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The United States proscription of Hezbollah: a critical discourse analysis (1985–1997)

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ABSTRACT

Hezbollah, a Lebanese political and armed organisation founded in 1982, was designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the United States. Since then, the US has pressured other states to adopt similar designations, producing significant material and symbolic consequences, particularly for the Lebanese diaspora. This research examines the accusations and motivations underlying Hezbollah's designation as a terrorist organisation. It argues that, rather than simply seeking to delegitimize Hezbollah, the proscription primarily aimed to reinforce containment strategies against Iran, viewed as a key challenger to US and Israeli strategic interests in the Middle East. Grounded in Critical Security Studies (CSS) and Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS), the study adopts a qualitative methodology that combines case study analysis with critical discourse analysis of US official documents and presidential speeches from 1985 to 1997. The findings suggest that Hezbollah's designation was not an isolated response to security concerns but part of a broader political strategy to advance US regional interests. As such, the case provides insights into wider Middle Eastern power dynamics, highlighting how terrorism designations can function as political instruments in the pursuit of regional security agendas.

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Introduction

On 19 May 2025, news circulated in South America regarding the “Rewards for Justice: Reward Offer for Information on Hizballah Financial Networks in the Tri-Border Area” (US Embassy and Consulates in Brazil 2025). Under the Donald Trump second administration, the US Department of State's Rewards for Justice programme offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to the disruption of Hezbollah's (Party of God) alleged financial mechanisms in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) spanning Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay – a region with a significant concentration of Lebanese Muslim migrants. Cheaito and Freixo (2025) contend that the securitisation movement in the TBA has utilised Hezbollah as a pretext for increased surveillance and monitoring of the region through counter-terrorism mechanisms and to justify accusations and containment measures targeting Iran.

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As noted by Jarvis and Legrand (2018), diasporas are extensively impacted by proscription mechanisms, which lead to stigmatisation and the creation of “suspect communities.” Yet, how can an organisation originating in Lebanon pose a threat in the Americas? To address this question, it is necessary to analyse a preceding process. Hence, this paper analyzes how the United States designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, focusing on official US discourses that preceded the proscription. Its central argument is that the proscription of Hezbollah in the 1990s sought not only to delegitimise the organisation, as is typical of proscriptions, but, more significantly, to reinforce containment measures against Iran, which represented a critical force of resistance and opposition to the US and Israeli strategic objectives in the region. In this context, the process illustrates a two-fold US regional strategy: to delegitimise, nationally and internationally, actors who oppose or threaten US interests and agendas, and simultaneously to legitimise the international implementation of counter-terrorism measures against those actors.

Hezbollah’s genesis occurred in 1982 when the Lebanese Islamic Resistance (RIL) – its armed wing – was established in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanese territory that year. In 1984, the organisation adopted the name Hezbollah, and in 1985, it published its Open Letter, the manifesto symbolising its official foundation. Beyond being an armed non-state actor, Hezbollah is a multifaceted organisation with specific complexities: it is characterised as a hybrid actor (Cambanis et al. 2019) centred on three interconnected pillars: an armed wing, a political party active within the state, and an efficient social services network.

In 1992, following the end of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) and intense internal debates, Hezbollah opted to create its political wing. Operating under the slogan “*isāl sawt al-Muqāwama lal-Barlamén*” (Make the voice of the Resistance heard in Parliament), the campaign demanded that the RIL’s actions in the South be officially recognised and legitimised by the State; sought aid for victims of Israeli bombings; and called for the release of Lebanese prisoners held by Israel (Daher 2018). Hezbollah secured seats in Parliament and began to politically represent the demands of the majority of the Shia community in the country.

Israel occupied Lebanese territory until 2000, when it carried out a unilateral withdrawal. Despite this, it maintained military bases in the Shebaa Farms, a territory claimed by Lebanon since 1967. Kanaaneh (2024) asserts that, together with its regional allies, the Lebanese organisation aims to serve as a political and armed force of opposition to the US’s presence and interference in the region. The author has termed this initiative the “*muqawama* project” (Resistance, in Arabic). This project is understood to be part of Iran’s forward defence strategy, which was later consolidated into the Axis of Resistance (Azizi 2025).

While proscription can be analysed from jurisdictional and legal perspectives, this research focuses on the discursive practice employed by US authorities. We argue that proscription is typically preceded by a discursive movement to identify and construct the “threat,” which could bring relevant contributions to studies on proscribed actors. The “perception of threat” inherently possesses a fluid, ambiguous nature that makes it an efficient tool for political power, particularly for the police and military apparatuses in the management of territories and populations (Rego-Monteiro 2021). Within the dichotomies created (legal/illegal and legitimate/illegitimate), the perception is constructed that all non-state violence is illegitimate and, therefore, liable to be framed as terrorist, while

state violence is identified as legitimate, as the State is seen as the entity responsible for security and the monopoly on the use of violence (Franks 2009).

The existence of a terrorist threat, according to Franks (2009), serves the State by strengthening its political position and granting it powers that fall outside the legal framework. However, instead of attempting to detail the hundreds of definitions of terrorism, this paper adopts the perspective that terrorism is a political tactic historically used across diverse contexts and societies (Toros and Gunning 2009). In turn, the proscription of individuals and organisations as terrorists has consistently served a political and symbolic agenda (De Goede 2018; Haspeslagh 2021). As Jarvis and Legrand (2018, 201) argue, because each state maintains its own approach and criteria for applying proscription regimes, lists of designated actors exhibit “tensions, incongruences, unintended consequences, perverse outcomes, and questionable effectiveness.”

Hezbollah’s objectives, its strategic and ideological alignment with Iran, and its armed actions against Israel placed the organisation in confrontation with the US and its interests in the Middle East (Saouli 2019). For this reason, the discursive practice articulated by various successive US actors suggests that its proscription was a necessary measure for American governments and their plans for the Middle East in general, and for Israel in particular.

Nonetheless, scholars such as Jarvis and Legrand (2018) assert that the relevance and effectiveness of proscription in the “fight against terrorism” have yet to be definitively demonstrated. These doubts and inconsistencies are evidenced in key data. Although one of the arguments for proscription is to generate the isolation and financial weakening of proscribed actors, a public opinion survey conducted by Roche and Robbins (2024) revealed that Hezbollah was described as the most heavily armed non-state actor in the world. Internally, 30% of interviewed Lebanese citizens state they have “quite a lot or a great deal of trust in Hezbollah.” Of this percentage, 85% are Shia, underscoring the organisation’s significance, particularly for this community, which has historically been neglected by the Lebanese State and dependent on the social services, such as schools and hospitals, offered by the organisation.¹ Furthermore, since 2005, Hezbollah has participated directly in the government through ministerial posts. While targeted by internal critics, its armed wing has also been acknowledged by the Lebanese government. For example, Lebanon’s former Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, stated on 29 June 2024, that “the resistance is doing its duty,” in reference to Hezbollah’s armed activity against Israel since 8 October 2023 (L’Orient Today, 2024).

