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THE SYRIAN IMBROGLIO: INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL STRATEGIES

Edited by
Ioannis Galariotis
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HEZBOLLAH'S LEBANESE STRATEGY IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

Marina Calulli

Introduction

Why did Hezbollah intervene in the Syrian war? Not only is this intervention harmful for its political base in Lebanon, but also the likelihood of success in a protracted violent conflict is highly uncertain. Hezbollah officially entered the Syrian war in May 2013, when the Syrian army was losing ground, whilst fighting with rebel forces in al-Qusayr, near the Syrian-Lebanese border. The 'Party of God' has arguably changed the course of that battle in favour of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and enhanced its presence in Syria ever since, deploying up to 8,000 fighters (perhaps more).¹ This poses a major dilemma for an armed group with limited capabilities that has never engaged in a sustained conflict. Furthermore, the party has been facing a substantial decline in credibility: by engaging in a competition with Sunni armed groups, labelled as 'terrorists' and *takfiriyyin*,² Hezbollah drastically recalibrated its doctrine of resistance (*muqawama*), formerly applied to its exclusive archenemy, Israel, and abandoned its previous claim to Muslim unity (*wahda islamiyya*). All this compromised the image of the 'hero' that the party had built up in the wake of the 2006 July war (*harb tammuz*) against Israel. Therefore, the benefits of Hezbollah's intervention in Syria are not at all obvious, while the costs are clear and immediate. What is also puzzling is that Hezbollah officially announced

1 Navad Pollak, 'The transformation of Hezbollah by its involvement in Syria', The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, n.35, August 2016, p.4. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-transformation-of-hezbollah-by-its-involvement-in-syria>.

2 Muslims who claim to be the right interpreters of Islam and accuse others of apostasy – generally referred to Sunni jihadi groups currently fighting in Syria.

its engagement in Syria in 2013, whereas hundreds of Hezbollah fighters had already joined the Syrian war since late 2011, although in a scattered and informal manner. However, the Party, had systematically denied its military engagement in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. It was only with the al-Qusayr battle that it flamboyantly announced its participation to the conflict, shifting from secrecy to publicity.

This paper aims at explaining the logic of Hezbollah's *official* engagement in the Syrian conflict and to shed light on the domestic strategy that the Party has pursued through its intervention in Syria. Existing explanations do not seem to offer clear answers. On the one hand, there are those who consider Hezbollah's intervention in Syria as part and parcel of Iran's sectarian (Shi'a) strategy in the Levant.³ On the other hand, there are those who see Hezbollah's engagement as a necessity, that is an obligation towards its strategic patron-allies, Iran and Syria⁴.

Yet, Hezbollah has resorted to a wide and original range of instruments to justify its intervention in Syria. It would be then reductive to see the Party's role as essentially sectarian. Moreover, although the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance is undeniably key to understanding the Party's strategic involvement in the conflict, this explanation falls short of appreciating Hezbollah's autonomous choices and modalities of engagement in the battleground. In fact, those who give primacy to external actors tend to exaggerate their influence and underestimate local agency,⁵ especially how local players may enable and manipulate external sponsors to pursue their own autonomous agenda.

I content that the style of Hezbollah's intervention in

3 Philip Smith, 'How Iran is building its Syrian Hezbollah', The Washington Institute, 8 March 2016. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-iran-is-building-its-syrian-hezbollah>.

4 See for instance: Aram Nerguizian, "Assessing the consequences of Hezbollah's Necessary War of Choice in Syria", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, June 17, 2013, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-consequences-hezbollahs-necessary-war-choice-syria>.

5 See among others: Ariel I. Ahram (2011) *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press); Henning Tamm (2016) "The Origins of Transnational Alliances: Rulers, Rebels, and Political Survival in the Congo Wars," *International Security*, vol.41, no.1, pp:147–181.



Syria rather points to the Party's domestic strategy of survival within the Lebanese power-sharing system. More specifically, the publicity of Hezbollah's engagement has been meant to deter its rivals from escalating the domestic conflict and force them to negotiate a new political status quo. I explain this by placing Hezbollah's intervention in Syria into the context of the Party's public displays of violence. I content that Hezbollah's demonstrations of force have been primarily geared towards instantiating the Party's claim to an active political role in Lebanon and resist rival attempts to weaken and disband it. Hezbollah's violent engagement in Syria – this paper shows – is no exception.

