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ANALYSIS PAPER

FIGHTING WORDS:

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AN ANALYSIS OF HEZBOLLAH'S NARRATIVE SINCE THE WAR ON GAZA

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HOW THE PARTY OF GOD'S NARRATIVE HAS EVOLVED AND WHAT IT MEANS





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“We cannot remain silent in the face of such a grave violation,” [said](#) Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah to vast crowds of supporters earlier this month. Nasrallah, speaking the day after senior Hamas official Saleh Al-Aroui was [assassinated](#) in a suspected Israeli drone strike in Beirut’s southern suburbs, vowed revenge for the attack.

News media jumped, speculating on what this might mean for Hezbollah’s involvement in the Gaza War. Indeed, Nasrallah’s infrequent speeches since the conflict began on October 7 have been the overwhelming focus of analysis for political pundits scrambling to figure out Hezbollah’s position related to the war.

This, however, has overlooked the regular stream of messaging the party has been putting out into the public through its members of parliament (MPs) and other senior representatives. For instance, MPs Ibrahim al-Moussawi and Hussein al-Hajj Hassan are among the Hezbollah officials who have been consistently tweeting about the Gaza War, while Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem gave an [interview](#) to NBC News in early November 2023.

Amid escalating tensions, the rich collection of public statements available offers nuanced insights on how Hezbollah’s narrative on the war has been evolving, and the party’s considerations amid the shifting geopolitical and military landscape.

READY FOR WAR

Any narrative analysis of Hezbollah must account for the standard context in which the militia-cum-political party situates itself relative to its longstanding conflict with Israel: that it is destined to be victorious, continually growing [stronger](#), and relentlessly imposing its might on Israel. This projection of self-confidence was immediately noticeable in the discourse from Hezbollah officials following Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel. Their rhetoric was defiant, signalling the party's preparedness for conflict and willingness to wage war.

October 7 saw Hezbollah's communications department quickly assume a war footing, marking a dramatic shift in the content and frequency of the party's messaging, according to [Badil's](#) media monitoring database. In the four-month period leading up to the Hamas-led attack on Israel, Hezbollah's public discourse had generally centred around Lebanon's long-delayed [presidential election](#), with more than 80 related public statements by party officials and affiliates in that time. Since October 7, however, the substance of party pronouncements has pivoted overwhelmingly towards defence and security issues, while being accompanied by a significant increase in the frequency of its messaging, with more than 300 statements made on these topics as of this writing.

"They are running a pretty tight ship in terms of communication", said Nicholas Noe, co-founder of Mideastwire.com and editor of *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. "I have seen coherency, and relative unanimity in their public messaging," Noe added.

Statements from Hezbollah's political representatives showed support of Hamas, describing the attack as a decisive response to Israel's continued occupation and a step towards victory for the resistance. MP Ibrahim al-Moussawi [tweeted](#) on October 8: "The time of defeats has passed and the time of victories has come (...). What

comes after October 7, 2023 is not the same as before. This is a strategic historical juncture. Israel will not continue as it was, and neither will the resistance and its axis."

Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, in her book *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, discusses how the party incorporates the notion of 'divine providence' into its narrative, effectively dismissing any prospect of strategic failures in its protracted struggles. She explains that Hezbollah officials, in asserting that the party's actions are divinely guided, frame their endeavours as axiomatically rewarding, while disparaging Israel's military and its dependence on US support. Echoing this sentiment, MP Hussein al-Hajj Hassan [stated](#) on October 22: "All fleets, warships, financial and military support will not intimidate the resistance, and will not weaken the determination and steadfastness of the fighters. Victory comes only from God."

David Daoud, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, focused on Lebanon and Hezbollah, discussed the necessity for the party to continuously exhibit its power against Israel during a [roundtable](#) talk in November. He said that any perception of Hezbollah's vulnerability or Israel's ascendancy could threaten the group's foundations. To maintain a façade of strength, Daoud added that Hezbollah needs to portray itself as always prepared to counter Israeli aggression even if it is currently keen to avoid an all-out war.