Despite 11 September 2001, having triggered a new phase of counterterrorism at the global level, this research focuses on the period preceding that date. The temporal scope was defined as the period from the first official US discourse that nominally cited Hezbollah in 1985 to its proscription in 1997. This research, therefore, seeks to contribute to existing studies on proscription by analysing the Hezbollah case through a critical discourse analysis of the justifications underlying its designation as a terrorist organisation in 1997. The Hezbollah case is compelling because, in addition to its armed capabilities, this actor has assumed a relevant political role not only domestically but also regionally and internationally, a fact that generates an interesting contradiction with its designation as a terrorist organisation.

Despite opposition movements, Hezbollah’s role in the Lebanese government and its political articulations raise pertinent questions about legitimacy, power, and authority.

Recent examples of Hezbollah’s political, regional, and international articulations clearly illustrate this paradox, as evidenced in [Table 1](#):

To present the research conducted, I begin with an overview of the theoretical and conceptual approaches employed in the analysis, as well as the research method utilised. Next, I provide a historical overview of the US’s “perception of threat” in the post-Cold War period. From the third section onward, I delve into the research object, focusing on its functioning and the criteria used to proscribe an organisation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). In the article’s fourth section, I dedicate the analysis to the official discourses articulated by US authorities from 1985 to 1997, the period preceding Hezbollah’s proscription. Finally, the last section seeks to foster reflections and concerns about the material and symbolic impacts of Hezbollah’s proscription, especially for the Lebanese diaspora.

Critical studies and discourse analysis in proscription research

Discourses and practices of proscription, alongside contemporary debates about their symbolic, political, and discursive aspects, have become central to counter-terrorism research. This area of study also demonstrates an intrinsic dialogue with the research developed by Critical Security Studies (CSS) and Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS).

For Bilgin (2008), differences in understanding what security is, as well as the definitions of what constitutes a threat, stem from the political perspective of each agent involved in its definition and articulation. CSS researchers argue that states are, in this sense, the *means*, not the *end*, of security policies. For this reason, guiding questions emerge: which security should be prioritised? What are the threats, and how are they identified? Where do security discourses originate, and whom do they serve? And,

Table 1. Hezbollah international articulations (2006–2024).

DATE	MEETING
September/2006	UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said that both Israel and Hezbollah agreed to let the UN help reach a deal in the case of the two Israeli soldiers captured by Hezbollah in 2006 ² ;
March/2021	The meeting of the Hezbollah delegation, led by the head of its parliamentary bloc Mohammad Raad (who is sanctioned by the US), with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow, between March 14 and 17, 2021 ³ ;
October/2022	The signing of an agreement on the maritime border demarcation between Lebanon and Israel received approval from Hezbollah, which highlighted its role in ensuring the agreement did not signify “normalization” with Israel ⁴ ;
January/2023	Joanna Wronecka, the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon and former Polish Ambassador, tweeted to Hezbollah’s head of international relations, thanking him for a “tour d’horizon” on priority issues for Lebanon ⁵ ;
January/2024	EU foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, spoke with the head of Hezbollah’s parliamentary bloc, Mohammad Raad. The EU stated it was “engaged in diplomatic dialogue with all relevant political representatives who have influence over the situation on the ground or have an interest in it” ⁶ ;
March/2024	The head of Hezbollah’s coordination unit, Wafic Safa, traveled to the United Arab Emirates to follow up on the situation of Lebanese citizens detained in the country ⁷ ;
June/2024	The Assistant Secretary-General of the Arab League, Hossam Zaki, held a meeting with the head of Hezbollah’s parliamentary bloc. This encounter marked the first contact between the Arab League and Hezbollah in over a decade ⁸ ;
January and July/ 2024	The Deputy Director of the German Federal Intelligence Service (BND), Ole Diehl, met with Hezbollah’s Deputy Secretary-General, Sheikh Naim Qassem, to discuss the conflicts on the border with Israel since 7 October 2023 ⁹ ;

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

crucially, what does security do politically? (Browning and McDonald 2013). In the words of Booth (1997, 106, as cited in Bilgin 2008, 98), “Security is what we make of it. It is an epiphenomenon intersubjectively created. Different worldviews and discourses about politics deliver different views and discourses about security.” The perception of security, as well as of threat, is shaped and influenced by the perspectives of those who articulate it – perspectives that are themselves subjects of dispute.

In dialogue with the perspective proposed by CTS, the motivations and implications of classifying an actor as terrorist are also subject to questioning. This approach reveals that the identification of a group or organisation as terrorist derives from the intentionality of the actors performing the designation. The definitions attributed are thus inherently political (Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning 2009). Therefore, the imposition of the term terrorism does not result from a “neutral” or “apolitical” view of reality but is “the fruit of a broad process involving the articulation between concepts such as identity, authority, and legitimization of the use of violence through discourse” (Vilas Boas et al. 2019).

The function of CTS, consequently, is to explore dilemmas such as security/insecurity and to question dichotomies such as Terrorism/Counterterrorism, and legitimate/illegitimate (Toros and Gunning 2009). In this research, terrorism is recognised as a tactic that must be understood from a broader perspective, considering its context, the political interests involved, and the instrumentalization to which the term is susceptible (Jackson 2007; Toros and Gunning 2009). Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning (2009, 223) argue that “(..) there is a discursive, political, and cultural process by which ‘real world’ experiences of violence are given social meaning through the negotiated application of different kinds of political and intellectual labels. (...) actions and events never just speak for themselves.”

From these two research areas, it became possible to employ the presented categories to develop an analysis of both the discourses on terrorism and the discursive subjects and material interests that generate and sustain this labelling and rhetoric. Proscription regimes, in this sense, were analysed through these perspectives. As exposed by Kirkpatrick (2019) and Haspeslagh (2021), the discursive roots of proscription date back to the 19th century in the United Kingdom, which was the first country to establish a proscription regime based on the Prevention of Terrorism Act after the Irish Republican Army (IRA) attacks on pubs in Birmingham in 1974. Consequently, it was from this moment that a link was established between the *act of terror* and the *actor*, who began to be described as a “terrorist.”

Proscription consists of designating actors, generically termed “non-state,” as terrorists. Proscription powers refer to the legal instruments used by governments or other actors with authority to prohibit the presence and support of a designated organisation within their jurisdiction (Jarvis and Legrand 2018). This act functions as a counter-terrorism listing mechanism aimed at disarticulating, stigmatising, and subjecting individuals and populations associated with the designated actors to judicial processing (Sentas 2018). Furthermore, the objective of proscription is to invalidate and delegitimize a group’s actions and ideologies, in order to “suffocate” its capacity for self-promotion and recognition (Chukwuma 2024).