To make my argument, I first locate Hezbollah within the “axis of refusal” to shed light on the strategic value as well as on the contradictions of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah's alliance. I then analyse the actual gains of Hezbollah in both Syria and Lebanon since 2013. Here I show that Hezbollah's intervention in Syria has served primarily to expand its political role in Lebanon. Finally, I discuss more broadly the Party's strategy of legitimizing its military engagement in Syria. By recalibrating the notion and doctrine of *muqawama* to the fight against Sunni jihadi groups in Syria and the Middle East, Hezbollah has emerged as a major ‘status quo’ defender. By so doing, it has strengthened the alliance with conservative forces against newfound attempts to neutralize it.

Hezbollah's place within the “axis of refusal”

There is a general tendency in the literature to treat Hezbollah as a non-state actor, with a Lebanese grip and a regional standing. By emphasizing the importance of its ideological commitment to the Iranian Islamic revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini's *wilayat al-faqih* (the “doctrine of the legislator”), some analysts and scholars essentially portray Hezbollah as a proxy of Iran.⁶ Others shed light on transnational Shi'ite

6 See, for instance: Matthew Levitt, *A Proxy for Iran*, The Washington Institute, July 14, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-proxy-for-iran>. (accessed August 20, 2016); see also: Matthew Levitt (2013) *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (London: CHurst & CoPublishers Ltd).

identity in the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah “axis of refusal” (*mahwar al-mumana'a*) [or “resistance movement” (*harakat al-muqawama*)].⁷ Seen from this angle, Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian conflict would be a combination of duty towards regional patrons and sectarianism. There is a palpable element of interaction between structure and agency in this position, as Hezbollah's agency is analysed in relation to structural constraints.⁸ But whilst we know that the party is vitally dependent on Iranian supply of weapons and funding, it also shows autonomy in providing social services,⁹ construction of a religious sphere,¹⁰ and partaking in Lebanese politics since 1992.¹¹ As Hokayem put it, “the idea of Hezbollah as a client of Iran and Syria has become obsolete due to the power base the Shi'ite group has nurtured and expanded in Lebanon”.¹²

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2011 conflict in Syria, sectarian self-victimization, often propagated by opportunistic political elites, has been a trigger of conflict and transnational feelings of belonging to a community under existential threat.¹³ Yet, it is

7 Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2006).

8 Karim Knio (2013) “Structure, Agency And Hezbollah: A Morphogenetic View,” *Third World Quarterly* vol.34, no.5, pp.856–872; Lina Khatib, Dina Matar, and Atef Alshaer (2014) *The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication* (London: Hurst & Company), pp.17–24.

9 Rola El Hussein (2010) “Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol.31, no.5, pp.803–815; Mona Harb (2010) *Le Hezbollah À Beyrouth (1985-2005)*. *De La Banlieue À La Ville* (Harmattan); Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders (2005) “Know Thy Enemy: Hizbullah, ‘terrorism’ and the Politics of Perception,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol.26, no.1, pp.173–197; Augustus R. Norton (2009) *Hezbollah: A Short History; with a New Afterword by the Author*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton, N.J.: Oxford: Princeton University Press).

10 Lara Deeb (2013) *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press).

11 Magnus Ranstorp (1998) “The Strategy and Tactics of Hizballah's Current ‘Lebanonization Process,’” *Mediterranean Politics*, vol.3, no.1, pp.103–134; Norton, *Hezbollah*.

12 Emile El-Hokayem (2007) “Hizballah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol.30, no.2, pp.35.

13 Marina Calulli (2016) ‘Middle East Security: Conflict and Securitization of Identities’, in Louise Fawcett

questionable whether these transnational bonds are breaking state borders. They rather seem to coexist and compete with national ties. Historically, political Shi'ism has been adapted in each country to the peculiar domestic political context. The perception of an existential threat stemming from Sunni jihadi groups, such as the Islamic State, may have fostered a pan-Shi'ite feeling of victimhood (parallel to a pan-Sunni sentiment of oppression by the Shi'ites). However, national identities show surprising resilience, amidst conflict and fragmentation.¹⁴ In addition to this, Twelver Shi'ites of Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan do not necessarily believe that the Alawites (to whom Bashar al-Asad belongs) can be considered as part of the Shi'ite faith community. Contestation of the Shi'ite identity of the Alawites was curbed in the 1980s as a result of Syria's strategic alignment with Iran.

