

Disarming Hezbollah: Systemic Erosion and Fragmented Sovereignty in Lebanon

Repeated international and domestic calls to disarm Hezbollah have not produced durable change in Lebanon. This article argues that Hezbollah's disarmament cannot be understood as a one-off military accomplishment or as the straightforward implementation of legal resolutions. Rather, it must be analyzed as a cumulative political-security process unfolding within a fragmented sovereign order. To capture this dynamic, the article introduces the concept of systemic erosion: a gradual transformation in the conditions that make autonomous armed power legitimate, viable, and sustainable. Systemic erosion comprises four interrelated dimensions: erosion of legitimacy, reduction of organizational and regional enablers, exploitation of political opportunity windows, and management of negative feedbacks. The framework is applied to Lebanon up to May 2026, including the legacy of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701, the November 2024 ceasefire, Lebanese state initiatives in 2025, Hezbollah's public rejection of disarmament in February 2026, and renewed hostilities since March 2026. The article shows that military weakening may open political space but does not by itself produce durable disarmament. More broadly, the Lebanese case illuminates a wider Mediterranean problem: how hybrid armed actors, weak-state institutions, border insecurity and regional patronage networks complicate the conversion of coercive pressure into sustainable political order.

Keywords: Lebanon; Hezbollah; disarmament; hybrid armed actors; armed group integration

Introduction

Across the contemporary Mediterranean and Mashreq, sovereignty is often layered rather than consolidated. Formal state institutions claim a monopoly of force, yet in practice coercive authority is frequently shared, contested or informally delegated among regular armies, militias, armed parties and external patrons. Lebanon represents one of the clearest expressions of this wider regional condition. Hezbollah is neither an ordinary militia nor simply a parliamentary party. It is a hybrid actor: a military organization, a political force, a social-service network and a regional node within a wider Iran-backed axis. The wider Mediterranean relevance of the case lies precisely here. Lebanon's experience speaks to broader questions of fragmented sovereignty, hybrid security orders, border stabilization, external patronage and the limits of coercive disarmament in an interconnected political arena.¹

¹Boaz Atzili, "State Weakness and 'Vacuum of Power' in Lebanon," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 8 (2010): 757–782; Simone Tholens, "Border Management in an Era of 'Statebuilding Lite': Security Assistance and Lebanon's Hybrid Sovereignty," *International Affairs* 93, no. 4 (2017): 865–882; Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Lina Khatib, *How Hezbollah Holds Sway over*

1 For more than two decades, Hezbollah's weapons have stood at the center
 2 of debates over Lebanese sovereignty, the authority of the state and the
 3 stabilization of the Israel–Lebanon border. United Nations Security Council
 4 Resolution 1559 called for the disarmament of Lebanese and non-Lebanese
 5 militias, while Resolution 1701 linked the post-2006 ceasefire to the principle
 6 that no weapons or authority in Lebanon should exist outside the state.² Yet
 7 Hezbollah not only survived these formal demands; it further entrenched itself
 8 as a politically embedded armed actor. The November 2024 ceasefire again
 9 renewed commitments to a more tightly regulated border order south of the
 10 Litani River, but it did not resolve the deeper political question of how non-state
 11 coercive power might be rolled back inside Lebanon.³

12 This produces the central puzzle. Why have repeated legal, diplomatic and
 13 military pressures not translated into durable transformation? Existing debates
 14 often oscillate between two inadequate poles. One treats Hezbollah's
 15 disarmament primarily as a matter of military degradation. The other treats it as
 16 the delayed implementation of legal formulas already embedded in international
 17 resolutions and Lebanese sovereignty doctrine. Both perspectives capture part of
 18 the problem, but neither is sufficient. In cases of hybrid armed actors embedded
 19 in weak institutions, social networks and regional patronage structures,
 20 disarmament is not a discrete event. It is a multi-stage political-security process
 21 that unfolds within a complex system.⁴

22 Existing scholarship explains important parts of this problem, but it tends to
 23 do so in fragmented fashion. Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
 24 (DDR) scholarship clarifies the importance of sequencing, guarantees, and
 25 institutional capacity; scholarship on armed-group integration shows why
 26 political participation can coexist with coercive continuity; and work on
 27 Hezbollah and Lebanon explains the organization's hybrid embedment in state
 28 and society. What remains underdeveloped, however, is a framework that treats
 29 disarmament in such settings as a cumulative transformation in the political
 30 conditions of armed autonomy rather than as a military event, a legal obligation,
 31 or a technical post-conflict sequence. This article addresses that gap through the
 32 concept of systemic erosion.⁵

the Lebanese State (London: Chatham House, 2021); Yaron Katz, "A Decade of Change in Middle Eastern Geopolitics," *Athens Journal of Politics & International Affairs* 1, no. 2 (2025): 163–178.

²United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1559 (2004). S/RES/1559, September 2, 2004; United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1701 (2006). S/RES/1701, August 11, 2006.

³Reuters. "Israel-Hezbollah Ceasefire: What Does the U.S.-Brokered Truce Include?" November 26, 2024; United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006). S/2025/460, 11 July 2025.

⁴Benedetta Berti, "Rebel Groups between Adaptation and Ideological Continuity: The Impact of Sustained Political Participation," *Government and Opposition* 54, no. 3 (2019): 513–535; Benedetta Berti, *Armed Political Organizations: From Conflict to Integration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Gyda Sindre, *The Political Integration of Armed Groups in a Changing Global Security Landscape: Implications for Sustainable Peace* (London: The British Academy, 2025).