De Goede (2018) explains that among the proscription measures adopted, the freezing of assets and the prohibition of financial support stand out, both of which can be adopted at the state or transnational level. The author also asserts that the function of proscription lists is symbolic and denunciatory, reinforcing and disseminating discourses of

“otherness” that separate (and oppose) the liberal/rational self and the terrorist “Other.” For Haspeslagh (2021), the symbolic effect of proscription is essential to the strategy. However, beyond its symbolic nature, the decision-making process for proscription is highly politicised (Jarvis and Legrand 2018). Sentas (2018), along this line, argues that there is a political interest in the listing and the discursive construction of the “Other.” Discourse, in this sense, plays a role in labelling the legitimisation and delegitimization of violence.

Upon conducting a literature review of the topic, it was observed that recent research on proscription has focused on other relevant cases. Walker (2018) analyzes the efficacy of the UK law regarding the persistence of proscription, focusing on its political, legal, and practical implications; Sentas (2018) examines the effects of the proscription of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) on the Kurdish conflict as a mode of counter-insurgency warfare; Bourne (2018) investigates the proscription of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain; Toros (2008) focuses on conflict cases in Northern Ireland and the Mindanao region in the southern Philippines to analyse how proscription can negatively interfere with negotiation processes; and Nadarajah (2018) starts from the case study of Sri Lanka to investigate how Western proscription of terrorism is connected to the pursuit of maintaining a liberal order.

Discourse analysis and proscription practices can be analysed in an articulated manner to provide a macro perspective on their evolution over time, the structures of power they represent, and the practices that legitimise them. De Goede (2018) draws attention to the fact that, although discourse is a key aspect of proscription measures, this element of the process has been little investigated and addressed. Proscription not only seeks to normalise a particular discourse of legitimacy but also seeks to silence, through delegitimization, those who challenge it. For this reason, this system must be analysed, from its inception, as a communicative device that allows the State to expand security powers to address a classified threat (Kirkpatrick 2019).

To conduct this study, I used primary and secondary sources, systematised and analysed using the case study and bibliographic-documentary research methods, in conjunction with the method of critical discourse analysis (Jackson 2005). Based on Gil (2002) and Lakatos and Marconi (2003), case study research techniques allow for (i) observing the agent in a given space and time, (ii) achieving a macro and structural view of the research problem, and (iii) identifying variables that affect and influence the central actor of this investigation. Based on Gerring (2006), the case study is applied to expand the analysis to a broader set of cases through the analytical deepening of a single case. It is understood that this method enables a detailed analysis of the historical processes and causal mechanisms involving the central object, facilitating the identification of variables that allow for the study of the interactions between motivations and their unfolding consequences.

As primary sources, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of speeches selected from the American Presidency Project platform. The keyword *Hezbollah* was used,¹⁰ and a total of 725 records in which the term was mentioned by political authorities were found, from 1985 to 2025.¹¹ From this corpus, 33 speeches delivered between 1985 and 1997 were selected for analysis. The use of critical discourse analysis as a method presupposes, according to Jackson (2005), that discourse is a social practice that constitutes a dialectical process, being understood as a shaper of social structures and also shaped

by them. For this reason, no discursive practices are neutral. Critical discourse analysis is considered an interdisciplinary method that combines social analysis with textual analysis. Consequently, it involves a careful reading of the text and its elements – such as terms, expressions, actors mentioned – understanding them within a historical context and as propagated by figures with vested interests.

The discursive analysis, as the exposed approaches propose, will be carried out in conjunction with the analysis of the social and political context. For this reason, the next section is dedicated to the context of the 1990s and the variables that enabled and justified the creation of a proscription system in the US, which led to Hezbollah's proscription in 1997.

The enemy in the 1990s: redefining threats in the post-cold war era

Despite the attacks of 11 September 2001 having marked an immediate and pronounced transformation in proscription regimes on a global scale (Jarvis and Legrand 2018), the issue of international terrorism was already present before this date, albeit to a lesser degree. Vieira (2022), in conducting a genealogy of the attention given to terrorism in US administrations, demonstrates that the first strategies began during the Richard Nixon (1969–1974) administration. Cheaito and Rodrigues (2023), in tracing the so-called “bad Muslims” – in Mamdani's (2002) terms – in US discourses and agendas, demonstrate how the first accusations against this “threat” date back to the 1980s and appear in academic productions associated with “new terrorism” (Hoffman 2017; Laqueur 1999; Lewis 2003, 2010) or the “fourth wave of terrorism”¹² (Rapoport 2022). For Jackson (2007), the discourse on “Islamic terrorism” became highly politicised and intellectually contestable.

The perception of “non-state terrorism” emerged in the mid-19th and early 20th century as a way to characterise anarchist movements following the popular revolts in Europe in 1848 (Haspeslagh 2021). As demonstrated by Toros (2008), while *terrorism* was used to describe tactics and means of action historically utilised in conflicts, the term *terrorist* — which, according to the researcher, should be rejected – began to characterise groups and individuals, reducing them to their actions and ignoring other elements and contexts that constitute the social subject or group.

By focusing the analysis on the US, it is necessary to consider this country's position and role in international relations, its power correlations, and its capacity to influence, through concessions, agreements, or sanctions, the security and defence agendas of other countries. Although the first more direct US interventions in the Middle East date back to the 1950s (Baxter and Akbarzadeh 2008), the Iranian Revolution of 1979; the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran (1979–1981), where 50 officials and diplomats were held prisoner for over 400 days; and the October 1984 attack against the US Marines barracks in Beirut, which killed 241 American soldiers, were key moments of change in US policy strategy for the Middle East.

Haspeslagh (2021) describes how, from these moments, the US administration applied the logic of the Cold War and the “friend-enemy” dichotomy to establish its projects for the region. From the US and Israeli perspective, since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iran has been considered a regional power seeking to eradicate US influence in the Middle East, aiming for Israel's destruction, and seeking to expand its regional power. This perception of threat led Washington to implement containment measures, such as

economic sanctions and an increase in its military presence in the Gulf (Azizi, Golmohammadi, and Vazirian 2020). This strategy has characterised successive US administrations, from Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) to Donald Trump (2017–2021 and 2025–present). Initially, these economic embargoes aimed to directly constrain the “Iranian enemy.” Subsequently, they aimed to concurrently constrain third parties seeking any relationship with Iran.

However, contrary to this perception, the Iranian strategies established since the revolution have focused on its defence, the deterrence of threats, and the maintenance of the regime (Badiee Azandahi, Zandi, and Yazdanpanah 2023). Its “anti-containment” strategy, based on the conception of resistance, emerged with the goal of circumventing, resisting, and neutralising the pressure exerted against the regime. The scenario of regional isolation, the absence of allied powers, gaps in a comprehensive regional security structure, the abundance of adversaries, and the economic and military encirclement carried out by the US led the Iranian ruling class to resort to armed non-state actors to build its influence and deter threats to its structures and infrastructure (Bajoghli and Nasr 2024; Rouhi 2025; Saraswat 2024). Ideologically, this alliance is founded on a shared opposition to the US and Israel (Bajoghli and Nasr 2024; Wastnidge and Mabon 2024). These interactions became central to analysing the relations between the US, Iran, and Hezbollah shaped in the ensuing years.