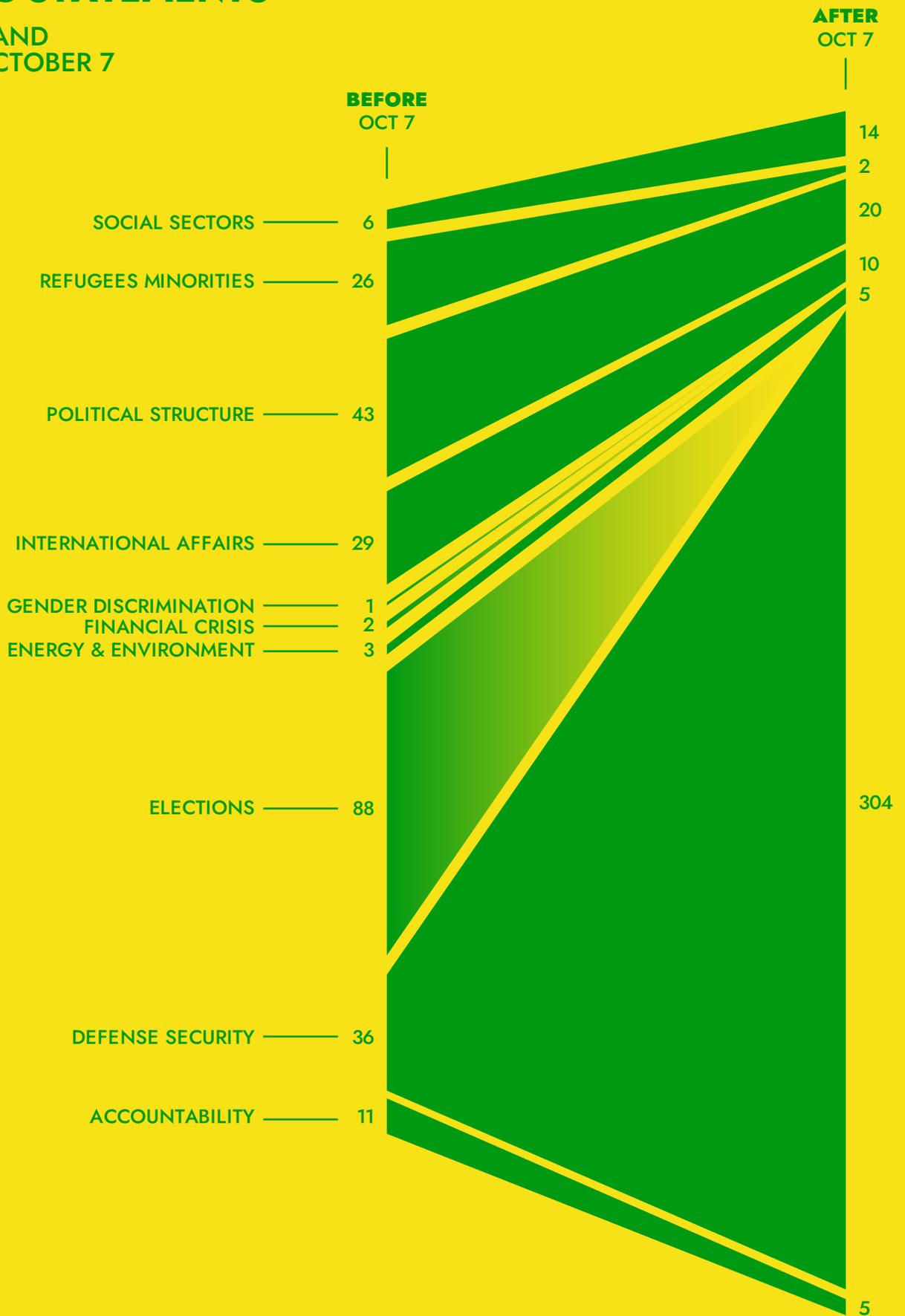
MP Ali Fayyad made this point [bluntly](#) on October 20: "The resistance is ready for all other options, escalating to the highest level."

SHARING THE BURDEN

A shift in Hezbollah's rhetoric became apparent when the [risks](#) of direct engagement escalated with the dramatic surge in US military assets in the region. Natalie Smrekar, a PhD Fellow at the Institut français du Proche-Orient specializing in Shiite political discourse

THE FOCUS OF HEZBOLLAH PUBLIC STATEMENTS

BEFORE AND AFTER OCTOBER 7



analysis, noted this change in an interview with The Badil. Smrekar points to the party's new emphasis on garnering international support, a strategy she refers to as the adoption of 'diplomatic language'.

