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Habitat for Hezbollah

By Melani Cammett

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Israel's intense bombing of Lebanon this summer was supposed to bring the organization to its knees. Instead, it gave Hezbollah a chance to display its prowess in caring for Lebanese civilians. Now that a cease-fire has been inked, Hezbollah is well positioned to deliver the social services that the Lebanese so desperately need.

After a month of war, Israel and Lebanon have finally agreed to hold their fire. With the dust settling, the reconstruction of Lebanon has begun and Hezbollah is positioning itself to become indispensable in the effort. Part military force, part political party, and part organized social movement, Hezbollah will now shift gears and capitalize on its nonmilitary skills. Whatever strength the movement lost during the fighting, it may recover quickly as Lebanon rebuilds.

Hezbollah, it should be recalled, emerged during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and gained legitimacy not only through military feats but also through reconstruction and development work. It emerged as the premier advocate and provider for poor and middle class Shia in a society that had long marginalized them. Over time, the organization took on schooling, healthcare, loans, and other forms of social assistance. Since 1988, Hezbollah has implemented more than 10,000 projects to promote agricultural development, build homes and businesses, and provide water, sewage, and electricity. Supporters and critics alike have long acknowledged that Hezbollah is the most effective welfare provider in Lebanon—far more effective than the state.



Relief center: Hezbollah is positioning itself to be an indispensable pillar of support while Lebanon rebuilds.

OUSSAMA AYOUB/AFP/Getty Images

Hezbollah's social work has focused on Shia areas, but it is a broader movement than is often acknowledged. To be sure, some services are reserved for the families of "martyrs," or fighters who died in struggles against Israel. But Hezbollah and its network of affiliated charities reach beyond the Shia community. In the early 1990s, when Christian families began to return to Haret Hreik in the southern suburb of Beirut after the civil war, Hezbollah helped them rebuild

their homes and businesses. During visits to health clinics this summer, I spoke with non-Shia beneficiaries who chose Hezbollah's medical services on the basis of quality and cost. Given the choice, of course, most Maronite Christians would probably not send their children to a Hezbollah-run school, but they are willing to accept healthcare and financial assistance from the organization.

Persistent state weakness and a strong tradition of denominational politics have given Lebanon a long history of faith-based social welfare. During the 15-year civil war, many state agencies collapsed, while international and local nongovernmental organizations, as well as militias, cared for the civilian population. Current relief efforts largely follow this pattern. Civil society organizations have taken the lead in setting up and running centers that house, feed, and provide medical care to displaced Lebanese.

Hezbollah is at the forefront of these efforts. Despite the destruction of many of its hospitals, schools, and community centers in this summer's fighting, the organization proved adept at relief operations. International organizations participating in the effort attest that Hezbollah is spending hundreds of thousands of dollars per day to do everything from delivering hot meals and medicines to organizing recreational activities for displaced adults and children living in temporary shelters. Within 24 hours of the cease-fire, a Lebanese television station reported that Hezbollah had set up hotlines to help refugees based on their place of residence and had dispatched teams to assess damage and plan for reconstruction. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has pledged to assist anyone whose home or business was destroyed with rebuilding and living costs. The breakdown of Hezbollah's financing is hotly contested, but it's clear that official and private funds from Iran and charitable contributions from supporters within Lebanon are critical sources.

Money is not the only factor facilitating Hezbollah's relief operations. Its social service infrastructure draws on the human capital of its cadres, who have applied their organizational and technological skills to document and address the needs of thousands of displaced families. Secular organizations and other religious institutions, including many that have long opposed Hezbollah's political and military role in Lebanon, view the organization as a legitimate and effective partner in the current relief operations. Hezbollah has a standing membership in Lebanon's network of nongovernmental organizations, and throughout the conflict, its representatives participated in coordinating the relief effort.

Israel's attacks—ostensibly aimed at disbanding Hezbollah and inducing an anti-Hezbollah backlash in Lebanese society—have instead bolstered the organization's domestic influence. The deaths of more than a thousand Lebanese civilians and Israel's destruction of Lebanon's new infrastructure, rebuilt at great expense in the 1990s after the civil war, have produced deep and lasting resentment against Israel in all of Lebanon's communities. What's more, Lebanon's pro-Western elite feels abandoned by the United States and will struggle to maintain a pro-Western line.

This united front will likely fracture in the aftermath of the war, and support for Hezbollah could decline, particularly outside of the Shia community. After all, Lebanon remains divided along sectarian lines. At least one community leader has already openly criticized Hezbollah for providing Israel with a pretext to invade. But these pockets of resentment provide an even greater incentive for Hezbollah to take the lead in rebuilding the country. Playing a visible role in the relief and reconstruction efforts gives Hezbollah an opportunity to regain whatever credibility it lost by putting its organizational and material resources to work. Bombs and blockades may have depleted Hezbollah's supply of weapons and physical capital, but they have highlighted the welfare activities that have made the organization a key part of the Lebanese social fabric.

Melani Cammett is assistant professor of political science at Brown University and an academy scholar at Harvard University. She recently returned from Lebanon, where she was conducting field research for her new book on religion and politics in Lebanese society.