⁵Berti, *Armed Political Organizations*; Berti, "Rebel Groups between Adaptation and Ideological Continuity"; Sindre, *The Political Integration of Armed Groups in a Changing Global Security*

This article therefore asks: under what conditions can Hezbollah's disarmament be understood not as a one-off military accomplishment, but as a process that gradually recentralizes coercive authority in the Lebanese state? The answer advanced here is that sustainable disarmament becomes politically thinkable only when four conditions accumulate together: first, erosion of the public and narrative legitimacy of autonomous arms; second, reduction of the organizational, institutional, economic, and regional enablers that sustain them; third, exploitation of political opportunity windows generated by crisis; and fourth, careful management of negative feedbacks through which pressure can regenerate the legitimacy it seeks to destroy. To conceptualize this cumulative process, the article introduces the concept of systemic erosion.

Systemic erosion refers to a gradual transformation in the conditions that make autonomous armed power legitimate, viable, and sustainable. It is not synonymous with battlefield attrition. Nor is it reducible to narrow coercive diplomacy, purely legal formulas or technical disarmament templates transplanted from conventional post-conflict transitions. Military weakening may matter, but only insofar as it becomes embedded in a broader process that alters legitimacy, institutional incentives, resource flows, border dynamics, and the strategic calculations of multiple actors.

The argument contributes at two levels. At the Hezbollah-specific level, it shifts attention from whether Hezbollah can be "defeated" to the more demanding question of how the conditions sustaining its armed autonomy might be eroded over time. The argument contributes at two levels. At the Hezbollah-specific level, it shifts attention from whether Hezbollah can be "defeated" to the more demanding question of how the conditions sustaining its armed autonomy might be eroded over time. At the broader level, it shows how political order in the region is shaped by the interaction of state weakness, hybrid governance, cross-border patronage, international monitoring regimes, and insecurity at the border. The Lebanese case thus illuminates a broader Mediterranean problem: the difficulty of converting episodic military pressure into durable political order where sovereignty remains fragmented and externally entangled.

Methodologically, the article is theory-informed and analytically interpretive. It combines the DDR and armed-group integration literatures with scholarship on Hezbollah, weak sovereignty and hybrid security orders, and it reads these bodies of work alongside official United Nations documents, institutional reporting and carefully used contemporary reporting up to April 2026. The claim is not predictive. It is conceptual and conditional: it identifies the mechanisms through which Hezbollah's disarmament becomes politically conceivable under contemporary regional conditions.

The article proceeds in six steps. The next section reviews the relevant literature and develops the concept of systemic erosion. A concise contextual section then situates the post-2024 environment in Lebanon. The main body analyses the four dimensions of systemic erosion. A short comparison with

Landscape; Khatib, *How Hezbollah Holds Sway over the Lebanese State*; United Nations Department of Peace Operations, *The Evolving Nature of DDR: Engaging Armed Groups Across the Peace Continuum* (New York: United Nations, 2021).

Northern Ireland follows. The discussion identifies the minimum conditions under which Hezbollah's disarmament becomes more politically thinkable and clarifies the article's wider Mediterranean contribution. The conclusion returns to the broader implications for the study of sovereignty, border order and hybrid coercive authority in the region.

Disarmament Beyond Classical DDR: Literature and Framework

The literature on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) has long emphasized that the collection of weapons is only one part of a wider political and institutional process. DDR succeeds more often where it is tied to a credible political settlement, meaningful monitoring mechanisms, security guarantees and at least some state capacity to enforce new rules. It tends to fail when armed actors interpret disarmament as unilateral surrender, when security dilemmas remain unresolved, or when military rebalancing outruns political accommodation. Recent United Nations thinking has reinforced this point by moving beyond narrow post-conflict templates toward pre-DDR and peace-continuum approaches designed for settings in which conflict persists, authority is fragmented and armed groups remain politically relevant rather than residual.⁶

Yet the Lebanese case does not map neatly onto classical DDR. Lebanon is not a conventional post-war setting in which a broadly accepted settlement precedes the disarmament of former belligerents. Rather, it is marked by fragmented sovereignty, a deeply embedded hybrid actor, institutional weakness and continuing regional confrontation. Hezbollah is not a peripheral armed remnant awaiting incorporation. It is already institutionally inserted into the state while preserving autonomous coercive power. Applying DDR to such a setting therefore requires adaptation rather than transplantation. The question is not how to execute an orthodox post-conflict program, but how to conceptualize disarmament under conditions of incomplete sovereignty and ongoing geopolitical entanglement.

The literature on the political integration of armed groups helps address this problem. Research by Benedetta Berti and others shows that armed organizations do not move along a simple linear path from insurgency to institutional politics. Sustained political participation can coexist with ideological continuity, organizational resilience and the retention of coercive capacity. Indeed, integration into formal institutions may in some cases increase an armed group's resilience by widening its social reach, diversifying its resources, and normalizing the coexistence of ballots and bullets.⁷ The more deeply such groups are embedded in governance networks, shadow economies, welfare provision and external alliances, the less plausible rapid disarmament

⁶United Nations Department of Peace Operations, *The Evolving Nature of DDR: Engaging Armed Groups Across the Peace Continuum* (New York: United Nations, 2021).

⁷Berti, "Rebel Groups between Adaptation and Ideological Continuity"; Berti, *Armed Political Organizations*; Sindre, *The Political Integration of Armed Groups in a Changing Global Security Landscape*.