Regarding the issue of terrorism, Haspeslagh (2021) points out how the attacks that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s were characterised, within the dynamics of the Cold War, as “state-sponsored terrorism.” This led the US to create the list of “State Sponsors of Terrorism” in 1979, on which Iran was included in 1984. This designation aims to implement four main sanctions: restrictions on US foreign assistance; prohibition of defence exports and sales; certain controls on exports of dual-use items; and various financial and other restrictions. Furthermore, it allows sanctions to be imposed on individuals and countries engaging in certain commercial transactions with “State Sponsors” (US Department of State 2025).

Although the US had not developed a proscription regime directed at armed non-state groups during this period, Haspeslagh (2021) argues that the language developed by the Ronald Reagan administration (1981–1989) influenced the symbolic delegitimization of certain groups labelled as “terrorists.” Meanwhile, others were legitimised under the label of “freedom fighters,” such as the mujahidin in Afghanistan, the Contras in Nicaragua, and anti-communist forces in Angola.

With the end of the Cold War, McCormick (1995) asserts that the US government began to seek new justifications for American intervention and the maintenance of its military bases scattered around the world, as Soviet expansionism was no longer a viable pretext. On the eve of the Gulf War, in August 1990, the Pentagon announced its new “plan for United States military strategy in the 1990s.” In this plan, US threats were no longer on the East-West axis but on the North-South axis and in the so-called Third World.

In this shift, the geostrategic element cannot be underestimated, as the Middle East is configured as a point of paramount importance for US actions and interests (Daher 2018). As a result of the 1980s attacks on American and French military forces in Lebanon; the Gulf War¹³ and its televised repercussion worldwide; and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the construction in the collective imagination of the “bad Muslim” created

a direct link with another discursive construction: the good and innocent American (Jackson 2005).

Huntington's (1997) thesis systematised the perceptions being constructed about Islam, affirming that its cultural zones were outside modernity. In Huntington's (1997, 328) words: "Islam has bloody borders, so too do its inward parts." The image created of Islam and, especially, of Muslims, is that both represented a force of resistance to modernity amidst a set of "flexible faiths," generating a Western apprehension towards Muslim "otherness" (Pasha 2017).

Thus, the 1990s established the constitutive elements and the international proscriptions of terrorism that rapidly expanded into a global anti-terrorism architecture following September 11. Nadarajah (2018) argues that the end of the Cold War and the triumph of the liberal model had reinvigorated ambitions for a world order based on liberal democracy, market economy, and the rule of law. The US, as the protagonist of this order, demonstrated its capacity to dominate the global agenda and apply targeted sanctions through the stigmatisation of terrorism as illegitimate (Haspeslagh 2021). Thus, it was in the pursuit of consolidating a global liberal order that various armed actors began to be identified as evident threats to international peace (Nadarajah 2018). The threat, in this sense, was anything that could confront the idealised liberal order championed by the US in the post-Cold War era.

Known as the "decade of sanctions," from 1990 onward, the UN Security Council became more proactive in leading actions against what was perceived as threats to international peace and security, initially targeting state actors (Haspeslagh 2021). Furthermore, this was a period defined by various interventions by the so-called "West" in conflict regions around the world, under the rhetoric of "peacebuilding," "peacekeeping," "securitized development," "economic liberalization," and "humanitarian intervention" (Nadarajah 2018). In response to US interventions and foreign policy, anti-Americanism grew exponentially in the Middle East during this period (Baxter and Akbarzadeh 2008).

During the Bill Clinton administration (1993–2001), sanctions against Iran expanded to prohibit the sale of any item or technology that could facilitate the development of weapons of mass destruction. Additionally, in 1996, the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act was enacted, prohibiting investments of more than \$40 million in the Iranian energy sector (Azizi, Golmohammadi, and Vazirian 2020). To promote its own security, circumvent its isolation, and deter US threats, Iran deepened its relations with its regional allies. Among these allies, Hezbollah was the most relevant, both for its structure and capacity for armed action and political organisation, and for its geographical proximity to Israel, which represented the main US ally in the region.

It was within this international context, therefore, that in 1997 the US Department of State created a formalised list of foreign terrorist organisations, on which Hezbollah was proscribed. Although the analysis in this article focuses on the official discourses that preceded the identification of Hezbollah as a threat and were used to justify its proscription, the following section briefly explores the legal mechanisms used by the Foreign Terrorist Organizations list.

The foreign terrorist organisations (FTOs)

As detailed by the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (2024), Hezbollah was designated as an FTO on 8 October 1997; as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) under Executive Order (E.O.) 13,224 on 31 October 2001; and individuals associated with Hezbollah are also designated under E.O. 13,224. For the purposes of this research, I focus on the first mechanism.

Based on the research on lists by De Goede and Sullivan (2016), this study understands the Foreign Terrorist Organizations list, developed by the United States Department of State (n.d), as a security device that produces specific material, political, and legal effects. Understanding the lists as devices justifies the fostering of security standards that include cooperation between agents or states, for example. Furthermore, the FTO list symbolises one of the main debates in the field: how terrorism is conceptualised and which organisations deserve to be designated (Legrand 2018). As Toros (2008) suggests, US proscriptions, especially the FTOs, appear to be driven, at least partially, by political considerations. Although efforts to ban groups identified as terrorists ascended after 11 September 2001, Jarvis and Legrand (2018) demonstrate that the paradigms of proscription predate this event. The FTO list, in effect since 1997, is an example of this.

Hence, the designation of terrorist groups is a mechanism within Western counter-terrorism structures. This proscription is a formal prerequisite for justifying the seizure or freezing of a group's assets; preventing the sending of support to the group; prohibiting participation in political office; and prohibiting travel beyond national borders, among others (Haspeslagh 2021; Jarvis and Legrand 2018). Focusing on the US case, Jarvis and Legrand (2018) also explain the existence of a variety of legal instruments available to sanction designated groups, with the FTO list being the most prominent. This list has two main characteristics: the organisations must be foreign and represent a direct threat to the US.

On 24 April 1996, Public Law 104–132, titled the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (AEDPA), was published by the United States Congress. According to the document, this law arose in response to the World Trade Center bombing in 1993 and the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. This Act conferred authority upon the Secretary of State to designate foreign terrorist organisations whose activity “threatens the security of United States nationals or the national defense, foreign relations, or economic interests of the United States” (Congress of the United States 1996).

For the objectives of this investigation, I highlight Section 219 (8 USC. § 1189), titled “Designation of Foreign Terrorist Organizations”. It was based on this section that the FTO list, initially published in the Federal Register on 8 October 1997, with the names of 30 designated organisations – including Hezbollah – began to be constructed (Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism 1997). Section 219 was added to the Immigration and Nationality Act and formally established the process by which the US Secretary of State can officially designate an entity as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, provided that a set of criteria and justifications is presented. The Act also made it illegal, within the United States or for any person subject to US jurisdiction, to provide material

support to a foreign terrorist organisation that has been designated by the Secretary of State.

For Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning (2009), each designated group or organisation reflects political contexts and decisions. The Secretary of State can designate an organisation as terrorist if he or she determines that three statutory criteria are applicable: (1) It must be a foreign organisation; (2) The organisation must engage in terrorist activity, as defined in Section 212¹⁴ or terrorism, as defined in Section 140¹⁵ of the Foreign Relations Authorisation Act, or maintain the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism; and (3) The organisation's terrorist activity or terrorism must threaten the security of US nationals or the National Security (National Defence, foreign relations, or economic interests) of the United States (US Department of State 2025).

Legrand (2018) states that, in the US, legislative approval for executive designation tends to be granted as a matter of routine. According to the researcher, the process is led by the Department of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism at the Department of State. The Department of State, by necessity, obtains advice from the US intelligence community and provides advice to the Secretary of State. The recommendation for proscription is based on a synthesis of information sufficiently robust to withstand legal challenges. Congress is then notified and has 7 days to review the Secretary's intent to proscribe an organisation. If there is no objection, the decision is published in the Federal Register and takes effect. The organisation then appears on the FTO list and is subject to the consequences of this designation.

In October 1997, then-Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright approved the designation of the first 30 groups as FTOs. Currently, the list includes 77 organisations).¹⁶ Designations can be revoked if the Secretary of State determines that the underlying circumstances initially used are no longer consistent with the group's activities or otherwise warrant revocation (US Department of State 2025).

The Office of Counterterrorism became responsible for continuously monitoring the activities of groups designated as terrorists worldwide, as well as the activities of other groups that may be potential targets for designation. Among the effects sought through the designation of an organisation as terrorist are: (a) supporting efforts to stem the financing of terrorism and encouraging other nations to do the same; (b) stigmatising and internationally isolating designated terrorist organisations; (c) preventing donations or contributions and economic transactions with named organisations; (d) increasing public awareness and knowledge about terrorist organisations; and (e) signalling to other governments concerns about the named organisations (US Department of State 2025).

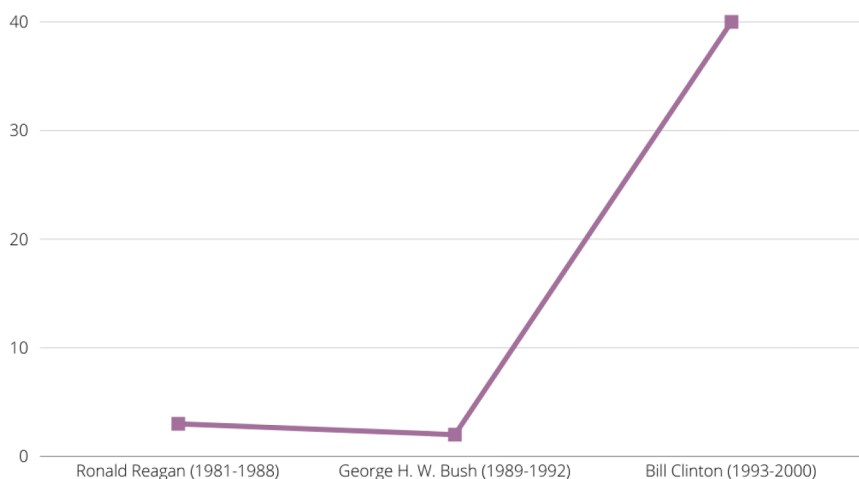
Based on this brief overview, we now focus on the case study of this research. As discussed in the previous section, symbolism has been a central element in counterterrorism frameworks and tools. For example, on its official website, the Department of State states the goal of "stigmatizing" designated foreign organisations. Legrand (2018) published an interview with James R. Clapper, US Director of National Intelligence during President Barack Obama's administration from 2010 to 2017, who confirmed the symbolic objective and aspect of the FTO list. However, like any other security measure adopted by the State, it needs to be explained and justified to different audiences to be considered legitimate (Jarvis and Legrand 2018).

To grasp the accusations that justified Hezbollah's designation as an FTO, the *Patterns of Global Terrorism* from the US Department of State for 1996 and 1997 were utilised.

Among the accusations made are: suicide truck bombings against the US Embassy and the US Marine barracks in Beirut in October 1983, and the US Embassy annex in Beirut in September 1984; the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in 1985, during which a US Navy diver was murdered; the kidnapping and detention of US nationals and other Westerners in Lebanon in the 1980s; and the attack on the Israeli Embassy in Argentina in 1992 and the Israeli cultural centre in Buenos Aires in 1994, neither of which directly involved US nationals. These accusations were also present in the official discourses articulated by US authorities, which are analysed in the next section.

Hezbollah in official US discourses (1985–1997)

Systematically, a pattern of increasing frequency was identified in the appearance of the term Hezbollah in official US discourse. During the Ronald Wilson Reagan administration (1981–1989), Hezbollah was mentioned in three speeches; during the George H. W. Bush administration (1989–1993), in two speeches; and during the Bill Clinton administration (1993–2001), a significant increase in mentions was recorded, totalling 40 speeches. Within the established temporal scope for this research, discourses that occurred between 1998 and 2001 were not considered.¹⁷



Graph 1. Mentions of Hezbollah in each administration (1985–2000). Source: Data from the American Presidency Project, graph created by the author.

In the analysis of the discourses mentioned in Graph 1, priority was given to tracing and apprehending the main accusations that led to Hezbollah's proscription. The first time Hezbollah was officially named as a terrorist organisation by the US government was on 14 June 1985, through the title of the President's press conference: "Hezbollah, a terrorist organization, hijacks a Rome-bound flight and kills a Navy officer on board, in addition to taking other hostages." In the speech transcript, however, the name Hezbollah was not mentioned directly. On the occasion, "international terrorism" and "those in Lebanon who commit these acts harm their country and their cause, and we hold them accountable" were referenced.¹⁸

This accusation referred to the hijacking of Trans World Airlines (TWA) Flight 847 on 14 June 1985, carried out by Mohammed Ali Hamadei. Upon investigating the case, it is noted that Hezbollah's involvement in the hijacking, as well as the link between Hamadei and Hezbollah, has not been confirmed to date, with the accusation based on assumptions due to the accused's origin: a Lebanese national, "alleged member of the terrorist organization Hezbollah",¹⁹ in the words of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) itself.

In this same period, in the context of the Lebanese civil war and amid accusations of US involvement in the conflict, attacks occurred on the US embassy in Lebanon, in April 1983, which resulted in the death of 63 people, 17 of them American; and, in October 1983, another attack on US military forces²⁰ resulted in the death of 220 Marines, 18 sailors, and 3 soldiers. Shia militants were accused of the attacks, and Iran was accused by the US of alleged involvement in their planning and execution. In 1984, the US government reinforced sanctions against Tehran under the accusation that the Iranians were funding terrorist groups, with direct reference to Hezbollah (Azizi, Golmohammadi, and Vazirian 2020), and in the same year, Iran was also designated by the Department of State as a State Sponsor of Terrorism.