Echoing a [call](#) from Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, Hezbollah politicians urged Arab countries to impose an oil-and-gas embargo on Israel, while prompting them to provide aid to Gaza through the Rafah border crossing. On October 22, MP Mohammad Raad [said](#): "Instead of some talkative individuals searching for the role of the resistance in Lebanon in supporting Gaza, its cause, and its people, let them demand the Arab regimes to cancel the legitimacy of the normalisation occurring between them and the Zionist enemy."

While such rhetoric was undoubtedly intended to embarrass Arab leaders for their [inaction](#), it was also meant to redistribute responsibilities. Hezbollah, facing the formidable risk of an all-out war with Israel, is not inclined to make Lebanon another Gaza, explains Bashir Saade, a Lecturer in Politics and Religion at the University of Stirling and author of *Hizbullah and the Politics of Remembrance*. Saade notes that Hezbollah sees more strategic victory in neutralizing Israel at the border.

"There is a bit of a cynical argument there," Saade adds. "Some people are saying 'Why doesn't Hezbollah intervene in order to stop the killing of civilians?' It is a good point, but the problem is that if they intervene, they may cause more killings of civilians. The only way to hope that less civilians are getting killed is to

win asymmetrically with Israel, to get Israel to the point where it will say 'Ok, I cannot stop Hamas, I cannot stop Hezbollah, I have to negotiate and compromise'."

MP Hussein al-Hajj Hassan, seemingly acknowledging the disparity between Hezbollah's ready-for-war narrative and the counterbalancing threat of Lebanon being subjected to devastating military force, [called](#) on "all free people around the world, governments, human rights organisations, activists, journalists, politicians, and anyone who can, to file a complaint against the enemy for committing war crimes and racist violations, and for all the crimes committed in Gaza. The Resistance relies on field strength and the strength of justice".

While Hezbollah remains rhetorically combative, it is 'cautious' about further escalation, calling on the international community for support, says Smrekar. MP Ibrahim al-Moussawi [tweeted](#) on November 22 that "the international system must be reformulated in such a way that it does not allow the likes of Israel, and its Western state sponsors who claim civilisation, to be part of the international community or to persist in their position of full support for Israel's criminality without fear of accountability or punishment".

What does this change in narrative tell us about Hezbollah? The tenor of the party's statements reflects Hezbollah's key dilemma, namely, how to respond to Israeli attacks while considering the repercussions of direct involvement. "Whatever opinion is shared in the media or in political statements is not as important as what military reality produces", sums up Saade.

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Timeline of Conflict

since October 7



OCT 7
HAMAS LAUNCHES THE 'AL-AQSA FLOOD' OPERATION



OCT 8
HEZBOLLAH BEGINS SHELLING ISRAEL



OCT 8
ISRAEL STARTS POUNDING GAZA, KILLING HUNDREDS



OCT 8
IRANIAN FM HOSEIN AMIR-ABDOLLAHIAN ARRIVES IN LEBANON



OCT 15
PENTAGON DEPLOYS TWO AIRCRAFT CARRIERS TO THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN



OCT 19
HOUSHI ATTACK SOUTHERN ISRAEL AND SHIPS LINKED TO ISRAEL



NOV 3
NASRALLAH DELIVERS HIS FIRST SPEECH

"All possibilities on our Lebanese front are open, and all options are on the table, ready for us to pursue at any moment. We must therefore all be prepared for all the upcoming possibilities"



NOV 7
U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR AMOS HOCHSTEIN IN LEBANON FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF UNSCR 1701.

"Is it reasonable that 57 Arab and Islamic countries cannot open the Rafah crossing?"

"If Hezbollah chooses to start an all-out war, then it will single-handedly turn Beirut and South Lebanon into Gaza and Khan Yunis"

"The United States does not want to expand the war because it is preoccupied with the Ukraine front and is preparing for a strategic defeat against Russia"



NOV 11
NASRALLAH DELIVERS HIS SECOND SPEECH



NOV 24
QATAR-MEDIATED FOUR-DAY TRUCE TAKES EFFECT



DEC 7
NETANYAHU WARNS HEZBOLLAH

"A response will inevitably come to the assassination that targeted Hamas leader Saleh Al-Arouri in the southern suburbs"



