifting geopolitical realities.

Hezbollah's Discursive Transformation: The Syrian Conflict, Securitization, and Regional Repositioning

The conflict in Syria and the weakening of the Assad regime marked a significant rupture in Hezbollah's security discourse and its regional role. Although the Syrian crisis, which erupted in 2011, initially appeared as an external development beyond Lebanon's borders, Hezbollah soon framed it as a

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matter concerning the survival of both Lebanon and the Axis of Resistance. In the early stages, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria was limited to advisory and supportive roles. While encouraging the Assad government to implement reforms, Hezbollah publicly declared its support for the regime. The organization characterized the protesters as "foreign agents" backed by the U.S. and described opposition groups as "takfiris,"¹⁴ framing the uprisings as a Western-instigated

rebellion. During this period, Hezbollah denied allegations of direct military intervention, asserting that its role was confined to providing advisory support and contributing to the process through diplomatic means.¹⁵ However, as the conflict escalated, Hezbollah's involvement became increasingly prominent.

The organization transitioned from an advisory position to a direct military role, actively engaging on the battlefield as a key actor in defense of the Assad regime.

By 2012-2013, the increasing possibility of the Assad regime's collapse was perceived by Hezbollah as a critical existential threat. The fall of the Assad regime posed a significant risk of severing the longstanding Syria–Hezbollah–Iran alliance. This alliance had provided Hezbollah with strategic depth and served as a vital lifeline for weapons and logistical support from Iran. Hezbollah's leaders repeatedly described Syria as the “backbone of the resistance,” arguing that the loss of a friendly government in Damascus would leave Lebanon defenseless. This discourse reflected the securitization process highlighted by securitization theory: Hezbollah framed the Syrian Civil War as a struggle for survival, presenting it to its community and supporters as a battle essential to their continued existence.

Hezbollah's decision to intervene militarily in Syria was facilitated through a deliberate act of securitization. From 2013 onwards, Hezbollah's leadership justified its intervention by emphasizing the spillover effects of the Syrian war on Lebanon, presenting several key arguments: (1) the claim that radicalist armed groups (such as al-Nusra and Daesh) posed an immediate and direct threat not only to Syria but also to Lebanon and, specifically, to the Shiite community; (2) the risk of destruction posed by these takfiri groups to Shiite holy sites, such as the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine in Damascus; and (3) the argument that the fall of Syria would strengthen the plans of Israel and “imperialist” powers in the region. These arguments became central to Hezbollah's discourse, with the organization consistently invoking them to legitimize its military presence in Syria. Nasrallah argued that fighting in Syria was essential to protecting Lebanon and constituted part of the broader resistance against Israel. Within this narrative, the rise of radicalist armed groups in Syria was framed as an existential threat to Lebanon. Hezbollah frequently linked the threats arising from the Syrian conflict with the necessity of resisting Israel, thereby reinforcing the existential nature of its struggle. In response to these emerging threats, Hezbollah began emphasizing the protective and defensive dimensions of its resistance discourse, portraying itself not only as a force opposing Israel but also as a bulwark against radicalist militancy. This discursive shift illustrates how political actors redefine aspects of their identity in relation to changing notions of the “other.” Rather than a fundamental transformation, this reflects a strategic recalibration of emphasis within Hezbollah's existing ideological

framework, allowing it to justify its military engagement in Syria while maintaining continuity with its core resistance narrative.

The characterization of anti-Assad movements in Syria as takfiri groups is particularly notable within Hezbollah's discourse. This rhetorical innovation became one of the key elements of Hezbollah's discursive transformation. To legitimize its intervention in the Syrian Civil War, Hezbollah revised its security discourse. By 2013, in addition to its traditional narrative that framed Israel as the primary threat, Hezbollah began labeling radical groups in Syria as takfiris as shown in Table 1.¹⁶ This discursive shift was not only a response to the dynamics of the battlefield but also to Hezbollah's legitimacy crisis within Lebanon. The organization's direct involvement in the Syrian conflict had triggered widespread criticism in Lebanon, prompting the need to mobilize public support through the construction of a new threat perception. Within this framework, the concept of takfiris was presented as a threat not only to the warring factions in Syria but also to Lebanon's internal stability. Hezbollah claimed that it was defending the country against this threat. However, this securitization strategy deepened sectarian fault lines within Lebanon and sparked debates even among Hezbollah's traditional supporters. The framing of takfiris as a security threat thus became a double-edged discourse, simultaneously mobilizing support and intensifying internal divisions.