It is also noteworthy that the relationship between Hezbollah and Syria sharply differs from the one between Hezbollah and Iran, and the Party itself has tried to avoid sectarian characterizations with regard to its engagement in Syria. For instance, the member of Parliament (MP) and intellectual Hassan Fadlallah recalled in his writings the fierce rivalry between Syria and the Party during the civil war, and the repression of Hezbollah's activists by Syria in 1993.¹⁵ Fadlallah also attributes the opening of a new era of collaboration with Damascus to the shift of Hezbollah's dossier from the supervision of former Syrian Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam to that of Farouq al-Shara.¹⁶ Pragmatism, therefore, seems to be more relevant than actual religious bounds. Incidentally, these bonds have anyway not prevented rifts and rivalries at different points in time.

(ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp.219-235.

14 Roschanack Shaery-eisenlohr (2007) "Postrevolutionary Iran And Shi'i Lebanon: Contested Histories Of Shi'i Transnationalism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol.39, no.2, pp.271-289; Laurence Louër (2008) *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, CERJ Series in Comparative Politics and International Studies (London: Hurst in association with the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Paris), pp.225-63.

15 For instance, in 1993, Syria repressed and killed Hezbollah activists protesting against the Oslo accords, of which Syria was part of.

16 Hassan Fadlallah (2014) *Hezbollah w dawla fi Lubnan* [Hezbollah and the State in Lebanon] (Sharka al-matbu'at liltuzy' w al-nashar, Beirut), pp.118-123.

Yet, although corroborated by the production of Shi'a transnational symbolism – such as the transformation of the Sayyida Zaynab mosque in Damascus into a shrine for Shi'ite pilgrims – Shi'ites from all over the Middle East, including the Lebanese, fall short of recognizing a transnational identification as superior to the national/local one. In Lebanon, for instance, whereas the Shi'ite community has overall supported the 2013 Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, civilians belonging to the so-called 'society of resistance' (*mujtama al-muqawama*) – Hezbollah's base – have recurrently questioned the "military adventure" (*mughamara askariyya*) in a "foreign country" (*balad ajnaby*) and even organized closed-door workshops to discuss the appropriateness of the Party's intervention in Syria¹⁷.

Moreover, although many Hezbollah supporters justify the Party's engagement in Syria as a "sacred defense" (*al-difa' al-muqaddas*) of the Shi'a community, they do not feel ideologically affiliated with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, who is largely seen as a secularist and corrupted ruler – far from the ethics of Hezbollah, which is in their view a Party with "clean hands" (*ayad nadifa*)¹⁸. In this regard, they do not consider Hezbollah's intervention in Syria as a defense of Assad, but rather as a strategic necessity aimed at countering the influence of Gulf powers, especially Saudi Arabia, and Gulf-sponsored Sunni armed groups in the Levant. They perceive the Gulf states as obsessed with the Shi'ites, and they believe that the Gulf states' regional policy seeks to marginalize the Shi'ites, if not erase them from earth. Episodes, such as the execution of the prominent Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016, are echoed by mass protests in the whole Middle East.¹⁹ In a similar vein, Saudi war on the Houthis in Yemen, started in 2015, is seen as merely driven by anti-Shi'ite sentiments. In an unprecedented move, during the 2015 celebration of the 'Ashura,²⁰ in Dahiye (Beirut), the crowd gathered around Hassan Nasrallah

17 Author's conversations with Hezbollah's electoral supporters in Beirut, Bint Jbeil, Hermel, Srifa, Tyr (15-26 August 2015). 18 out of 20 people explicitly pointed to the Syrian conflict as "foreign".

18 Author's conversations with Hezbollah's electoral supporters in Beirut (September 14, 2016).

19 cleric <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35213244>.

20 When the Shi'ites remember the martyr of Husseyn.

started chanting “death to al-Saud” (*al-mut lil-Sa’ud*).²¹ Whereas all this may point to sectarianism, these facts neither foster inter-Shi’ite solidarity, nor they smooth intra-Shi’ite rivalries and competition. For instance, the other Lebanese Shi’a party AMAL has not actively supported Hezbollah’s participation in the Syrian war in 2011, and the competition between AMAL and Hezbollah has grown ever since.²²

Finally, it is noteworthy that Hezbollah’s intervention in the conflict sparked controversy amongst the Syrian army and intelligence. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Syrian generals have hardly accepted Hezbollah taking the command in security operations and training SAA officers and Special Forces in guerrilla warfare. Not surprisingly, there has been evidence of clashes between Syrian officers and Hezbollah fighters along the battle of Aleppo.²³ In 2015, a strong debate within the Syrian establishment on the expanding role of Hezbollah and Iran in Syria even led to the killing of Rustom Ghazali, a Syrian top intelligence figure.²⁴ Put differently, Hezbollah’s presence on the Syrian battleground has been and remains highly controversial and contested from both a Lebanese and a Syrian standpoint. The fact that foreign state and non-state military forces most probably outnumbered SAA officers on active duty in 2016²⁵ only testifies to the weakness of the Assad regime, and the indispensability of external military support.