On 23 February 1986, the central theme of the discourses was the kidnapping of hostages in Lebanon. In the early 1980s, when the Lebanese civil war was at its peak, Westerners, mostly Americans, were kidnapped. Groups like Hezbollah were accused of perpetrating the kidnappings, despite the fact that, according to Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) and Daher (2018), no concrete evidence directly incriminating the group has yet emerged. The group also denies all accusations. In this context, Hezbollah reappeared in Reagan's discourse, and a direct link between the group and Iran was reinforced in the rhetoric. In the president's words (our emphasis): "Those holding their people [in reference to the French hostages] hostage are a different group than Hezbollah, the *Iranian group*, that is holding ours." This accusation highlights how Hezbollah began to be constructed, in the official rhetoric, not as a Lebanese group, but as an *Iranian* group.

The absence of proof of this involvement and the generalisation in the discourses lead to the understanding that the kidnappings of Westerners in Lebanon were carried out by a single organisation, or solely by Shias, an assertion that does not correspond to reality. An example of debate on this crisis concerns the Lebanese Islamic Jihad, which claimed responsibility for some of the kidnappings. Researchers such as Abisaab and Abisaab (2014) state that the connection between Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah is unclear. Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) also argues that claims that Islamic Jihad is a Hezbollah affiliate, or a pseudonym, are based on speculation, lacking consolidated proof of the link between the two.

In a speech on 27 February 1987, the issue of hostages remained central, as did the mention of the Hezbollah-Iran connection: "Available intelligence suggested that most, if not all, of the Americans were held hostage by members of Hezbollah, a fundamentalist Shia terrorist group with ties to the Ayatollah Khomeini regime." Franks (2009) observes that the predominant theoretical and analytical matrix in the Cold War tended to view, from a state-centric approach, non-state groups and organisations as *proxy actors*. Daher (2018) states that Hezbollah is commonly identified as a representative of regional state actors, reducing the analysis of the

group and its interaction with the world to initiatives considered terrorist, anti-Western, and anti-Israeli in nature, carried out under the orders of the Syrian and/or Iranian regimes.

Saad (2019) and Ghasemi Tari (2025) explicitly detail the limitations of this approach. For Saad (2019), this perspective is a reductive device and conceptually inadequate for examining a partnership like that between Iran and Hezbollah. Furthermore, it serves a political purpose to delegitimize and criminalise enemies in the same way the terrorism label is used. In this sense, when Iran is proscribed as a “State sponsor of terrorism,” its allies are then identified as “terrorist organizations,” and this narrative legitimises the proscription of both.

At the end of the 1980s, during the Bush I administration, Hezbollah was mentioned in only two official discourses, in 1989 and 1991. On both occasions, the mentions were superficial: Bush referred to Sheikh Abdul Karim Obeid, a Muslim religious leader close to Hezbollah, who had been imprisoned by Israel. This distancing by Bush I towards Hezbollah can be analysed in the context of the moment. With the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the Gulf War, it is observed that other priorities and urgencies characterised the discourses and the US foreign policy agenda.

Starting in the 1990s, notably with the Bill Clinton administration (1993–2001), mentions of Hezbollah in official discourses increased. It became evident that the focus of the speeches was Iran, which began to be accused of “destroying peace in the Middle East” and “sponsoring terrorist groups.” As noted by Nadarajah (2018), the end of the Cold War led to an ascent of discourses and practices emphasising the need to combat any threat to the triumphant liberal model. The conception of peace in this sense would be liberal peace within an order idealised and championed by the US in the post-Cold War era. On 6 April 1993, the discourse accused Iran of being a threat “to the region as a whole, both in terms of Iran’s categorical opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process, its efforts to destabilise regimes, and its support for various terrorist organisations, such as Hezbollah links, Iranian support for Hamas, and other Islamic groups (. . .).”

Another example can be illustrated in statements such as those by Dee Dee Myers²¹ (27 July 1993): “Hezbollah has the support of the Iranian government and they are enemies of the peace process.” The discourses also evidenced how Syria also began to be pressured by the US to adopt a position – and a rupture – concerning Iran and Hezbollah. In this context, the Syrian government was threatened with the imposition of sanctions if it did not take a stance against the activities of both actors in the region. It should be noted that Syria’s territory has historically been a strategic location for the connections and relations between Hezbollah and Iran, and for the Axis of Resistance in general (Nasr 2025).

Regarding the accusations involving the existing link between Hezbollah and Iran, although this alliance is acknowledged by both, Daher (2018) demonstrates how during the Rafsandjani (1989–1997) and Khatami (1997–2005) governments in Iran, Hezbollah significantly lost the support and funding from the country, which had been characteristic of the Khomeini era under the presidency of Khamenei (1981–1989). The Rafsandjani and Khatami governments marked a moment of greater flexibility from Iran regarding the US. During this period, relations with Hezbollah were limited to pragmatism, as the political agenda of those governments focused on the domestic environment and aimed for Iran’s rearticulation in international relations.

This accusation, furthermore, obscures the fact that Hezbollah emerged as a group linked to national interests and that the ties governing relations between Hezbollah and Tehran, on the one hand, and the party and Damascus, on the other, have been modulated several times according to the contexts. Saad (2019) asserts that, despite the alliance, Hezbollah maintains autonomy and decisional independence from Iran. Along the same lines, Husseini (2010) states that there is no concrete, concise information on the extent of Iran's influence and control over Hezbollah. By analysing the decisions and actions of both, it becomes clear that the political and armed organisation's loyalty to the Iranian State does not exclude moments of disagreement and divergence between the actors.

Moreover, while Iran was described as "the number one state sponsor of international terrorism" (30 April 1995), President Clinton's discourses also reinforced support, friendship, and guaranteed protection for Israel. On 30 April 1995, the president again emphasised "opposition to all those who would thwart the peace process, promote terrorism, or develop weapons of mass destruction," reinforced "efforts to act against groups like Hamas and Hezbollah," and stated: "Israel shares the lands of the Middle East with nations who still seek to destroy peace, nations like Iran, Iraq, and Libya. (...) Since the beginning of our administration, we have moved to combat Iran's support for international terrorism and, in particular, its support for the violent opponents of peace in the Middle East."

On 7 May 1995, containing Iran was announced as a "paramount interest" of the US administration. In 1996, the year preceding the official proscription, official discourses focused on the fragile peace negotiations established between Hezbollah and Israel, such as the July Understanding of 1993 and the April Understanding of 1996. In these discourses, Hezbollah was identified, even indirectly, as a relevant actor for negotiations, although its activities remained described as terrorist. I highlight the following excerpts: "It remains our view that all parties who have an interest in the long-term peace and stability in that region should carefully consider how best to use their influence with the parties to see if we can get the fighting to diminish" (11 April 1996), and "In Lebanon, the United States has continued up to the present moment, very energetic and arduous efforts to try to resolve the problems between Israel and Hezbollah and others in the region to stop the fighting and return the situation to calm and normalcy where there is no fighting on either side and no risk to civilians on either side" (18 April 1996).