1 becomes and the more central sequencing, verification, and gradual institutional
2 change appear.

3 Hezbollah exemplifies this pattern in especially acute form. The
4 organization combines military autonomy, parliamentary participation, welfare
5 provision, ideological mobilization, and regional alignment with Iran.
6 Scholarship has therefore treated it not simply as an insurgent or militia, but as
7 a hybrid actor occupying multiple social and institutional sites simultaneously.⁸
8 Hezbollah's armed status is sustained not only by material resources and
9 ideology, but also by its embedment in social dependence, patronage structures,
10 bureaucratic influence, and a wider transnational strategic project.

11 The concept of systemic erosion also engages indirectly with debates on
12 hybrid armed actors beyond Lebanon. A recurring finding in comparative work
13 is that where armed organizations are simultaneously political representatives,
14 security providers, and transnational intermediaries, disarmament cannot be
15 reduced to the physical removal of weapons. What must change is the political
16 ecology in which weapons remain meaningful. This includes the narratives
17 through which arms are justified, the institutions through which they are
18 shielded, the social arenas through which they are reproduced, and the regional
19 alignments through which they acquire strategic depth. Hezbollah is analytically
20 important because it concentrates all these dimensions within a single case.

21 A further body of work concerns weak sovereignty and hybrid governance.
22 In Lebanon, the issue is not merely a 'vacuum of power' in which the state is
23 absent and non-state actors rush in to fill the gap. Rather, the system is
24 characterized by overlapping and negotiated sovereignties. Formal institutions
25 coexist with informal coercive infrastructures, and border order is often
26 maintained through layered arrangements involving the Lebanese Armed Forces
27 (LAF), UNIFIL, local power brokers, and Hezbollah's shadow presence.⁹ Such
28 arrangements may reduce violence temporarily, but they also reproduce
29 ambiguity over who ultimately monopolizes force.

30 Against this background, the article proposes systemic erosion as a more
31 suitable framework for understanding disarmament in Lebanon. Systemic
32 erosion refers to a cumulative political process through which an armed actor's
33 autonomous weapons become less legitimate, less materially sustainable, less
34 institutionally protected, and less strategically defensible over time.
35 Analytically, the concept has four dimensions. First, erosion of legitimacy
36 concerns the weakening of the public, narrative and cross-communal
37 justifications for autonomous arms. Second, reduction of enablers concerns the
38 contraction of the organizational, economic, institutional, and regional
39 conditions that sustain armed autonomy. Third, opportunity windows refer to the
40 moments in which crisis unsettles previous equilibria and opens limited space

⁸Norton, *Hezbollah*; Krista E. Wiegand, "Reformation of a Terrorist Group: Hezbollah as a Lebanese Political Party," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 8 (2009): 669–680; Khatib, *How Hezbollah Holds Sway over the Lebanese State*; Joseph Daher, "Hezbollah, Neoliberalism and Political Economy," *Politics and Religion* 13, no. 4 (2020): 719–747.

⁹Atzili, "State Weakness and 'Vacuum of Power' in Lebanon"; Tholens, "Border Management in an Era of 'Statebuilding Lite'."

for reordering authority. Fourth, management of negative feedbacks concerns the risk that pressure itself may recreate the legitimacy, dependency, or insecurity narratives that sustain the armed actor.

This framework differs from several adjacent approaches. It differs from simple military attrition because it is concerned not only with capabilities but also with legitimacy, institutions, and feedback effects. It differs from narrow coercive diplomacy because its horizon is not immediate behavioral change but long-term transformation in the conditions of armed autonomy. It differs from purely legal approaches because it recognizes that sovereignty claims do not enforce themselves. And it differs from technical DDR templates because it begins from a setting in which conflict remains active, authority is layered, and the armed actor is already deeply embedded in both state and society. The analytical advantage is that systemic erosion focuses not merely on how Hezbollah might be weakened, but on how it might be weakened without reproducing the very conditions that justify or sustain its weapons.

The concept also generates a more disciplined claim. It does not predict that Hezbollah will disarm, nor does it suggest that military weakening automatically translates into state consolidation. Rather, it identifies the conditions under which disarmament becomes more politically thinkable. In this sense, systemic erosion is a framework of conditional possibility, not an event model or a deterministic forecast.

The framework travels only under specific conditions. It is designed for cases in which an armed actor is deeply embedded in formal politics and social provision, where sovereignty is fragmented rather than consolidated, and where regional patronage sustains autonomous coercive power. It is therefore not a general model of all disarmament processes, nor a substitute for classical DDR in conventional post-conflict settings. Its analytical purpose is narrower: to explain how disarmament becomes more politically thinkable in hybrid sovereign orders.

Case Context: Lebanon, Hezbollah and the post-2024 Border Order

Hezbollah's contemporary position in Lebanon rests on three mutually reinforcing foundations: a long-standing resistance narrative against Israel, deep organizational and political embedment in Lebanese institutions and society, and a durable strategic relationship with Iran.¹⁰ For this reason, the question of disarmament has always exceeded the legal domain. Resolution 1559 established the principle of militia disarmament, and Resolution 1701 reinforced the norm of exclusive state authority south of the Litani River after the 2006 war.¹¹ Yet implementation remained partial and uneven, while Hezbollah's hybrid status

¹⁰Shiran German-Ben Hayun and Leehu Zysberg, "New Aspects to the 'Blame Game': Political Attitudes, Attributed Blame, Hope, and Resilience in the Context of the 'Swords of Iron' War," *Athens Journal of Politics & International Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2026): 9–24.