Yet, the evidence provided in this section suggests that Damascus did not dictate the terms and the limits of the Party’s intervention. Most crucially, whereas Hezbollah’s intervention was negotiated with Iran and Syria, external sponsoring and the idea of Hezbollah as a “proxy” does not explain why in May 2013 the ‘Party of God’ announced its participation in the Syrian war;

21 <http://janoubia.com/2015/10/24/دوعس-ل-ال-توول-افاته/>
لقتي زرم آل-توم-ال-لدب

22 <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/566733-the-not-so-cold-war-between-amal-movement-and-hezbollah>

23 <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/567106-hezbollah-clashes-with-syria-regime-troops-activists>

24 Marina Calulli, ‘The Iran-Russia alignment in Syria’, Aspenia online (October 26, 2015), <https://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/iran-russia-alignment-syria>

25 <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/11/26/hizballahs-nasrallah-holds-meeting-with-assad-on-syria-lebanon-border>

hence, breaking with the past two years (2011-2013) in which its belligerent engagement in Syria had been informal and publicly denied. Is this a sign of a major transformation of Hezbollah from a domestic into a regional force?

Is Hezbollah going regional?

Hezbollah has led prominent military operations in al-Quseyr, Aleppo, Zabadani, Homs, Qalamun and Quneitra.²⁶ In addition, the Party has rapidly adapted to new types of warfare, especially long-distance fighting, driving tanks and coordinating with (Russian) airpower²⁷ – something unprecedented for an armed group exclusively used to guerrilla warfare in Southern Lebanon against Israel. Also, the Party has trained and coordinated with Syrian militias, that increasingly imitate Hezbollah’s ideological and structural frame. These militias mainly recruit in the villages of Nubl and Zahara, where the majority of the population is Twelver Shi’a.²⁸ Moreover, new reserve battalions in both Syria and Lebanon have been created, also recruiting Sunnis and Christians.²⁹ Whereas all this testifies to an extension of Hezbollah’s grip, possibly indicating that the Party has been transformed into a *de facto* “conventional force” increasingly active in multiple battlefields,³⁰ there is no clear evidence of a *permanent* regionalization of Hezbollah, nor of its detachment from the political and social Lebanese dimension.

Quite on the contrary, from 2011 to 2016, the Party has unprecedentedly expanded its political hold on Lebanese institutions. Incidentally, Hezbollah has calibrated its presence in Syria to the strategic needs hitherto, withdrawing its fighters during calm periods.³¹

26 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-3075681/Hezbollah-leads-fight-strategic-Syrian-mountain-range.html>

27 <http://www.timesofisrael.com/thanks-in-no-small-part-to-russia-hezbollah-is-now-a-full-fledged-army/>

28 <http://www.joshualandis.com/blogsyrianhezbollah-militias-nubl-zahara/>

29 <https://now.mmediamelbenreportsfeatures/565936-hezbollahs-recruiting-of-sunnis-in-the-bekaa>

30 <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/567516-hezbollahs-army-in-syria-is-good-news>

31 <https://now.mmedia.melbenNewsReports/566739-hezbollah-withdrawing-fighters-from-syria-report>

More saliently, the Party seems aware of the fact that “the burdens of the war are sustainable in the short run, but Hezbollah has not unlimited resources”.³² The Party’s social base is also very sensitive to the sustainability of Hezbollah’s welfare, which has proven to affect popular support for military operations. Anecdotal accounts suggest that Hezbollah’s electoral base is increasingly worried that the military engagement in Syria will affect their economic stability, and is waiting for a full withdrawal from Syria.³³ After December 2015, Hezbollah was hit by the US ‘International Financing Prevention Act of 2015’, which froze bank accounts and assets likely to be destined to the Party. All his piled up with the already planned cancelation or postponement of different infrastructural projects in Dahiye and South Lebanon by the construction company Jihad al-Bina.³⁴ As a result, during summer 2016, amidst a massive and costly military campaign on Aleppo, Hezbollah disposed of an increase in pensions and salaries, following widespread social disappointment with previous cuts.³⁵ Otherwise, the culture of martyrdom cannot suffice as a viable symbolic glue for the rather narrow Shi’a Lebanese community. Finally, if the Syrian regime wins the war – what Hezbollah is fighting for – it is unlikely that it will foresee a newfound “Syrian role” for the party, so far considered no more than an “allied force” (*al-quwat al-halifat* – pl.).