An important dimension of this securitization discourse was its focus on the domestic audience. Hezbollah was aware that its long-standing image as a "champion of resistance against Israel" could be damaged by its decision to engage in conflicts against the opposition in Syria that was mainly composed of Sunni Arabs. To mitigate this, the organization sought to make its intervention in Syria acceptable to segments of the Lebanese population. The threat narratives advanced by Hezbollah—such as preventing the spillover of terrorism into Lebanon, averting sectarian massacres, and protecting sacred shrines and Shiite villages along the border—resonated, particularly among its Shiite base and even some Christian allies. Many of the organization's supporters internalized the leadership's argument, often summarized as, "If we do not fight in Syria, Daesh will fight in Beirut." Through this discourse, Hezbollah was able to justify its entry into the Syrian war to its constituents, effectively disregarding Lebanon's official government policies and power-sharing dynamics. This securitization strategy enabled Hezbollah to maintain its legitimacy and mobilize domestic support for a highly controversial military intervention.

Undoubtedly, Hezbollah was unable to convince all segments of Lebanese society regarding its intervention in Syria. Criticism against the organization

increased, particularly among Lebanon's Sunni community and some Christian factions. Faced with growing opposition, Hezbollah reached a critical juncture, prompting a return to its traditional discourse centered on the threat posed by Israel. An analysis of Nasrallah's speeches between 2011 and 2016 reveals that the frequent use of terms such as "Lebanon," "Lebanese," "takfiri," and "Israel/i" reflected shifts in Hezbollah's rhetoric and that these changes were influenced by its policies in Syria. The term "takfiri" began appearing in 2012 and saw a significant increase following Hezbollah's direct involvement in the Syrian conflict. Similarly, the use of "Lebanon" and "Lebanese" also rose sharply, suggesting Hezbollah's attempt to overcome internal criticisms related to its Syrian intervention. The organization's involvement in Syria was increasingly perceived through a sectarian lens, leading to accusations within Lebanon that Hezbollah was waging war against Sunni Muslims. To counter these criticisms, Hezbollah appears to have intensified its references to Lebanese identity in its discourse.

Another notable trend, as indicated by the data, concerns the usage of the term "Israel/i." While the use of "takfiri" increased between 2011 and 2013, the use of "Israel/i" dramatically declined until 2013, after which it began to rise again (Table 1). Given that one of the main criticisms leveled against Hezbollah was its perceived failure to prioritize resistance against Israel, the organization strategically refocused its anti-Israel rhetoric to divert attention from its controversial intervention in Syria.¹⁷ As a result, the usage of both the terms "takfiri" and "Israel/i" increased in parallel. In fact, following Hezbollah's capture of cities near the Lebanese border from Syrian opposition forces in 2015, Nasrallah declared that "the road to Jerusalem passes through these areas," thereby linking the Palestinian cause to the Syrian conflict.¹⁸ This rhetorical strategy served to align Hezbollah's involvement in Syria with its broader resistance narrative, reinforcing its legitimacy in the eyes of its domestic constituency.

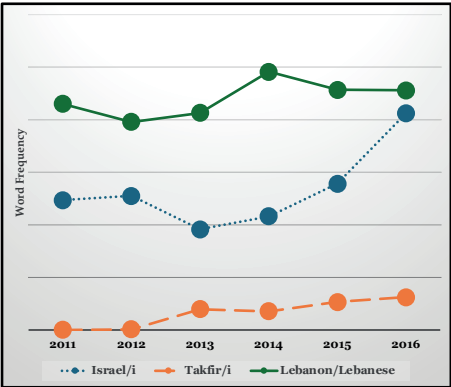
Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian Civil War had significant military and geopolitical consequences. For the first time, the organization engaged in large-scale operations beyond Lebanon's borders, surpassing its traditional identity as a "defensive resistance" force and transforming into a regional power. Years of conflict on the Syrian front provided Hezbollah with conventional warfare experience, enhanced operational capabilities in diverse geographic environments, and improved coordination skills with allied militias. More critically, Hezbollah solidified its role as Iran's regional proxy force, becoming a crucial link in a supply corridor extending from Iran through Iraq and into Syria. Following the survival of the Assad regime—backed by Russia, Iran, and