Finally, in 1997, the FTO list was created, and Hezbollah was officially designated as a terrorist organisation. In this year, there is only one discourse by President Clinton that cites the group, on 13 February 1997. On this occasion, the three elements present in almost all his previous speeches were reinforced: Hezbollah and its relations with Iran and Syria were addressed. However, a new actor was cited: Saudi Arabia. In the analysed discourse, the Saudi regime was cited as an important ally for Israel's security, which was described as the priority at the moment. This mention of Saudi Arabia invites new reflections on the dynamics of regional alliances, as well as on shared perceptions of threats. In this speech, the president also stated: "We are doing what we can to contain the tide of terrorism. And I will say again, we will do what we can to ensure that no development in any other country that is beyond our control or influence can erode Israel's qualitative security edge. That is our responsibility, and we will do our best to meet it."

As argued by Kirkpatrick (2019), although proscription can be analysed in terms of the material and legal reality of political violence, this process also incorporates a discourse of state legitimisation. As the analysed discourses demonstrate, organisations like Hezbollah were essentialized as “terrorists,” and, in a discursive process spanning years, efforts were made to justify the accusations aimed at legitimising its proscription in 1997. It is observed that the mentions of Hezbollah and Iran were accompanied by the use of terms such as “peace,” “terrorism,” “threat,” and “security.” As CSS questions, the analysis of these discourses allows us to observe where security discourses originate and who they serve. Since proscription results from a political process with symbolic effects, as Chukwuma (2024) states, discourses are essential tools for delegitimising a group’s actions and ideologies.

Based on these selected excerpts, it can be observed that both the proscription and the maintenance of Hezbollah on the FTO list result from a political process that involves disputes over security projects in the Middle East, and that this process extends beyond an exclusive, particular focus on Hezbollah. Through discourse analysis, it was possible to apprehend, for example, how there was a discursive focus on identifying Iran as a threat to the US, American society, and, on a broader scale, to international security. Hezbollah, in this sense, was described in various discourses as a representative of Iranian interests, simplifying and obscuring its multifaceted political and armed activities and its own objectives. Finally, it was due to its political and symbolic nature that the process of designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation generated material impacts and revealed contradictions.

The effects of Hezbollah’s proscription

In this final section, I dedicate a brief description of the material and symbolic effects of Hezbollah’s proscription. As De Goede and Sullivan (2016) analyse, the purpose of security lists, such as the FTOs, is prevention. As mechanisms, these lists create modes of target selection that enable security intervention before the actualisation of any act or judicial process. According to Sentas (2018), among the material effects generated by this process, counter-terrorism also incorporates the logic of counter-insurgency into its structure, resulting in the implementation of various modes of law and policing that target broader populations. In the researcher’s definitions, insurgency can refer to non-violent civil and political movements that support the militants’ ideologies or political claims. Under this logic, any association or contact with proscribed organisations can be deemed a crime liable to banishment and punishment.

The proscription of “terrorist organizations,” in this sense, has significant implications for the lives of citizens (Jarvis and Legrand 2018) and can impact negotiation processes (Haspeslagh 2021). Although Hezbollah is not proscribed by the Lebanese State, its proscription by the US, and subsequently by other States worldwide, demonstrated how this process can also reflect in transnational cooperation and generate impacts on Lebanese diaspora communities as well.

As Haspeslagh (2021) argues, financial sanctions against armed groups will only have an effective impact if these groups depend on resources from the international financial markets. For this reason, the cited research indicates that the impact of sanctions against these groups is small, and the case of Hezbollah, as presented,

substantiates this argument. Despite, in this sense, the specific impacts felt by Hezbollah due to financial restrictions, the Lebanese diaspora has become a target in various forms. As Sentas (2010) states, proscription seeks to sever legitimate ties and criminalise migrants if they are suspected of having any contact with the proscribed organisation. In the case of Hezbollah, the initial issue presented regarding the TBA and the accusations against the organisation's alleged activities in South America is a notorious example of this process.

As investigated by Cheaito and Freixo (2025), attempts to securitise Hezbollah in Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil – with the first two having proscribed the organisation – led to the stigmatisation of a significant portion of the Lebanese and Shia Muslim communities in these countries, considered suspect of “financing terrorism” for sending resources to their families in Lebanon, for example. It is essential to reinforce Hezbollah's multifaceted nature, which, in addition to its armed wing, functions as a political entity and manages a social services network. Anyone or any group sending financial resources – such as *zakat*, the donations made by Muslims to social service entities – to the service provision institutions that comprise the Hezbollah network began to be accused of “supporting terrorism,” including its employees. By sanctioning its institutions, the beneficiaries of these services, who constitute a significant portion of poorer Lebanese society, are directly affected, as are its employees, given that its networks are important centres of employment in the country.

In addition to this material effect, the accusations and criteria utilised and articulated in the discourses against Hezbollah evidenced some inconsistencies. Among the criteria presented for designating an organisation as an FTO, the following stand out: (1) “The organisation's terrorist activity or terrorism must threaten the security of US nationals or the national security of the United States”; (2) “Section 140 of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act defines ‘terrorism’ as ‘premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents’”; and (3) “the Secretary of State may revoke a designation at any time if he or she finds that the underlying circumstances initially used are no longer consistent with the group's activities, or otherwise warrant revocation.”

Regarding the first point, Hussein (2010) asserts that maintaining Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation is contradictory because, among various factors, the absence of continuous attacks by the group against the US is evident, with the last record being the attacks that occurred in the 1980s. These attacks took place on Lebanese territory, in the context of the civil war, and amidst accusations that US forces were not neutral in the civil war that was spreading across the country (Aruri 1985). Furthermore, it should be noted that during the years the attacks occurred, Hezbollah did not yet exist in a structured form, as it was officially founded in 1985 with the Open Letter.

Concerning the attacks “perpetrated against noncombatant targets” highlighted in the second point, Norton (2007) mentions some of the cases in which Hezbollah was accused of using terrorist tactics, but none of the cases mentioned by the researcher involved civilians. Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) reports in her research the organisation's position regarding attacks on civilians and in the West, which clashes with the accusations made. For the researcher, among the principles that constitute Hezbollah, causing the death of Western civilians would be against Islamic interests, as such attacks contribute to staining Islam's reputation and distracting international public opinion from a cause

central to Hezbollah: the large-scale aggression and massacres committed by Israel against the Palestinians.

Regarding the possibility of “(...) revoking a designation at any time if he or she finds that the underlying circumstances initially used are no longer consistent with the group’s activities, or otherwise warrant revocation,” the analysed presidential discourses show inflexibility towards this revocation even when questioned about: the possibility of Hezbollah laying down its arms; the realisation of the massive popular support the group has within Lebanon; the confirmation that, for decades, Hezbollah has not been involved in any attacks on Americans; and the fact that it officially established itself as a political party in the 1990s. The inflexibility of the decision is evidenced in excerpts such as: “organizations like Hezbollah have to choose, either you are a terrorist organization or you are a political organization. They remain a terrorist organization” (Excerpt from McClellan’s 2005 speech, available at The American Presidency Project [n.d](#)).