On the one hand, Hezbollah decided to join the Syrian conflict for a clear strategic reason: a fall of the Syrian regime, which seemed incumbent in May 2013, would have hindered the feasibility of Hezbollah’s weapons procurement. By intervening in Syria, Hezbollah managed to alter the power distribution within the “axis”, improving the position of the ‘resistance’, and

32 Author’s interview with Hezbollah’s MP, Ali Fayad (Beirut, 3 May 2015).

33 Author’s conversations with Hezbollah’s supporters (Srafa and Tyr, 8-9 September 2016).

34 In my conversations with supporters of Hezbollah (Beirut, 5-6 September 2016), six people reported to me that they were aware of infrastructural projects that had been budgeted by Hezbollah and then canceled.

35 In conversation I had with four people, they declared their salary depends on Hezbollah; all declared they had received more money, and this was not only a random, but a structural measure taken by the party in June-July 2016 (Beirut, 6 September 2016).

finally renegotiating the terms of Syrian presence and manoeuvring in Lebanon. However, Hezbollah’s military gains have not produced enduring advantages in Syria and the Middle East. Yet, the strategic publicity of its intervention in 2013 – the visible display of force, coordination and adaptation to the new warfare – can be better explained as part of a domestic calculation, meant to deter rivals from engaging in formal and informal actions to harm the *muqawama*, secure and enhance Hezbollah’s positioning within Lebanese State institutions. To understand this move, we need to place the 2013 intervention in Syria within the wider context of Hezbollah’s material and symbolic historical displays of force since 2000, and the political meaning of these manifestations of force within the Lebanese corporate power-sharing system.

Hezbollah’s Lebanese strategy in Syria

In a speech announcing that Hezbollah was ready to join the fighting in Syria, in April 2013, Hassan Nasrallah argued that 30,000 Lebanese Christians and Muslims living on the Syrian-Lebanese borderland were being threatened by Islamist groups who were fighting in al-Qusayr against the Syrian Army.³⁶ In another speech,³⁷ on May 25, Nasrallah referred to the insufficiency of State defence facing the Israeli and other regional threats to their borders. The lack of the LAF (Lebanese Armed Forces)’s military equipment is attributed to a US veto, based on the concern that a strong Lebanese army would threaten Israel. It is exactly such a veto, in Hezbollah’s view, that justifies the necessity of the ‘resistance’:

What has the Lebanese State done to face potential perils that may occur in the region on the Israeli side?...Let’s start with the Army. Everybody wants a strong Army capable to defend the nation...What if we provide the Army with capabilities and strengths, which enable it to deter the enemy?...There is no answer...Yet, some in Lebanon prepared to confront all future Israeli threats...A part

36 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvNXVGOZYUI&t=1030s>.

37 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHHnYwr2044>.

of the Lebanese people made it, namely the resistance. I do not mean only the resistance of Hezbollah...everyone who made an effort in this direction...After 30 years of accumulated experience... Lebanon today possesses this power. This power – the resistance with all its factions – defeated Israel [in 2006].³⁸

In the same speech, Nasrallah goes on to talk about what he perceives as the new incumbent threat upon Lebanon: the *takfiri* threat. Here, he dismisses sectarianism whilst forging the image of the party as the protector of religious pluralism (*al-ta'dudiyya*):

Today those who are fighting in Syria are an extension to the...organization of the Islamic State in Iraq. Ask the Sunni in Iraq... They did not attack only Shi'ite mosques...and Christian churches. No!...Most of these suicide operations targeted Iraqis from all sects...Do you know what is the problem with the takfiri mentality? They label others as unbelievers for the most trivial reasons... whoever takes part in parliamentary elections is an unbeliever... no matter whether he is a Sunni, a Shi'ite or a Christian...O Lebanese people!...I am a brother who gives you an advise...Lebanon will be afflicted by this epidemics. Let's be logical. Put factionalism and sectarianism aside. This is a huge peril...We are not approaching the issue from a Shi'ite or Sunni perspective as some try to accuse us. We are rather approaching the issue from a perspective which sees both Muslims and Christians threatened in the same way³⁹.