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the U.S.-led international coalition’s campaign against Daesh—Hezbollah secured its strategic presence in Syria. This presence allowed the organization to extend its frontlines against Israel into Syrian territory. Consequently, Hezbollah’s presence in southern Syria has been closely monitored by Israel and has occasionally been targeted by Israeli airstrikes. Hezbollah, in turn, has incorporated these incidents

into its security discourse, portraying Israel’s actions in Syria as part of hostile plans against Lebanon and issuing constant alerts across all fronts. Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria significantly enhanced its logistical and military capabilities. What initially served as a mere transit corridor for Iranian weapons gradually transformed into a forward-operating zone. The town of Qusayr became a key hub in this transformation, hosting Hezbollah’s main logistical base and symbolizing its entrenchment in Syrian territory. The group even held a military parade there, showcasing tanks and heavy weaponry—an unprecedented display of force outside Lebanon.¹⁹ This expansion enabled Hezbollah to integrate advanced arms more effectively, including precision-guided missiles and drones, into its arsenal. As a result, the organization not only bolstered its operational reach, but also reinforced its strategic position within the broader regional power structure.

Table 1: Word frequency “Israel/i,” “Takfir/i,” and “Lebanon/Lebanese” in Nasrallah’s speeches and changes in Hezbollah’s discourse (2011-2016)



Source: Nail Elhan, “Hezbollah’s Diversionary War in Lebanon: Continuity and Change in the Threat Perception,” *İnsan ve Toplum*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2023), p. 182.

Faced with the potential collapse of the Assad regime, Hezbollah's securitization discourse enabled the organization both to preserve its legitimacy within Lebanon and transform its regional role. In the context of Syria's new status quo, Hezbollah positioned itself as an indispensable security actor. While maintaining its "balance and deterrence" mission against Israel in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah simultaneously evolved into a coordinating power within Syrian territory and, more broadly, across the Axis of Resistance in the Middle East. The core of this shift in Hezbollah's regional position lay in the discursive construction of threat perceptions, which allowed the organization to expand its influence both domestically and regionally. This strategy not only granted Hezbollah the capacity to operate independently of the Lebanese state, but also reinforced its alliances with Iran and Syria under the guise of ideological necessity. By framing its actions as essential for regional security, Hezbollah legitimized its autonomous military and political maneuvers, securing a pivotal role within the broader resistance framework.

Hezbollah's Threat Perception and Securitization Strategies after the October 7 Attacks

The shifts in Hezbollah's security discourse following the October 7, 2023, attacks reflect the dynamic and adaptive nature of its securitization strategy. Hamas's surprise assault on Israel and the subsequent Gaza War marked a critical juncture for the Axis of Resistance, where Hezbollah occupies a central role. Hamas's call for regional allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran to join the battle placed significant pressure on Hezbollah to demonstrate its commitment to the Palestinian cause. Inaction risked undermining its long-cultivated image as the vanguard of resistance. On October 8, Hezbollah launched limited assaults on Israeli military positions in northern Israel, citing Israeli operations in Gaza and attacks against Palestinians.²⁰ These low-intensity operations disrupted the relative stability along the Israel-Lebanon border and triggered a new phase of confrontation.²¹ In retaliation, the Israeli military conducted airstrikes on Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley, and weapons depots. These strikes marked the gradual intensification of the conflict. Tensions escalated further with Israeli operations on September 17-18, 2024, which detonated communication equipment—including radios and electronic devices—used by Hezbollah across Lebanon. These blasts killed or injured hundreds, including Hezbollah operatives, and reportedly wounded Iran's ambassador to Lebanon.²² Open sources suggest that Israeli intelligence

may have planted explosives in devices destined for Hezbollah and detonated them remotely.