¹¹United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1559 (2004). S/RES/1559, September 2, 2004; United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1701 (2006). S/RES/1701, August 11, 2006.

1 enabled it to survive both formal diplomatic pressure and recurrent military
2 confrontation.

3 The November 2024 ceasefire again attempted to regulate the border space
4 by requiring an end to hostilities, a phased Israeli withdrawal, a stronger
5 deployment of Lebanese troops in the south and renewed implementation of
6 Resolution 1701.¹² Secretary-General reporting through July 2025 and March
7 2026 nonetheless continued to describe incomplete implementation, recurrent
8 violations and the persistence of unresolved tensions along the Blue Line.¹³ The
9 ceasefire thus managed violence temporarily without resolving the underlying
10 problem of how autonomous armed power might be translated into exclusive
11 state authority.

12 The Lebanese state nevertheless took more explicit steps during 2025. In
13 August, the cabinet tasked the army with preparing a plan to establish a state
14 monopoly on arms by the end of the year. In September, the cabinet welcomed
15 the army's plan but avoided fixing a binding implementation timetable,
16 reflecting both political sensitivity and institutional limits.¹⁴ In February 2026,
17 Hezbollah publicly rejected the government's plan and timeline, presenting them
18 as serving Israeli objectives and reaffirming that it would not accept a path
19 perceived as unilateral dismantlement of the 'resistance'.¹⁵

20 Since March 2026, renewed hostilities, Israeli discussion of an expanded
21 buffer zone, a widening displacement crisis in southern Lebanon and pressure
22 on already weak Lebanese institutions have made the political environment even
23 more difficult.¹⁶ This context is analytically decisive. It demonstrates that
24 Hezbollah's disarmament is not a separate domestic reform issue. It sits at the
25 intersection of Lebanese state weakness, Israel-Lebanon border politics, UN
26 diplomacy, regional patronage, and social dependence within parts of the Shi'i
27 arena. That is precisely why the case matters beyond Lebanon: it condenses a
28 wider Mediterranean pattern in which state consolidation is mediated by border
29 insecurity, external sponsorship and hybrid local actors.

30 The difficulty is therefore not simply that Hezbollah is armed, but that its
31 arms are embedded in a broader mode of order. The organization's military
32 autonomy has long coexisted with forms of negotiated coexistence inside

¹²Reuters. "Israel-Hezbollah Ceasefire: What Does the U.S.-Brokered Truce Include?" November 26, 2024.

¹³United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006). S/2025/460, 11 July 2025; United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006). S/2026/160, 11 March 2026.

¹⁴Reuters. "Lebanon Tasks Army with Limiting Arms to State Forces in Challenge to Hezbollah." August 5, 2025; Reuters. "Lebanon Cabinet Welcomes Army Plan to Disarm Hezbollah, No Timeline Given." September 5, 2025.

¹⁵Reuters. "Hezbollah Rejects Disarmament Plan and Government's Four-Month Timeline." February 17, 2026.

¹⁶Reuters. "Israel's Netanyahu Orders Expansion of Southern Lebanon Operations to Halt Hezbollah Rockets." March 29, 2026; Reuters. "Israel to Establish Buffer Zone in South Lebanon up to Litani River, Defence Minister Says." March 31, 2026; Reuters. "Lebanon Bracing for Long-Term Displacement Crisis amid Funding Crunch, Minister Says." March 31, 2026.

Lebanon and across the southern border. This has enabled partial stabilization without full sovereign consolidation. The post-2024 moment exposed the fragility of that arrangement: once the border order came under severe strain again, the limits of legal formulas and limited ceasefire engineering became unmistakable.

Erosion of Legitimacy

Hezbollah's weapons have historically drawn legitimacy from two interrelated claims: that Israel poses an enduring external threat, and that the Lebanese state is too weak to defend the country effectively. This legitimacy has never been purely sectarian. Although it is strongest within the Shi'i arena, scholarship on Lebanese public opinion suggests that Hezbollah's standing has at times extended beyond its core constituency when the organization is framed as a national resistance force rather than merely a communal militia.¹⁷ Disarmament therefore requires more than legal de-legitimation. It requires a shift in how autonomous arms are narratively understood within Lebanon's broader political field.

Analytically, legitimacy erosion operates through three distinct but interacting channels: representational legitimacy within core constituencies, deterrent legitimacy vis-à-vis external threat, and substitutive legitimacy derived from state weakness. Disarmament becomes more plausible only when all three begin to weaken together.

It is useful to distinguish three forms of legitimacy. Social legitimacy refers to support or tolerance within specific constituencies. Legal legitimacy concerns compatibility with formal sovereign principles and international resolutions. Institutional legitimacy concerns whether autonomous arms are tolerated as a functional substitute for weak state capacity. Hezbollah's resilience has depended on partial success across all three registers: social backing in its core constituency, legal ambiguity under conditions of incomplete enforcement and institutional tolerance rooted in the weakness of the state. Disarmament becomes more plausible only when these layers begin to separate and then erode.