The discourse of Nasrallah marked a major change from the two previous years, when Hezbollah had denied the presence of its fighters on the Syrian front. From 2011 to 2013, Lebanese politics had been characterized by an exacerbation of the rivalry between the '14 March' and the '8 March' – the two blocs emerged from the political reshuffle that followed the end of the Syrian protectorate (*al-wikala al-suriyya*) in 2005. When popular protests started to challenge the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, in 2011, the '14

38 Author's translation.

39 *Idem*.

March' sharply voiced its support to the Syrian street. The Hezbollah-led '8 March', on the contrary, jumped on defending the legitimacy of Assad, mainly adopting Damascus' narrative of a 'foreign plot against Syria, masked as a popular revolution'.

The '14 March', led by Sa'ad Hariri, hoped to witness a rapid regime change in Syria thus also an end of the long-standing influence that Assad exerted on Lebanon, despite the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country in 2005⁴⁰. Relatedly, the '14 March' expected that its main rival in Lebanon, Hezbollah, would be weakened and its armed wing dismantled. '14 March' politicians had, at different points in time, asked Hezbollah to put its weapons under the authority of the State and called for and supported international pressure on the Party. Hezbollah adopted a set of preventive measures to counteract rival attempts to marginalize the Party. In January 2011, three months before the Syrians sparked off street protests, Hezbollah ministers resigned from cabinet. As a consequence, the Hariri-led government collapsed. The move came as a response to Hariri's backing of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), which had signalled to hold proves of Hezbollah's involvement in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, Sa'd father, in 2005.⁴¹ A 6-month long political void opened up in Lebanon, until Nagib Mikati, a businessman from the northern city of Tripoli, was nominated Prime Minister. In July 2011, amidst the exacerbation of the Syrian regime repression and the transition from peaceful to violent mobilization of the Syrian protest, the STL issued an indictment against four Hezbollah members, to be executed by the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF). Verbal anger escalated between the '14 March' and the '8 March', but the STL indictment was not eventually followed by any formal measure against the four Hezbollah members. Yet, the '14 March' was still confident that Assad had his days counted, and a regime change in Damascus would have boosted the power of Hariri and allowed Saudi Arabia to exert more influence in Lebanon and the Arab Levant, thus to diminish the role of Iran and Hezbollah.

40 The withdrawal put an end to 29 years of Syrian military presence in Lebanon, widely considered as an 'occupation'.

41 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast.com/2011/01/2011112151356430829.html>.

The political polarization was only further exacerbated, however, since the conflict in Syria escalated and Assad showed surprising resilience. Lebanese citizens from the two camps joined the Syrian conflict on both sides, although Hezbollah's capacities largely outnumbered those of their rivals. The turning point occurred in April 2013, when PM Mikati resigned from office and Tammam Salam was nominated as the new head of cabinet. Amidst this political turmoil, Hezbollah changed its strategy and decided to formally enter the Syrian conflict. The decision came at a moment in which the '14 March' was expecting a significant weakening of the SAA's military force, whilst calling for Assad to step down. Not surprisingly, Hezbollah's decision to enter Syria was enormously contested and criticized by the '14 March' politicians and supporters. Salafi actors voiced their sympathy for the Syrian rebellion and mobilized against the Shi'a Party. For instance, the emergence of the 'Abdullah Azzam' Brigades and a group known as 'Free Sunni Command' in Ba'albek, an area of the Lebanese Biqa' Valley mainly inhabited by Shi'ites and Christians, sparked panic amongst the population. Also, in Sunni-populated areas, such as Tripoli or Tareq Jadida in Beirut, sympathy for the Salafi jihadi group Jabhat al-Nusra (since 2016, renamed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham) enhanced sectarian hatred, which polarized the country even further.

Hezbollah exploited these fears at a moment in which it was itself concerned with a possible fall of Bashar al-Assad, which would have constructed a momentum of vulnerability for the Party, and encouraged its political rivals in Lebanon to raise the stake and undermine Hezbollah's political future. Therefore, the Party decided to publically intervene in Syria. The decision not to keep a low profile in the al-Qusayr battle, but to flamboyantly display its force, has not just been a matter of necessity but rather a strategic move to deter its Lebanese rivals from escalating the rift in both Syria and Lebanon, and to freeze the status quo to produce more favourable conditions to politically renegotiate its role and viability. This strategic move can be only understood if we place Hezbollah's violence in Syria in the wider picture of Hezbollah's displays of force.