The conflict soon resulted in large-scale displacement, forcing thousands of Israeli and Lebanese civilians to flee border areas. Israeli strikes escalated in intensity: on July 30, 2024, a drone attack in Beirut killed Fuad Shukr, a senior Hezbollah commander. On September 20, another Israeli airstrike killed Ibrahim Aqil, a commander of Hezbollah's elite Radwan Force, along with other high-ranking figures. Most notably, on September 27, an Israeli strike killed Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah. His assassination raised urgent questions about Hezbollah's future leadership, strategic coherence, and position within the Axis of Resistance.

In response to these developments, Hezbollah adopted a dual-layered securitization strategy, aligning with the logic of constrained warfare. First, it maintained deterrence through limited and carefully calculated military actions, including artillery strikes, targeted missile launches, and drone incursions. Second, it mobilized symbolic and rhetorical tools—such as martyrdom ceremonies and mass rallies—to reaffirm its commitment to the Palestinian cause and sustain morale among its base and regional supporters.

Hezbollah framed its restrained engagement as part of a broader collective struggle. In his November 3, 2023 speech, Nasrallah declared, "We are ready to intervene, if necessary, but this is the Palestinians' war," underlining the group's intent to defend Lebanon while expressing solidarity with Hamas.²³ This carefully balanced discourse served two purposes: domestically, it positioned Hezbollah as a protector of Lebanese sovereignty; regionally, it reaffirmed its place in the resistance front without provoking full-scale war. Nonetheless, Hezbollah's limited involvement created rhetorical dilemmas. Critics across the Arab-Islamic world labeled its response "insufficient," especially during the first three weeks of Israel's intense assault on Gaza, when Nasrallah remained notably silent. To manage these critiques, Hezbollah relied on symbolic gestures and speeches reaffirming its preparedness and strategic patience. Nasrallah described the Gaza conflict as the beginning of a new historical era and stated that all scenarios are on the table on our fronts.²⁴ This approach reflects Hezbollah's ontological security concerns²⁵—its need to preserve a stable and coherent identity.²⁶ While avoiding full-scale warfare, Hezbollah sought to reaffirm its resistance credentials, portraying its military readiness as both a practical and symbolic act of resistance. It projected Israel not only as

an enemy of Palestine but as an existential threat to Lebanon and the broader Axis of Resistance.

Nasrallah and other leaders used funerals and commemorative events to deliver messages such as “we are ready to make sacrifices for Palestine.” This discourse conveyed a dual message: externally, it functioned as psychological deterrence toward Israel; internally, it reinforced collective identity and legitimized Hezbollah’s continued armed presence. By reinterpreting Israeli aggression in Gaza as a broader regional threat including Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, Hezbollah expanded its resistance discourse from a focus on “liberating Palestine” to “countering regional encirclement.” Within this narrative, Hezbollah linked Syria’s stability directly to its own security, warning that instability in Damascus could spill into Lebanon and endanger the entire resistance front.

Although Hezbollah has not established direct relations with the post-Assad Syrian administration, it continues to emphasize Syria’s sovereignty in its rhetoric. This appears aimed at maintaining strategic alignment without alienating the new Syrian leadership. Simultaneously, Hezbollah has worked to consolidate its domestic political position. It has strengthened its alliance with the Amal Movement, built relations with Christian factions, and emphasized the “Army–People–Resistance” triad to justify its military presence as part of national defense. Meanwhile, the rise of a new Lebanese government under Prime Minister Nawaf Salam has introduced new political challenges. While Hezbollah supported the government in the confidence vote, Salam’s emphasis on state monopoly over arms and a neutral foreign policy signals a shift. His statements that “the Lebanese army is responsible for protecting the country’s borders” and “decisions regarding war and peace must be made by the state” reflect mounting pressure to limit Hezbollah’s autonomy.

In this context, Hezbollah faces increasing internal and external constraints. Its strategy appears to be one of pragmatic adaptation, maintaining its resistance narrative and deterrent

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posture while avoiding direct confrontation that could threaten its survival or provoke a domestic backlash. The October 7 attacks and their aftermath thus mark not only a new phase in regional conflict, but also a critical moment of recalibration for Hezbollah's security discourse, political strategy, and ideological identity.