The renewed war of 2026 creates a paradox in this respect. On the one hand, sustained military losses and the heavy costs borne by communities in southern Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburbs can weaken Hezbollah's prestige by exposing the strategic burden of preserving autonomous arms. On the other hand, intensified Israeli operations, public discussion of a buffer zone up to the Litani River, wide displacement and visible destruction can reconstitute Hezbollah's claim that its weapons remain necessary for communal and national defense.¹⁸

¹⁷Norton, *Hezbollah*; Karakoç, Ekrem, Mesut Özcan, and Sevinç Alkan Özcan, "Beyond Identity: What Explains Hezbollah's Popularity among Non-Shi'a Lebanese?" *Politics and Religion* 15, no. 1 (2022): 85–113.

¹⁸Reuters. "Israel's Netanyahu Orders Expansion of Southern Lebanon Operations to Halt Hezbollah Rockets." March 29, 2026; Reuters. "Israel to Establish Buffer Zone in South Lebanon up to Litani River, Defence Minister Says." March 31, 2026; Reuters. "Lebanon Bracing for Long-Term Displacement Crisis amid Funding Crunch, Minister Says." March 31, 2026.

1 External pressure can therefore simultaneously undermine and replenish
2 legitimacy.

3 This duality clarifies why military pressure alone cannot produce
4 disarmament. Attrition only translates into erosion of legitimacy when
5 accompanied by a credible alternative order—one that reduces insecurity,
6 stabilizes the border, and makes exclusive state authority appear plausible rather
7 than rhetorical. In the absence of such an alternative, the resistance narrative may
8 contract tactically yet revive strategically. This is especially true in a setting
9 where the border remains the principal theatre through which threat is
10 experienced and interpreted.

11 More broadly, the Lebanese case speaks to a wider Mediterranean problem.
12 Hybrid armed actors derive part of their durability from border insecurity. Where
13 frontiers remain sites of recurring threat and where the state cannot monopolize
14 protection credibly, calls for disarmament confront not only organizational
15 resistance but socially embedded security logics. Legitimacy erosion, in other
16 words, cannot be detached from border politics, threat perception, and the
17 symbolic economy of protection.

18 The implication is not that Hezbollah's legitimacy is immutable. It is that
19 legitimacy must be analyzed as contingent, layered, and responsive to changes
20 in the regional environment. If autonomous arms are to become less legitimate,
21 disarmament discourse must be linked to a convincing alternative narrative: one
22 in which state authority is associated not with exposure and abandonment, but
23 with protection, reciprocal restraint and political inclusion. Without such a shift,
24 disarmament will continue to appear to many relevant audiences not as a
25 transition toward sovereignty, but as an invitation to insecurity.

26 27 *Reduction of Enablers*

28
29 Hezbollah's armed autonomy does not persist because of narrative
30 legitimacy alone. It also depends on a dense structure of enablers: funding
31 streams, weapons procurement networks, logistical depth, freedom of
32 operational movement, bureaucratic influence, welfare provision, patronage
33 structures, and external sponsorship. The value of systemic erosion is that it
34 redirects analysis away from the blunt question "How can Hezbollah be defeated
35 militarily?" toward the more demanding question how the conditions that sustain
36 autonomous arms might be gradually reduced.

37 The key analytical point is that enablers are not merely resources. They are
38 also political veto capacities, institutional shielding mechanisms, and social
39 infrastructures of dependence. A strategy that degrades matériel without
40 weakening these parallel supports is unlikely to produce durable disarmament.

41 These enablers are multidimensional. Some are material: finance, arms
42 flows, storage capacity, and transport routes. Some are institutional: leverage
43 within ministries and state agencies, parliamentary presence, and the ability to
44 exploit weak enforcement. Some are social: welfare provision, local dependence,
45 and long-term patronage. Others are regional: Iranian sponsorship, Syrian
46 interfaces, and the strategic logic of the wider 'axis of resistance'. Hezbollah's

durability lies precisely in the interaction among these dimensions. Pressure on one dimension does not necessarily collapse the others.¹⁹

The Lebanese initiatives of 2025 are important in this regard even though they did not produce implementation. By instructing the army to develop a state monopoly-of-arms plan, the cabinet signaled that the weapons question was no longer completely insulated from formal politics. Yet the subsequent avoidance of a fixed timetable, the army's caution regarding its own capacities and Hezbollah's February 2026 rejection showed that institutional initiative without broader political sequencing remains fragile.²⁰

Reducing enablers also requires moving beyond a narrow focus on Iranian funding alone. Hezbollah's resilience is tied to its de facto control over strategic interfaces between the Lebanese and Syrian spaces, its influence within weak state institutions, and its insertion into social and economic circuits that reduce the costs of political loyalty. In this sense, the organization's political economy is inseparable from its coercive autonomy. Its military infrastructure is sustained not only by weapons and money, but also by an ecosystem of organizational embedment and social dependence.²¹

At the regional level, 2025 and early 2026 also revealed a changing diplomatic environment. U.S. pressure, efforts to connect Israeli withdrawal to progress on disarmament and attempts to frame the Hezbollah question within a wider arrangement all signaled movement in the external environment.²² Yet Hezbollah's rejection demonstrated that without a credible sequence of political and security guarantees, attempts to reduce its enablers can easily be reframed as externally imposed coercion. The enabling environment is therefore not only material and organizational; it is also institutional and perceptual.

For that reason, the reduction of enablers cannot be a single-dimensional sanctions or interdiction strategy. It must involve the gradual contraction of Hezbollah's military, institutional, social, and regional anchors together. Efforts to squeeze only the military dimension while leaving institutional weakness, social dependence and border instability intact are unlikely to produce durable disarmament. More broadly, the case illustrates a wider Mediterranean condition: armed actors embedded in weak states often survive because their support structures are simultaneously domestic and transnational.

