Armed non-state actors (ANSAs) pose a particular problem for states. The presence of ANSAs and militias within a nation’s territory undermines a state’s stability and central authority. It shows that a government is unwilling or incapable of effectively dealing with them. Today, numerous states are dealing with armed and often violent NSAs within their borders, ranging from criminal and vigilante organizations to separatist and terrorist groups. The presence of ANSAs is particularly evident in developing and underdeveloped states.

One of the most sophisticated and well recognized ANSA groups today is Lebanon’s “Party of God,” more commonly known as Hezbollah. From its roots as an Iranian-backed movement with the aim of resisting the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, it has come a long way to become more than just a militia. Designated as a terrorist organization by a large number of states, it has evolved into somewhat of a legitimate political force, carving out semi-autonomous regions within Lebanon, and enjoying widespread support amongst its constituents.

This article will aim to explain the combination of factors that allowed for Hezbollah to become the force it is today and the measures and the effectiveness of measures taken by the various actors, from the Lebanese state to the international community, in dealing with the group. Armed non-state actors: A theoretical perspective

For the longest time, international relations could be studied from a realist perspective, with states, with clearly defined borders, being the primary actors. The rise of armed non-state actors has put this mode of thought into question. ANSAs have become increasingly important actors on both a state’s domestic scene and on the international stage. German sociologist, Max Weber, states that one of the necessary concepts for statehood is that a state must possess ‘a monopoly of the legitimate use of force’ through public institutions, such as the military or police force, to ensure order. “Rising numbers of ANSAs (from militias and criminal gangs to private security firms) in many parts of the world have put states ‘monopoly of violence’ into jeopardy and thus undermining a state’s legitimacy and security, essentially, creating a form of a “state within a state.”

NSAs serve different purposes and work towards different goals, but experts agree that most NSAs share certain common characteristics, such as “the use of (political) violence as a defining aspect of their activities, a certain relationship to territory; the provision of some level of material and immaterial (including identity) resources to group members and varied levels of marginalization in the wider society.” The rise of NSAs can be explained as “a form of self-help to escape particular circumstances [that have] flourished where inaccessibility and administrative inefficiency and complication [are] the rule.”

Past experiences with armed non-state actors There are two notable ways in which states deal with ANSAs. Either through inclusive measures such as negotiation, integration into the wider society and offering services, or through coercive measures, through military action, economic sanctions, and terrorist listing. Rarely are there cases where ANSAs are dealt with using purely inclusive measures. However, there are instances, particularly in states that have gained independence from colonial overlords through armed revolution, whereas ANSAs and militias that were founded over the course of the independence war would later form the core of the newly-independent state’s armed forces. Such a case can be presented in Indonesia’s war of independence on the Dutch. An example of coercive measures undertaken by a state is evident in the history of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a former militant separatist group that was based in Sri Lanka. The LTTE waged a bloody civil war against the Sri Lankan government starting in the 1980s, and after exhausting diplomatic means at solving the conflict, the government stepped up its military operations against the group until the government announced it had successfully eliminated the group in 2009.

A case where both coercive and inclusive measures were utilized is the case of Colombia. The conflict in Colombia between the Colombian government and broad range of paramilitary groups, most notably The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The insurgency began during the 1960s and was brought to a standstill as recent as June 2016, with the signing of a peace treaty. The terms of the treaty allow political participation for the FARC, their demilitarization and reintegration of the rebels into civil society (with the exception of those accused of committing serious war crimes).

History of Lebanon and Hezbollah should be noted that Hezbollah differs from the mentioned groups in terms of goals, ideology and the factors that led to its rise. In addition, Lebanon is a rare case in world politics as it is one of the few confessionalist systems in which power is distributed on a religious basis. To understand the meteoric rise of Hezbollah, from its beginnings as an Islamic militant group backed by Iran, to a political force in Lebanon, one must understand the history of the Shi’ites of Lebanon.

Widely seen as an impoverished and disenfranchised group within Lebanese society, many Shi’ites joined or supported left-wing, secular and anti-establishment movements in the build up to Lebanese Civil War of 1975. Urbanization and population growth led to the Shi’ites forming a collective consciousness, and it was during the civil war that the first Shi’ite movements, such as the Amal movement founded by the charismatic Iranian-born cleric, Musa al-Sadr, came to life. During the first few years of the civil war, there would be two significant developments that would lead to the formation of Hezbollah. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 encouraged the growth of ‘Islamic’ activism and aided the formation of Shi’i fundamentalist militant groups.