Hezbollah's search for Legitimacy

Hezbollah's use of violence has been always controversial and contested by Lebanese and international actors, which have recurrently voiced for the Party's disbandment and subjection to the authority of the Lebanese State. Yet, Hezbollah employs its weapons to mainly claim a political role and normalization, and to protect its position within the Lebanese power-sharing system. This is the very logic of Hezbollah's use and display of violence and continuation of its alliance with Iran and Syria. Accordingly, in order to resist marginalization, Hezbollah needs to create and reproduce legitimacy for its violence, amidst growing and renewing contestation of its military role in Lebanon.⁴² The Party frames its action under the formula '*al-jaysh, al-sha'ab, al-muqawama*' ('the Army, the People, the Resistance') that all Lebanese governments have adopted from 1992 to 2011.

Not surprisingly, any possible change in the status quo, which is liable to undermine the validity of this formula, represents an opportunity for Hezbollah's rivals to delegitimize the role of the 'resistance'. In such critical moments, Hezbollah tends to display its violence in order to construct, adjust and force the other actors of the Lebanese power-sharing system to renegotiate a new domestic status quo. In order to understand the logic of Hezbollah's display of force in Syria from 2013 onwards, we need to decode the Party's perception of an incumbent challenge to its own survival, by placing Hezbollah's public intervention in Syria along a series of momentous tensions between contesters and proponents of the legitimacy of the 'resistance' Lebanon.

In 1992, Hezbollah was mainly perceived as an "uninvited newcomer" in the Lebanese confessional power-sharing system, challenging all other members thereof, including the Shi'a party AMAL. At that time, however, Syria exploited Hezbollah's military wing

42 Marina Calulli, (II) legitimate violence and the State in Lebanon. Understanding the liaison between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Army, paper presented at the George Washington University, 27 February 2016, https://www.academia.edu/30200309/II_legitimate_violence_and_the_State_understanding_the_liaison_between_Hezbollah_and_the_Lebanese_Army.



in southern Lebanon,⁴³ whilst supporting AMAL and limiting Hezbollah's participation in politics. A crucial moment of contestation of Hezbollah's political role occurred when Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon, thus also encouraging Hezbollah's rivals to claim that, with the end of occupation, the Party's reason to exist had ended relatedly. After 9/11 2001, in the framework of the US war on terror, Hezbollah's Lebanese rivals coordinated with international actors in order to enhance the pressure on the 'resistance', through the 'Syrian Accountability Act and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act' (SALSRA) of 2003 and UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 (2004), calling for the Party to submit its arms under the authority of the State.

After the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and the end of Syrian military presence in the country in 2005, the establishment of a Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) was perceived as a further instrument to weaken Hezbollah. The 2006 war with Israel, de facto provoked by the Party, turned into a stunning opportunity for Hezbollah to renew the legitimacy of its weapons and their functionality for the security of Lebanon. The July war (*harb tammuz*) offered to the Party the narrative of a "victory"⁴⁴, through which Hezbollah informed a new discourse to morally justify its violence. In Hezbollah's view, the absence of military engagement of regular Arab armies against Israel – and especially the under-equipment of the Lebanese Army – was adequate to justify the continuation of Hezbollah's armed resistance. The popularity of the Party spread in the whole Arab and Muslim world, giving the Party a moral allure and a deterrent towards its political rivals at once.

A further occasion to delegitimize Hezbollah occurred in May 2008, when the government, led by the '14 March' politician Fuad Seniora, outlawed the communication network of Hezbollah. The Party considered its communication network vital to counteract Israeli attacks against the Lebanese territories, and perceived the government's decision as

43 Syria used Hezbollah in south Lebanon in order to balance Israel.

44 Although the war ended without winners or losers, Hezbollah claimed that its resistance prevented Israel from annexing part of Lebanon – as explicitly expressed by the Israeli government at the beginning of the war.

a 'declaration of war'. Therefore, it decided to occupy downtown Beirut, in a major demonstration of force, which proved Hezbollah's military superiority. All this led anti-Hezbollah parties to make a step back and renegotiate the relationship between Hezbollah and the State in the 2008 Doha agreement, in which Hezbollah obtained that a Government decision should have the support of two-thirds of the cabinet, thus providing a grouping of 'one-third plus one' the power to veto. Such formal measure has been vital for Hezbollah to block decisions taken against the *muqawama* after 2008⁴⁵. The new Cabinet that emerged from the Doha agreement recognized the formula *al-jaysh, al-sh'ab, al-muqawama*, thus reiterating the formal recognition of Hezbollah's weapons within (and not outside) the framework of the State.