¹⁹Khatib, *How Hezbollah Holds Sway over the Lebanese State*; Daher, "Hezbollah, Neoliberalism and Political Economy"; Norton, *Hezbollah*.

²⁰Reuters. "Lebanon Tasks Army with Limiting Arms to State Forces in Challenge to Hezbollah." August 5, 2025; Reuters. "Lebanon Cabinet Welcomes Army Plan to Disarm Hezbollah, No Timeline Given." September 5, 2025; Reuters. "Hezbollah Rejects Disarmament Plan and Government's Four-Month Timeline." February 17, 2026.

²¹Daher, "Hezbollah, Neoliberalism and Political Economy"; Khatib, *How Hezbollah Holds Sway over the Lebanese State*.

²²Reuters. "Can Lebanon Disarm Hezbollah?" August 6, 2025; Reuters. "Hezbollah Rejects Disarmament Plan and Government's Four-Month Timeline." February 17, 2026.

1 *Opportunity Windows*

2
3 Crises do not automatically generate transformation, but they can unsettle
4 previously stable equilibria and open narrow windows of political possibility.
5 The wider literature on disarmament and armed-group integration suggests that
6 change becomes more plausible when prior balances are disrupted by battlefield
7 setbacks, fiscal crisis, loss of sponsorship or shifts in domestic coalition
8 structures.²³ Lebanon has experienced several such shocks in recent years: deep
9 economic collapse, repeated border war, the November 2024 ceasefire, state
10 initiatives in 2025, and Hezbollah's relative military weakening amid renewed
11 hostilities in 2026.

12 A further distinction is useful here between window-opening and window-
13 conversion. Crises may open windows by destabilizing prior equilibria, but
14 windows are converted into political change only when domestic coalition-
15 building, external guarantees, and institutional enforcement capacity align.

16 Yet an opportunity window is not the same thing as an implementable
17 transition. A window becomes politically usable only when state actors and
18 external mediators can translate disruption into institutional sequencing, credible
19 verification, and assurances against a security vacuum. This is especially
20 important in Lebanon, where communities expected to bear the costs of
21 transition must believe that they are not being moved from a problematic armed
22 order into an even more dangerous void.

23 Recent work further underscores the political economy of such transitions.
24 Civilian support for reintegration and peace-building declines when economic
25 hardship is acute and livelihoods are precarious.²⁴ Lebanon's economic collapse
26 therefore matters directly to the politics of disarmament. Where the state cannot
27 provide reliable security or social compensation, the transition away from armed
28 autonomy becomes more threatening, not less. This is one reason why
29 opportunity windows in Lebanon are unusually fragile: they open within a social
30 field already structured by severe material insecurity.

31 The 2025 cabinet and army initiatives, together with external efforts to
32 connect progress on disarmament to Israeli restraint and withdrawal, suggested
33 the outline of such a window. But Hezbollah's rejection in February 2026
34 showed that the opening remained thin and politically contested. The renewed
35 war since March widened the sense of crisis but also narrowed trust.
36 Opportunity, therefore, is deeply conditional. Military weakening may open
37 space, but it can only be converted into transition if domestic coalition-building,
38 international mediation, and border stabilization develop simultaneously.

²³Berti, *Armed Political Organizations*; Sindre, *The Political Integration of Armed Groups in a Changing Global Security Landscape*; United Nations Department of Peace Operations, *The Evolving Nature of DDR: Engaging Armed Groups Across the Peace Continuum* (New York: United Nations, 2021).

²⁴Amanda Kennard, Konstantin Sonin, and Austin L. Wright, "When Do Citizens Support Peace-Building? Economic Hardship and Civilian Support for Rebel Reintegration," *International Organization* 79, no. 4 (2025): 787–806.

The wider Mediterranean implication is significant. In weak or divided states, political windows are rarely domestic alone. They are shaped by external patrons, ceasefire regimes, border arrangements, and diplomatic guarantees. Lebanon demonstrates that disarmament opportunities in the region are best understood as regionally conditioned openings rather than self-contained domestic moments. The politics of timing cannot be separated from the politics of scale: what appears domestically as a window often depends on external restraint, regional diplomacy, and the credibility of international monitoring.

This also means that windows can close as quickly as they open. If state actors cannot translate crisis into a credible transitional architecture, then the same shock that briefly disrupted previous equilibria may harden them again. In the Lebanese case, the distinction between disruption and transformation is central. Crisis creates fluidity; it does not in itself create a viable post-crisis order.

Management of Negative Feedbacks

The weakest link in any disarmament strategy toward Hezbollah is the problem of negative feedback. Negative feedback here does not mean the correction of policy through institutional learning. It refers to a process in which pressure reproduces the very conditions it seeks to undo. If coercive action is experienced as collective punishment, prolonged occupation, institutional humiliation, or civilian abandonment, it can strengthen rather than weaken the appeal of armed ‘resistance’. In hybrid sovereignty settings, this is not an accidental by-product; it is a core mechanism.

These feedbacks can be narrative, social, and institutional. They may restore the legitimacy of resistance, deepen communal dependence on the armed actor, and further weaken the state expected to replace it. The problem is therefore not simply unintended consequences, but recursive effects that regenerate the original condition of armed autonomy.