Such Shi’ite militant groups would be founded in Lebanon in the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when an Iranian religious and military delegation recruited a few militant Lebanese clerics in East Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley who would set the framework for the founding of Hezbollah in 1985 with the goal of resisting Israeli aggression and founding an Islamic state in Lebanon, in line with the Khomeini’s theory of ‘Wilayat al-faqih.’ There would be another development that would allow Hezbollah and its allies to dominate
Lebanese politics and cause a great schism on the political scene over the next few decades. This development was the involvement of the Syrian regime in the civil war. Under the guise of the “Arab Deterrent Force,” the Syrian army, with the support of the international community, was tasked with restoring order to Lebanon by weakening the Palestinian factions present on Lebanese soil, the Syrian regime and army would dominate Lebanon from 1976 till their withdrawal in 2005. The Taif Agreement of 1989 brought an uneasy peace to Lebanon. One of the main stipulations of the agreement was the disarmament of all Lebanese and foreign militias, with the exception of Hezbollah, which retained its capacity to act as a resister against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon. Moreover, it was during this time that Hezbollah consolidated its support from its constituents by forming a network of institutions to provide a range of services from healthcare and education to housing and cultural activities. The General state of affairs in Lebanon is a contributing factor to Hezbollah’s declining power. Hezbollah’s popularity has waned a decade after it successfully repelled an Israeli invasion in 2006. It began with the 2008 conflict which proved that Hezbollah could successfully use its military capabilities internally against Hezbollah’s successes. The social and political structure of the Lebanese state further complicates the issue of dealing with Hezbollah. The confessionalist system of Lebanon encourages a form of clientelism and patronage, where citizens turn to their sectarian leaders for the provision of welfare services, thus consolidating their support. The Lebanese state has been unable to provide decent infrastructure and welfare services to many of its citizens, in particular in remote regions such as the Bekaa Valley, where Hezbollah enjoys a monopoly of support by filling the vacuum left by the state. Hezbollah’s declining power has been a decade after it successfully repelled an Israeli invasion in 2006. It began with the 2008 conflict which proved that Hezbollah could successfully use its military capabilities internally against other Lebanese factions to enforce its demands, at the same time, alienating large segments of the Lebanese population and inflaming sectarian tensions. Additionally, Hezbollah is one of the most sophisticated and capable groups in the world; security experts compare its capabilities to that of a professional army rather than a militia. Some of its support is garnered from its ability to withstand Israeli encroachment on its territory, as proven by previous wars. Hezbollah supporters argue that the group is the only group capable of protecting Lebanon’s sovereignty from not just Israeli, but from the recent threat of extremist groups like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. Furthermore, Hezbollah has consistently used the weakness of the Lebanese Armed Forces to support the legitimacy of its own arsenal. That being said, the ill-equipped Lebanese Armed Forces would not be able to conduct any offensive operation against Hezbollah successfully. The group’s recent involvement in the Syrian Crisis has thrown its ‘resistance against Israel’ narrative into question. Once treated as a Lebanese national resistance movement, it is now widely seen as the elite arm of a regional Shi’ite axis composed of Iran and Syria, with a military and political presence that stretches from Damascus to Baghdad to Sanaa. This is evident in the changing attitudes of the general Arab population, where Hezbollah was once lauded across the Arab world for successfully resisting Israeli aggression, they are now vilified with their decision to take part in the Syrian crisis on behalf of the Assad regime. The group has suffered significant losses, which has taken a toll on their supporters. “According to the number of casualties and their origin in Lebanon, it is safe to assume that every Shi’ite family in southern Lebanon knows someone who died or was injured in the Syrian civil war. Beyond the deep psychological effect on the community, there is also the financial cost for families losing their main providers.” Their involvement has come with negative repercussions on all of Lebanon. Syrian armed groups have used Lebanese border towns as bases for attacks on Hezbollah. Their connection to the regime has put a target on Lebanon as a whole for extremist groups, especially considering most of the recent terror attacks in Lebanon were targeting Hezbollah strongholds. Moreover, the 2016 Lebanese municipal elections signified a blow to not only Hezbollah but the entire old order. In spite of most of the participating established parties reconsolidating their power in areas where they enjoy traditional support, they did not win their elections by the landslide victories of previous elections. For example, 45 per cent of voters in the South of Lebanon and 35 per cent of voters in the Baalbek region did not vote for Hezbollah or their allies, Amal, areas where they traditionally enjoyed a monopoly of support over their Shi’ite constituents. Dealing with Hezbollah has been a challenge for the international community to attempt to weaken Hezbollah’s grip on the region. The Congress of the United States passed the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act in 2014 that aimed at imposing sanctions on foreign financial institutions that facilitate Hezbollah financial transactions. Furthermore, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council have both labeled Hezbollah as a terrorist group. In spite of taking a hit to its popularity and financial abilities, Hezbollah still enjoys almost unanimous support from the Shi’ite population of Lebanon. The organization is viewed as the only group that can represent the Shi’ite community as a people, protect them from internal and external threats, and provide them with services that the Lebanese Central Government cannot. With the support of regional powerhouse Iran, it is still able to function and maintain its military capabilities in the face of international sanctions. The general state of affairs in Lebanon is a contributing factor to Hezbollah’s success. The government has been in a
state of paralysis since 2011 when the elected parliament of the Future Movement’s Saad el-Hariri fell and was replaced by that of Najib Mikati. Elections were supposed to be held in 2014. However, parliament extended its term, pushing back elections to 2017, citing the failure to elect a president as the reason. This inability to elect a president is another indication of the paralysis of the Lebanese government with parliament unable to agree on a suitable candidate since the end of the President Michel Suleiman’s term, leaving Lebanon without a president since mid-2014. Furthermore, the numerous security institutions in Lebanon are also divided on a sectarian basis, leaving many of them unwilling or unable to confront Hezbollah with regards to their possession of weapons in fear of inflaming the already fragile state of affairs in Lebanon. With a weak central government and similarly near-ineffective international action, it is no wonder that Hezbollah still maintains a grip over Lebanon and the region. The paralysis by the government is an indication that is unable to confront Hezbollah over its actions such as the 2008 conflict, the implication of the group in the assassination of PM Rafic el-Hariri, and the group’s involvement in Syria. This paralysis is also an indication that the government is incapable of challenging the monopoly of support that the group enjoys over its constituents, as a government that is unable to elect an official is most certainly unable to provide services for its citizens.

Conclusion