The Post-Assad Era and Hezbollah's Strategic Contraction: From Regional Power to Domestic Containment

The Assad regime collapsed on December 8, 2024, after allied opposition groups led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) captured Damascus. This development has further weakened Hezbollah's already fragile strategic position, depriving the group of its most critical regional ally and logistical depth.²⁷ The emergence of a new administration in Damascus, distanced from Hezbollah, has led to the organization's diminished ability to utilize its critical logistical corridor effectively. Analysts indicate that the land corridor stretching from Iran through Syria to Lebanon has been destroyed, severing Hezbollah's most crucial supply line for heavy weapons and logistical support.²⁸ The loss of Syria also signifies the disappearance of a strategic buffer zone. In previous conflicts, Hezbollah could evacuate its assets and even Lebanese civilians to Syria for security purposes, while deploying its fighters to rear bases deep within Syrian territory. This strategic depth, however, has now been eliminated. Hezbollah forces are now confined to Lebanon's limited geography under constant Israeli surveillance. Under this trajectory, Hezbollah found itself 'isolated' and 'trapped' within Lebanon,²⁹ experiencing its weakest moment in decades, according to Imad Salamey, a senior Middle East policy adviser.³⁰ Across the border, neither Shiite refugees nor rear bases are now available, significantly restricting Hezbollah's military maneuverability and logistical flexibility. Another analysis suggests that in the post-Assad period, Hezbollah feels squeezed between Israel from the south and Syria from the east.³¹ This scenario increases Hezbollah's vulnerability in any future war, as there are no longer safe zones for retreat in the event of intensified Israeli attacks.

Moreover, the transitional Syrian government leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, has not responded to Israel's aggressive actions against Syria, further deepening Hezbollah's concerns.³² The collapse of the Assad regime has reduced Hezbollah's military posture from regional influence to local defense, forcing the organization into a struggle to maintain its superiority with limited resources. In previous years, Hezbollah's leaders openly described this situation

as a “devastating setback,” warning that if Syria fell into enemy hands, “the resistance would be besieged” and Israel would gain strategic advantage.³³ This development has significantly undermined Hezbollah’s strategic flexibility and heightened its vulnerability against Israel.

In response to the collapse of the Assad regime and increasing Israeli aggression, Hezbollah has begun to reposition its military and strategic posture. The loss of Syria as a logistical corridor and strategic ally has deprived the group of its depth and mobility, compelling a shift in its operations. Hezbollah is now relocating its military assets outside Syria, developing advanced missile technology domestically, and expanding its tunnel networks along the Lebanon-Israel border. Analysts note that Israel’s intensified airstrikes in Syria have pushed the organization toward more covert activity and defensive infrastructure.³⁴

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Consequently, Hezbollah’s military strategy has shifted from large-scale confrontations to defense and clandestine reinforcement. The group has once again framed Israel as an existential threat, not only to Lebanon but to the broader Axis of Resistance. Israeli actions, especially in Syria and the Golan Heights, are described as “a blatant assault on Syria’s sovereignty and an attempt to destabilize the region.” Hezbollah has called on the international community to oppose Israeli aggression³⁵ and reaffirmed its solidarity with Syria and its people.³⁶ The narrative has now expanded beyond “resistance against Israeli occupation” to encompass “resistance against regional encirclement.” Hezbollah frames Israel’s assaults not only as threats to Lebanon but also as attacks targeting broader regional resistance fronts, including Syria and Yemen.³⁷ This repositioning reflects Hezbollah’s broader strategic adaptation to evolving regional dynamics. By reinforcing its resistance discourse and emphasizing external threats, the organization seeks to maintain its influence, legitimacy, and deterrent posture in the post-Assad context.