Finally, when in 2013 Hezbollah officially entered Syria, the Party was obviously trying to prevent the fall of a major strategic ally, namely the Assad regime. Yet, the Party rhetorically framed its intervention as a preventive war against 'terrorist groups' and a way to protect Lebanon and the Lebanese border from *takfiri* infiltrations. The visibility of the collaboration between the Army and Hezbollah against Da'esh and other jihadi groups [especially around the *jurd* (outskirts) of the border-town 'Arsal, in the northern part of the Biq'a valley] is part and parcel of the Party's strategy to refashion a moral justification for its military role in Lebanon.

In so doing, Hassan Nasrallah has emphasized the national role of Hezbollah, crafting a renewed doctrine of complementarity (*al-takamul*) between the *muqawama* and the Lebanese Army as the only formula to protect Lebanon from external threats.⁴⁶ More crucially, this strategy has allowed the Party to reframe or strengthen a political alliance with Christian political parties and actors in Lebanon, against rival

45 Including the aforementioned Hariri's endorsement of the STL indictment against the party, which led to the government collapse in 2011.

46 Marina Calulli, (Il)legitimate violence and the State in Lebanon. Understanding the liaison between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Army, paper presented at the George Washington University, 27 February 2016, https://www.academia.edu/30200309/Il_legitimate_violence_and_the_State_understanding_the_liaison_between_Hezbollah_and_the_Lebanese_Army.



Sunnis. Amongst them, there is especially the Leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, Michel 'Aoun. The Free Patriotic Movement perceives Hezbollah's action against Sunni jihadi groups as a defense of Christian existence and religious pluralism in the Arab Levant and of the Lebanese State more broadly. Their discourse has therefore refashioned the perception of Hezbollah amongst a great part of the Christian community in Lebanon.

As stated in the previous section, Hezbollah capitalized on the political vacuum and stagnation that since 2011 lingered over and exacerbated to the point that, when former President Michel Suleiman ended his mandate in 2014, the Parliament (that had itself illegitimately renewed its own mandate) was unable to elect a president. The Presidential vacuum finally ended in October 2016, with the election of Michel 'Aoun, who openly supports the complementarity between Hezbollah and the Army and does consider Hezbollah as 'part of the national defence of Lebanon'.⁴⁷ By further associating itself to Christian conservative forces, Hezbollah has reinvented its security role for Lebanon in order to accommodate its interests within the new geopolitical conditions of the Arab Levant and the region, and continue to play a vital political role in Lebanon.

Conclusions

Whereas the decision to intervene in Syria was certainly negotiated with Iran and Syria, in 2013 Hezbollah entered the conflict at its own terms and conditions. The Party has used the Syrian momentum in order to construct a novel discourse to justify the necessity of its weapons for Lebanon's security. Such discourse was directed at both its Lebanese supporters and detractors, in order to reproduce, renegotiate and enhance its political role in the country. Therefore, Hezbollah has been able to improve its political position in Lebanon not simply in spite of its foreign adventurism in Syria, but precisely through it.

The military action of the Party is informed by two inherent limitations: first, as a Lebanese actor and militia, the Party can potentially maximize its power

within Lebanon, whereas overstretching its regional ambitions is likely to be self-harming in the long run. Secondly, there exists an intimate link between Hezbollah's military and political wings. More specifically, Hezbollah uses its weapons not only as a means to exert its political violence, but also as way to claim recognition as a political party.

From this perspective, Hezbollah's public display of force in Syria in 2013 was meant to deter its domestic political rivals from escalating the conflict against the resistance. By inscribing Hezbollah's intervention in Syria within a series of cyclical demonstrations of force, this paper aimed at shedding light on the logic of Hezbollah's violence, which serves to negotiate and secure its political viability in Lebanon, rather than expand its regional influence.

47 <http://yalibnan.com/2017/02/18/aoun-assures-critics-that-hezbollah-would-be-bound-by-the-national-defense-strategy/>.