The renewed hostilities since March 2026 highlight this risk sharply. Israeli discussion of a wider buffer zone, large-scale displacement, visible destruction in southern Lebanon, and the strain imposed on already weak Lebanese institutions can all be folded back into Hezbollah’s claim that autonomous force remains indispensable.²⁵ In such circumstances, damage to Hezbollah’s military infrastructure does not necessarily translate into state consolidation. It may instead widen institutional hollowness while revalidating the armed actor’s security narrative.

This is why the strategic challenge is not simply to degrade Hezbollah, but to do so without degrading the state meant to replace it. A disarmament strategy that hollows out Lebanese institutions, deepens social dependence or blurs the distinction between targeting Hezbollah and punishing its surrounding

²⁵Reuters. “Israel’s Netanyahu Orders Expansion of Southern Lebanon Operations to Halt Hezbollah Rockets.” March 29, 2026; Reuters. “Israel to Establish Buffer Zone in South Lebanon up to Litani River, Defence Minister Says.” March 31, 2026; Reuters. “Lebanon Bracing for Long-Term Displacement Crisis amid Funding Crunch, Minister Says.” March 31, 2026.

communities is likely to be self-defeating. The management of negative feedbacks therefore requires restraint as much as pressure: calibrated coercion, civilian protection, border stabilization, credible monitoring, and institutional substitution.

Seen in this light, the article also advances an argument about sequencing in regional order-making. In fragmented sovereign settings, coercion can create opportunity only if institutions, monitoring, and political inclusion are prepared to absorb the strategic effects of coercion. Otherwise, pressure produces turbulence without transition. Lebanon makes this sequencing problem unusually visible because each step depends on multiple scales at once: domestic coalition-building, Israel–Lebanon border restraint, external mediation, and the wider regional role of Iran. The case thus illustrates how Mediterranean order is made and unmade through cross-scalar interaction rather than through domestic reform or interstate bargaining alone.

This point also resonates with research on post-conflict reintegration. Where former combatants are stigmatized and communities are not given viable pathways into an alternative order, transitions become harder and more exclusionary.²⁶ In Lebanon, the analogous challenge is not only what happens to combatants after disarmament, but what happens to the social arena in which Hezbollah’s armed role has long been embedded. If transition is framed as strategic humiliation or communal abandonment, negative feedback is likely to intensify.

The wider Mediterranean lesson is clear. Across the region, coercion often interacts non-linearly with fragility. Efforts to suppress hybrid actors can generate countervailing dynamics—mobilization, renewed communal dependency, and delegitimizing of the center—that offset or even reverse the intended political outcome. Lebanon offers an analytically sharp example of this broader pattern. It shows that force can be politically productive only when it is embedded in a wider strategy that protects civilians, stabilizes borders, and strengthens the institutions expected to monopolize force afterward.

The management of negative feedbacks is therefore not a secondary concern. It is central to the entire problem. Without it, military pressure may succeed tactically while failing strategically. It may shrink Hezbollah’s capabilities in the short term while replenishing the political and social conditions that make those capabilities thinkable again in the longer term.

A Cautious Comparative Lesson from Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is analytically useful not because it offers a ready-made model for Lebanon, but because it remains one of the clearest cases in which a politically embedded armed actor moved toward disarmament through gradual sequencing, independent verification, and a broader political settlement. The decommissioning of IRA weapons did not emerge from straightforward military

²⁶Jareme R. McMullin, “Integration or Separation? The Stigmatisation of Ex-Combatants after War,” *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 385–414.

1 defeat. It occurred within a larger institutional framework structured by the Good
 2 Friday Agreement, mutual guarantees, and monitored implementation.²⁷ The
 3 comparison is therefore heuristic and bounded: it is used to identify sequencing
 4 conditions, not to claim structural equivalence between the two cases.

5 The relevant lesson is therefore limited but valuable. When an armed
 6 organization has deep political and social roots, disarmament is more likely to
 7 occur through gradual, verified, and politically embedded sequencing than
 8 through demands for immediate surrender. What matters is not the
 9 transplantation of the Irish case, but the analytical principle that disarmament
 10 becomes more plausible when institutional redesign, monitoring, and legitimacy
 11 shift together.

12 The differences with Hezbollah, however, are decisive. Hezbollah is tied to
 13 Iranian regional sponsorship, possesses a much larger and more sophisticated
 14 military infrastructure, operates within a more fragile consociational order, and
 15 functions as part of a wider geopolitical axis rather than as a primarily local
 16 armed formation. These differences sharply limit analogy. Northern Ireland
 17 clarifies conditions of possibility; it does not provide a template for direct export.
 18 The comparative value of the case is therefore diagnostic rather than
 19 prescriptive.

20 The lesson for Lebanon is accordingly cautious. Even substantial military
 21 weakening of Hezbollah would be insufficient in the absence of a broader
 22 mechanism of sequencing, verification, and gradual state enforcement. The
 23 comparison underscores the core argument of this article: where an armed actor
 24 is politically and socially rooted, disarmament requires transformation in the
 25 conditions of political order, not merely coercive damage.