Following the collapse of the Assad regime, Hezbollah appears to have directly linked Syria’s stability to its own existential security. Statements in Hezbollah’s media have emphasized that Syria’s future is “vital for the Axis of Resistance,” arguing that any instability in Syria would inevitably spill over into Lebanon.³⁸

The developments after October 7 have further intensified this discourse. Israel's attacks and military operations in Gaza have been framed by Hezbollah as threats not only to Palestinians but also to Lebanon and Syria. Hezbollah has characterized Israel's regional aggression as part of a broader encirclement of the Axis of Resistance, thereby reinforcing the necessity of its military presence and resistance movement.³⁹

Although Hezbollah has not established direct relations with the new administration in Syria, it has continued to emphasize the necessity of protecting Syria's sovereignty. This strategy can be seen as an effort both to preserve Hezbollah's regional legitimacy and strengthen the resistance front between Syria and Israel.⁴⁰ This discourse appears to be developed with the dual aim of avoiding tensions with the new Syrian leadership while ensuring that Syria remains aligned within the Axis of Resistance against Israel.

In the new period, it is anticipated that the political dynamics in Lebanon may gradually shift. With Syria no longer functioning as a rear base for Hezbollah, the organization's rivals within Lebanon could be emboldened. Considering that Ahmad al-Sharaa's first foreign visit was to Saudi Arabia and the newly appointed Syrian foreign minister recently traveled to Italy, there are claims that the new administration appears to be aligning itself with Western and Gulf actors.⁴¹ If this orientation continues, it is likely that international powers could coordinate efforts to increase pressure on Hezbollah.⁴² This scenario may, in turn, encourage internal opposition in Lebanon to push for Hezbollah's disarmament or, at a minimum, for restrictions on its military capabilities.

In preparation for this possibility, Hezbollah has pursued a strategy aimed at consolidating its domestic political power. It has strengthened its alliance with its Shiite political partner, the Amal Movement, and has established political relations with various Christian groups to maintain its parliamentary majority and block any hostile legislation. Through this approach, Hezbollah seeks to ensure that Lebanon's state policies remain favorable in the post-Assad era. Hezbollah has particularly emphasized the "Army-People-Resistance" triad, framing its military presence as an integral part of Lebanon's national security. The organization has argued that its armed wing is essential for securing Lebanon's border and acts as a deterrent force against Israel's aggressive policies.⁴³ This discourse can be interpreted as an effort by Hezbollah to strengthen its political position in Lebanon and preempt potential internal criticisms.

On the other hand, Hezbollah has shown signs of rapprochement with Sunni groups. The organization voted in favor of the new government led by Prime

Minister Nawaf Salam during the confidence vote held on January 15, 2025. However, the new government's prominent discourse emphasizes the state's monopoly over armament and Lebanon's pursuit of a neutral foreign policy. Prime Minister Salam's statements, asserting that "the Lebanese army is responsible for protecting the country's borders and that decisions regarding war and peace should be made by the state," indicate that the new period may not be smooth for Hezbollah.⁴⁴ These developments suggest that Hezbollah will face significant challenges in maintaining its current military and political position, particularly as the new government underscores state sovereignty over military affairs.

In the context of shifting regional power alignments and as part of a wider reconfiguration of Middle Eastern geopolitics, Hezbollah's weakening should be understood within Israel's broader strategy to dismantle the Iran-led Axis of Resistance. In recent years, Israel has conducted a series of military strikes targeting Iranian Revolutionary Guard units, arms depots, and key military infrastructure across Syria and Iran itself. These operations have significantly degraded Iran's ability to project power beyond its borders, with direct implications for Hezbollah's strategic depth and resupply capabilities. The collapse of the Assad regime further exposed Hezbollah's vulnerabilities. Analysts argue that the opposition's capture of Damascus was not merely a local development, but a consequence of the simultaneous weakening of both Iran and Hezbollah.⁴⁵

In effect, what has unfolded is the collapse of the regional resistance axis. Once the backbone of an alternative regional order opposed to Western- and Gulf-backed alignment, the Iran-led front has lost much of its coherence and capacity. Gulf states have maintained close ties with Israel, while Iran's influence has receded under military pressure and domestic constraints. Hezbollah now finds itself isolated geographically, politically, and strategically. Only the Houthis in Yemen remain as an active node in what was once a more robust resistance front. In this new regional order, increasingly defined by Gulf-Israel cooperation, Hezbollah's survival as an armed political movement is becoming ever more difficult, particularly with Syria appearing to shift into this emerging configuration. Recent Israeli operations inside Lebanon further demonstrate the extent of Hezbollah's exposed position, highlighting the dramatic reversal in fortunes for what was once considered the spearhead of regional resistance.