JAN 2
PRECISION STRIKE KILLS HAMAS DEPUTY SALEH AL-AROURI



JAN 5
NASRALLAH DELIVERS HIS FOURTH SPEECH



JAN 3
TWO EXPLOSIONS KILL NEARLY 100 PEOPLE AT A CEREMONY IN IRAN TO COMMEMORATE COMMANDER QASSEM SOLEIMANI



JAN 3
NASRALLAH DELIVERS HIS THIRD SPEECH



JAN 8
SENIOR HEZBOLLAH COMMANDER WISSAM AL-TAWIL KILLED BY ISRAELI STRIKE

"All developments in the region depend on stopping the aggression against Gaza"



JAN 10
AMOS HOCHSTEIN IN BEIRUT TO AVOID FULL-SCALE WAR & DELINEATE LAND BORDER BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES



JAN 12
U.S. AND BRITISH WARPLANES, SHIPS AND SUBMARINES LAUNCH AIR STRIKES ACROSS YEMEN AGAINST HOUSHI FORCES IN RETALIATION FOR ATTACKS ON RED SEA



JAN 14
NASRALLAH DELIVERS HIS FIFTH SPEECH



JAN 28
A DRONE ATTACK ON SMALL US ARMY OUTPOST IN JORDAN, KILLS THREE AND WOUNDS 34 AMERICANS

BREAD AND BUTTER

After more than a month of reciprocal hostilities at Lebanon's southern border, which led to considerable economic harm to the region's [agriculture](#) and [infrastructure](#), the resistance narrative expanded to include bread-and-butter issues such as education, reconstruction, and compensations for those affected by Israeli shelling in areas along the Blue Line.

This amended discourse has in part been outsourced to Hezbollah's political ally, Amal, the small member to the country's so-called 'Shia duo'. Caretaker Minister of Agriculture Abbas Hajj Hassan, a member of Amal, [said](#) on November 1: "I demand compensation for farmers affected by the Israeli bombing". Similarly, in an interview to the newspaper [Asharq Al-Awsat](#), the caretaker minister emphasised that "the biggest loss in this war was the olive season, with the burning of more than 53 old trees, and then forests, forest areas, and livestock".

Joseph Daher, author of *Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God*, told The Badil that, "Hezbollah knows it is very much isolated politically and socially in Lebanon compared to [2006](#), where it had much wider popular support in terms of resistance". He asserts that a series of events since then – including the [May 7, 2008 clashes](#), Hezbollah's [intervention in Syria](#) and its opposition to the [October 17 Protests](#) – have helped erode this broader support.

"We have seen several incidents between Hezbollah and other segments of society, the [Tayouneh Incident](#) being a prominent one," that demonstrate these inter-Lebanese fissures, according to Daher. He adds that while "ideology plays an important role for Hezbollah's discourse, it has been subordinated to other political questions and interests".

As tensions along the Blue Line exacerbate Lebanon's misery, the party's discourse on the war is now expanding to encompass its supporters' struggles to get

by. MP Hassan Fadlallah [said](#) on November 27: "We in Hezbollah started paying compensation, and we carried out statistics at the southern level, and surveyed these damages (...). What we are offering to those affected is the money, capabilities, and efforts of Hezbollah."

LOOKING AHEAD

Nasrallah's [speech](#) on January 3 gained new significance in the wake of Al-Aroui's assassination. In his message, Nasrallah reiterated that his party would negotiate with Israel to curb tensions along Lebanon's southern border only if the war in Gaza ends. As has been shown, however, this message must be interpreted within the wider context of Hezbollah's public pronouncements since October 7.

The party's evolving rhetoric is testimony to its [constant balancing](#) between ideology and expediency, especially as Lebanon struggles with a four-year [economic crisis](#) and a stalled recovery from the 2020 [Beirut Port Explosion](#). In this challenging context, four out of five Lebanese people live in poverty, among which [36 percent](#) are below the extreme poverty line. A survey by [al-Akhbar](#), a pro-Hezbollah Lebanese newspaper, revealed that 68 percent of respondents voted "No" to the following question: "Do you support opening the southern front and immediately going to war". Despite their belligerent rhetoric, Hezbollah's leadership knows that many Lebanese are not ready for a full-scale war.

This shifting narrative on the war suggests that Hezbollah is far from being a monolithic entity. Instead, as Nicholas Blanford, a senior fellow and Hezbollah expert at the [Atlantic Council](#), describes it, Hezbollah is a 'coalition of shifting views'. The rapid changes and nuances in Hezbollah's discourse indicate that the movement retains its rational pragmatism, switching narrative track as it deems necessary, based on its own strategic and political considerations. For now, Hezbollah appears to see the risks of war as too high, seeks to preserve the status quo.