28 **Discussion: When does Hezbollah's Disarmament Become More Politically** 29 **Thinkable?**

31 The analysis suggests that Hezbollah's disarmament is not impossible, but
 32 neither is it the direct or automatic consequence of military degradation. The
 33 minimum conditions of political thinkability appear to be sixfold. First,
 34 Hezbollah's military capabilities must continue to erode—but not in ways that
 35 generate such extensive civilian devastation that the resistance narrative is
 36 revived faster than military capacity declines. Second, Lebanese state
 37 enforcement capacity, especially through the army, must be strengthened
 38 gradually but credibly. Third, external monitoring and mediation must be robust
 39 enough to reassure all sides that sequencing will be reciprocal rather than
 40 unilateral. Fourth, the border must move toward stabilization and mutual
 41 restraint; otherwise, autonomous arms will continue to claim strategic necessity.
 42 Fifth, Hezbollah's public legitimacy as a guardian of communal survival must
 43 diminish. Sixth, transition costs for the Shi'i arena must be lowered through a

²⁷Good Friday Agreement. Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations. Belfast, April 10, 1998; University of Notre Dame, Peace Accords Matrix, "Disarmament: Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement." Accessed April 5, 2026.

1 political-economic framework that reduces the social penalties of moving away
2 from armed autonomy.

3 Current developments underscore both the relevance and the fragility of
4 these conditions. The combination of renewed war, large-scale displacement,
5 discussion of a buffer zone, weak Lebanese state capacity, and continued
6 regional entanglement may weaken Hezbollah militarily, but it can also damage
7 the very political and institutional environment required for a sustainable
8 transition.²⁸ The point, then, is not that coercion is irrelevant. It is that coercion
9 becomes politically productive only when embedded in a sequence that
10 strengthens the state rather than bypassing or hollowing it out.

11 This discussion also clarifies the article's wider contribution to scholarship
12 on hybrid sovereignty and regional order. The Lebanese case reveals how
13 sovereignty is often negotiated, layered, and contested rather than fully
14 consolidated. It demonstrates the limits of linear state-centric disarmament
15 thinking in contexts where coercive authority is shared, border regimes are
16 fragile, and local actors are rooted in regional patronage networks.

17 The broader relevance extends beyond Lebanon or Hezbollah as singular
18 cases. Across the Mediterranean and nearby Mashreq, states often confront
19 armed actors that are simultaneously local and transnational, coercive and
20 political, embedded and autonomous. The Lebanese case therefore helps
21 illuminate a more general regional problem: how to transform layered coercive
22 orders without reproducing the very insecurities that made them durable. It is
23 precisely because Lebanon is difficult, not because it is exceptional in a trivial
24 sense, that it yields analytical leverage for the wider field.

25 At the same time, the argument should remain bounded. This is not a
26 predictive model of Hezbollah's future choices, nor does it claim that a viable
27 disarmament sequence is imminent. It is a conditional framework for
28 understanding why repeated calls for disarmament have failed and under what
29 circumstances they might become more politically meaningful. In this respect,
30 systemic erosion is best understood as an analytical lens for evaluating
31 trajectories of possibility rather than forecasting a specific outcome.

32 The article also has two limitations. First, it is a theory-guided analytical
33 study rather than a fieldwork-based investigation, and it therefore does not claim
34 direct access to internal Lebanese political deliberations or Hezbollah decision-
35 making. Second, because the argument extends to developments up to April
36 2026, some of its empirical claims concern an evolving strategic environment
37 whose long-term effects cannot yet be assessed conclusively. The contribution
38 is therefore conceptual and conditional rather than predictive: it clarifies the
39 mechanisms that shape political feasibility, not a fixed timeline of outcomes.

40 A final caution is necessary. Extended strategies of erosion can themselves
41 become mechanisms of indefinite escalation. As war lengthens, civilian costs
42 rise, state capacity erodes, and the distinction between degrading Hezbollah and

²⁸Reuters. "Israel's Netanyahu Orders Expansion of Southern Lebanon Operations to Halt Hezbollah Rockets." March 29, 2026; Reuters. "Israel to Establish Buffer Zone in South Lebanon up to Litani River, Defence Minister Says." March 31, 2026; Reuters. "Lebanon Bracing for Long-Term Displacement Crisis amid Funding Crunch, Minister Says." March 31, 2026.

degrading its social environment becomes harder to sustain. Under those conditions, even substantial weakening of the organization may not translate into recentralized authority in the state. It may instead deepen institutional voids and social fragmentation. Any serious discussion of Hezbollah's future disarmament must therefore remain careful, conditional, and acutely attentive to the risks of self-defeating strategy.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Hezbollah's disarmament becomes analytically intelligible only when treated as a cumulative process of systemic erosion rather than as a discrete military or legal event. Military weakening may create openings, but durable disarmament becomes politically thinkable only when legitimacy erodes, enabling conditions contract, opportunity windows are converted into institutional sequencing, and negative feedbacks are contained.

The argument is not that force should be replaced by politics, nor that politics can be detached from coercive realities. It is that disarmament becomes conceivable only when coercion, institutions, mediation, and political settlement operate in sequence and in coordination. Attempts to shortcut that sequence are likely to fail—not only because Hezbollah will resist, but because the surrounding sovereign order remains fragmented and regionally entangled.

More broadly, the case illuminates three enduring features of Mediterranean politics: the persistence of hybrid sovereignty, the fragility of border order, and the need to analyze armed actors through the interaction of force, legitimacy, institutions, and feedback. If Lebanon demonstrates anything of wider regional significance, it is that the fate of autonomous arms in weak states cannot be explained by battlefield outcomes alone. It must be understood as a problem of political order in an interconnected regional system.

In that sense, the Hezbollah case is not simply about one-armed actor in one fragile state; it is a window onto how contested sovereignty persists and how political order is made, deferred, and destabilized across regionally entangled systems.

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