Therefore, I argue that the FTO list can be identified as another political instrument used to legitimise counter-terrorism practices and to implement US control and surveillance mechanisms across different parts of the world. A more recent example was the creation of the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015, followed by its amendment in the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Amendments Act of 2018. The 2018 Act expanded the sanction tool for financing Hezbollah to focus more on logistical networks and individual and governmental facilitators, making the US sanctions regime against Hezbollah much stricter and more comprehensive.

For this reason, proscribing Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation is a useful tool to legitimise the containment and financial pressure on the group and its regional allies – which represent a force of resistance to US and Israeli interests and projects in the Middle East. As Iran is an active regional actor capable of influencing its surroundings, its containment – to this day – became a necessity for North American governments.

Conclusion

The analysis of Hezbollah’s proscription by the US can initiate a series of future research endeavours concerning the organisation specifically and the Middle East generally, especially within debates on legitimacy, authority, and power. The main objective of this research was to analyse official US discourses between 1985 and 1997, focusing on the criteria and justifications used to legitimise Hezbollah’s proscription as an FTO in 1997. Beyond an exposition and analysis of the effects of this designation, especially for the Lebanese diaspora, the study sought to demonstrate how proscription regimes are inserted into a broader geopolitical context involving different actors and interests.

Understanding discourses as political practices and instruments, the terms employed can directly impact public opinion about the actors and move away from a critical understanding of the relationships and processes. The analysis of discourses in the years preceding Hezbollah’s proscription revealed that, even when Hezbollah was cited, the focus of the US offensive was Iran. In the developed rhetoric, creating the consensus that Iran was a threat to international security and sponsored terrorist groups would legitimise and justify containment and isolation measures against that country through the application of sanctions. For this reason, the articulated analysis of proscription

discourses and practices enables us to examine the structures of power underlying the proscription of organisations as terrorists.

The article sought to highlight, then, the existence of a crucial connection between discourse, geopolitics, and the exercise of power. It is possible to apprehend how the post-Cold War context, the reconfiguration of the “new enemy,” and the development of a security agenda focused on combating “new terrorism” manifest in the FTO list, which features comprehensive and relative criteria for both designating and revoking a group’s designation.

This process, therefore, needs to be analysed within a structural and geopolitical logic, beyond an agent-centred analysis. Since Hezbollah’s proscription in 1997, various events have marked the region and, specifically, the organisation itself. Since the war against Israel in 2006, it has been observed that the pressure exerted by opposition groups has increased against Hezbollah, especially regarding the maintenance of its weapons. However, analysing these developments demands extended/different temporal further research.

This research sought to demonstrate how Hezbollah’s designation as a terrorist organisation by the US is part of a dispute for influence in the Middle East, especially with Iran; the economic and political interests in expanding surveillance and control mechanisms against those considered “suspect” or “potential” terrorists, based on racialised criteria; and the dispute over narratives and political ideologies that involves designating a subject – individual or collective – as terrorist. We argue that analysing this process macroscopically, rather than focusing solely on Hezbollah, allows for expanding the analytical perspective on the redefinitions of the current Middle East.

The genocide in the Gaza Strip, initiated on 7 October 2023, and Israel’s attacks on Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Yemen, and Qatar may generate relevant developments for the region, particularly concerning US projects for integrating Israel into the regional security system. Given the current changing scenario, will US proscriptions against armed actors in the Middle East have an impact on regional dynamics? This question will be explored in future research.

Notes

1. Due to the Lebanese state structure and its political system, known as Confessionalism, Shia communities were politically underrepresented until the 1990s and had their regions neglected by the State. It is noted that the model of political and social relations in Lebanon is based on a sectarian logic, which, since the end of the 19th century, transformed religious identities into political identities. For this system, Makdisi (2000) is recommended.
2. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2006-09-04-voa38/313597.html>. Accessed on: September 25, 2024.
3. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/lavrov-meets-with-delegation-from-lebanon-s-hezbollah/2177205>. Accessed on: September 25, 2024.
4. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanon-israel-set-approve-maritime-border-deal-2022-10-27/>. Accessed on: September 25, 2024.
5. Available at: https://www.jpost.com/international/article-728975#google_vignette. Accessed on: September 25, 2024.
6. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/eu-foreign-minister-meets-with-head-of-hezbollahs-parliamentary-bloc-while-in-beirut/. Accessed on: September 25, 2024.
7. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/03/whats-behind-hezbollahs-wafiq-safa-rare-uae-visit>. Accessed on: September 25, 2024.

8. Available at: <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-808353>. Accessed on: September 25, 2024.
9. Available at: <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-808592>. Accessed on: September 25, 2024.
10. The transliteration of the word حزب الله in the Latin alphabet can occur in two most known forms: Hezbollah or Hizbullah. For methodological choice, Hezbollah was opted for in this research, as it was the spelling widely used in the transcription of the analysed discourses. In the survey conducted, the spelling Hizbullah appeared in seven records, only three of which are within the temporal framework of the research. Of these three, one was during the Bill Clinton administration and two during the Bush II administration, and their contents were not relevant to the objectives of this study, therefore they were not included in the count. The search also did not include the name Party of God, as the range of results would be overly extensive – since there are other groups in other countries, such as in Iraq, that also use the denomination – and would be beyond the stipulated objective of the analysis.
11. Data from November 19, 2025.
12. Called the “Religious Wave,” this approach asserts that, starting with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, a new “phase,” or “wave” of terrorism began, being of a religious nature.
13. The Gulf War (1990–1991) was a conflict that occurred between the US (leading international forces and supported by Arab countries) and Iraq. The US attack on Iraq was a consequence of the Iraqi army’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990.
14. Section 212 of the Immigration and Nationality Act defines terrorist activity as any activity that is unlawful under the laws of the place where it was committed or that, if committed in the United States, would be unlawful under the laws of the United States or of any State.
15. Section 140 of the Foreign Relations Authorisation Act defines “terrorism” as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.”
16. Data from April 20, 2025.
17. Research conducted by Cheaito (2023) analysed the discourses of US authorities until 2006.
18. All analysed and cited discourses can be accessed on The American Presidency Project, through the website: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>. Accessed on: April 26, 2025.
19. More information: <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/hijacking-of-twa-flight-847>.
20. The multinational peacekeeping force, composed of troops from the United States, France, and Italy, arrived in Lebanon in August 1982 as part of a ceasefire agreement signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The troops were responsible for supervising and ensuring the safe and peaceful withdrawal of Yasser Arafat and the PLO from their positions in Beirut and ensuring the security of the Palestinian civilians who remained.
21. Former White House Spokesperson.

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