Conclusion

Hezbollah currently finds itself at a historic crossroads, challenged by the twin shocks of the October 7 attacks and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. These developments have deeply altered the group's strategic environment, undermining its regional alliances, constraining its military capabilities, and exposing its vulnerabilities both domestically and internationally. What this study has shown, however, is not simply a decline narrative, but rather a complex pattern of strategic adaptation grounded in a robust ideological framework and a dynamic securitization strategy.

Through the lens of securitization theory, Hezbollah's actions can be understood as a calculated response to shifting regional threats and internal legitimacy crises. By discursively constructing Israel, radicalist armed factions, and Western interventionism as existential threats, Hezbollah has managed to justify extraordinary measures such as its sustained armed presence and controversial regional interventions. The use of securitization has allowed Hezbollah to reposition itself rhetorically and militarily from a purely anti-Israel resistance movement to a regional security actor defending the Shiite community and the Axis of Resistance.

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This study highlights how Hezbollah's securitization discourse evolved over time from an exclusive focus on Israeli

occupation to the inclusion of takfiri groups and broader regional encirclement. These shifts demonstrate the group's ability to recalibrate its threat narratives in line with changing geopolitical realities. Hezbollah's framing of the Syrian conflict, for example, as a war against takfiri extremism and a defense of sacred Shiite sites, enabled it to secure support from its base despite widespread criticism. In doing so, the organization successfully mobilized collective fear and religious symbolism, ensuring audience acceptance, which is an essential component of successful securitization.

At the same time, Hezbollah's evolving threat narratives also reflect deeper ontological security concerns. As regional dynamics eroded the group's material strength and disrupted its logistical corridors, Hezbollah intensified efforts to

preserve its identity as the vanguard of resistance. The group's symbolic acts such as martyrdom ceremonies, speeches invoking Imam Hussein, and public reaffirmations of commitment to the Palestinian cause function not only as instruments of deterrence but also as mechanisms for identity stabilization. This emphasis on coherence in identity narratives aligns closely with the ontological security framework, suggesting that Hezbollah's strategic restraint and rhetorical recalibration are as much about preserving self-conception as they are about deterring external threats.

The post-Assad landscape, however, presents Hezbollah with a new set of strategic dilemmas. The collapse of its primary regional ally and logistical partner has reduced Hezbollah's operational range, forcing a retrenchment into Lebanese territory and increasing its dependence on underground infrastructure and domestically produced weaponry. In response, Hezbollah has sought to consolidate its domestic political position reviving alliances, engaging with former rivals, and reinforcing the triad of "Army-People-Resistance" to justify its continued militarization. Yet, this recalibration is not without challenges. The rise of a new Lebanese government with a more state-centric security doctrine, combined with rising internal dissent and external pressures, signals a difficult road ahead.

This study contributes to literature in two significant ways. First, it deepens our understanding of how non-state actors like Hezbollah deploy securitization strategies not only for immediate tactical gain but also for long-term ideological survival. Second, it offers an empirically rich case of how ontological security concerns intersect with strategic adaptation, revealing how identity maintenance can be as crucial as material capacity in times of crisis. By situating Hezbollah's response within these theoretical frameworks, the paper illustrates the multifaceted tools available to non-state actors operating in volatile environments.

Looking forward, Hezbollah's trajectory will likely hinge on its ability to preserve ideological coherence while adapting to growing asymmetries in military power and regional legitimacy. Three potential scenarios can be envisioned: (1) further retrenchment into a purely Lebanese resistance actor with limited regional reach; (2) ideological and organizational transformation into a more conventional political-military hybrid; or (3) strategic fragmentation due to internal and external pressures. Each scenario poses distinct implications for the future of the Axis of Resistance and the broader balance of power in the Middle East.

In conclusion, Hezbollah's case demonstrates how non-state actors use securitization not merely as a rhetorical tool but as a comprehensive political technology that fuses ideology, identity, and strategy. The organization's response to the October 7 attacks and the collapse of the Assad regime reveals the capacity of armed movements to recalibrate in the face of existential shifts, reaffirming the theoretical relevance of both securitization and ontological security in the study of contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Endnotes

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