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Between the battlefield and the ballot box: armed political parties in the Middle East

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(p.356)

Introduction

Scholars tend to interpret the formation of political parties by rebel groups as a temporary phenomenon in the transition of countries from civil wars to post-war political settlement. This view mirrors the expectation of states, who claim the exclusive right to use violence within their sovereign territory and therefore require the complete subordination and assimilation of non-state rebels. However, there are rebel groups that form political parties without being assimilated by the state in which they operate. They manage to secure an in-between position, combining both integration within the state and distance from it. They might decide to integrate politically without however relinquishing their armed forces, thus challenging the state's claim to the monopoly of violence. Rather than being transient, they represent a discrete category of actors: 'armed political parties.'

This is a phenomenon that we can primarily observe in the postcolonial world, where party and party-system institutionalisation are often uneven (Randall and Svåsand 2002), and have gone hand in hand with a contentious and often violent process of state formation and state building. The Middle East is a case in point. We have seen rebel groups form political parties and participate in elections for decades, especially in states and areas that have been subjected to foreign occupation, civil war or other forms of violent conflict (e.g. Palestine, Lebanon, or Iraq). Peace deals, truces and political agreements often provide a window of opportunity for rebel groups to transform into political actors and compete in elections. But their political participation is not necessarily contingent upon signing an agreement with former rivals or the incumbent government, nor does it entail renouncing violence. Hence, the core question of why rebels create political parties to join a political system which they deem illegitimate, and how they preserve the autonomy of their military capabilities, still lacks an answer, which is what this chapter will address.

In particular, the preservation of an autonomous military wing represents a challenge to dominant views in the literature on democratization and political violence, which assume that rebels' participation in politics should lead to their 'moderation' and demilitarization (Jarstad and Sisk 2008). The literature has acknowledged that violence and elections are not (always) mutually exclusive, but have mainly treated the cohabitation of the two as a failure of the peace process (Snyder 2000). There are notable exceptions to this deterministic approach, shedding light on alternative rationales of violence and electoral politics (Matanock and Staniland 2018). Yet, broadly speaking, the debate is among those interested in the teleological force of democratization and those interested in the agency and internal decision-making of rebel groups participating in electoral competitions.

(p.357) This chapter tries to reconcile these approaches, by proposing a critical perspective that concentrates on the ideologically contentious construction of post-war political systems. Instead of looking at 'armed political parties' as consequences of a derailed democratization process, the chapter views them as the result of an unsolved dispute among dominant and non-dominant forces over the meaning and function that post-war institutions *should* have. It examines post-war elections not merely as settings to determine which political force gains the majority at the ballot box, but arenas in which rival political forces struggle to define what is the ideological and moral purpose of the state – or the meaning the sovereignty assumes vis-à-vis both the individuals who compose the state and the external world. Amidst this ideological battle, the contours of the domestic space might be clear *de jure*, but not *de facto*.

Why do rebels form parties?

Why rebels decide to become politicians is a *vexata questio* that scholars have approached from two main perspectives. On the one hand, there are those who focus on the structural incentives foreign powers and international institutions create to push armed groups to demilitarize and politically integrate into the state; on the other hand, there are those who see rebels' participation in elections as the result of their strategic calculations. A common ground between these two approaches is the assumption that rebels cannot survive without popular support. As Mao Tse-tung famously asserted, "guerrilla warfare...derives from the masses and is supported by them" and this is why "it can neither exist nor flourish if it separates from their sympathies and cooperation" (Mao Tse-tung 1961, 41). Yet, the two approaches are not complementary with one another. Moving from different assumptions, they have led scholars to reach different conclusions.

Those following the first approach are mainly interested in externally-driven democratization after the end of civil wars or other conflicts involving rebels and militias. They have tended to concentrate on the effects of the end of the Cold War on rebel groups (Przeworski 1991). In the wake of the so-called ‘third wave of democratization’, they have explored various aspects of what Huntington called the ‘participation-moderation trade-off’ (Huntington 1991, 166) – or the hypothesis that political inclusion of extremist actors leads to their ‘moderation’. Building on new data, Manning and Smith (2016, 984) noted that in civil wars that came to an end between 1990 and 2009, 54.8% of the armed groups that fought in those wars formed a political party and participated in elections. They see this move as a direct result of a carrot and stick strategy used by external donors, providing rebels with material incentives in exchange of their commitment to renounce violence (*idem*). They built their argument on an abundant literature on internationally brokered peace and power-sharing agreements advocating for external forces and peacebuilding missions to shape post-war ‘nation-building’ and persuade non-state armed organizations to disband their militias (Manning 2007; Lyons 2006; De Zeeuw 2008; Söderberg Kovacs and Hatz 2016). This approach continues to influence governmental agendas and policy makers. Even when external actors fail to demilitarize rebels, their failure is seen as the result of poor planning of the political transition and limited capacity to put pressure on rebels —not of the rationale of externally driven democratization (Berdal and Ucko 2009).

The implicit assumption here is that rebels are at best ‘rational’ and at worst ‘buyable’. Therefore, a combination of coercion and side payments should be sufficient to persuade them to abandon the armed struggle. When this does not happen, practitioners and scholars shift the focus on towards the ideology of rebels, deemed as too ‘extreme’ to adapt (**p. 358**) to electoral democracy. This is a stigma that is especially put on Islamist and Marxist/Communist armed groups. But the question that democratization scholars avoid to address is: why should rebels renounce their autonomy?

The second approach pays closer attention to the resistance of rebels to integrate politically. In particular, Matanock and Staniland (2018) suggest that rebels carefully ponder the choice between participation and non-participation, even when rivals, donors and foreign powers pressure them to disband and put their weapons under the authority of the state. They have noticed that, whilst some rebel groups form political parties and run in elections, others decide either to participate indirectly (e.g. informally supporting parties or politicians) or not to participate at all. They argue that rebel groups join the electoral race when they have a clear chance to make electoral gains, and are keen to render their popularity ‘official’ through the ballot box, but resist political integration and direct participation when the prospects of electoral gains are uncertain or meagre (*idem*). For example, the

PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan), boycotted participation in elections, encouraged by the European Union (EU), when they realized they were losing to their competitors (Tezcür 2010).

Beyond acknowledging the shortcomings of democratization strategies, understanding why some rebels prefer not to participate in elections can help us understand why, *mutatis mutandis*, others decide to run in elections. A key discriminating factor is the risk of internal splits. When confronted with the choice to participate in elections, rebel groups can split between pragmatists and purists (Sindre 2019). These divergences may even lead to the collapse of the organization, if a divide between purists and pragmatists over fundamental ideological issues emerges (Staniland 2014). Söderberg and Kovacs (2008) and Krause (2017) argue that moderation is a function of the centralization of authority of the rebel group —so centralization would prevent splintering.

But this is hardly the only manner in which rebels convert into politicians. The problem with most of these studies is that the scramble between pragmatists and purists is often reduced to a perfect opposition between ideological-moral and rational-consequentialist behaviour. These attitudes are often conceived as opposite ends of a spectrum. In practice, those who refer to ‘rational behaviour’ define it in accordance to their own perspective on the world, and how it *should* properly function – so advancing a *de facto* normative-ideological proposal and portraying it as universally attractive. The ‘rational’ is never defined in an epistemological vacuum, but depends on the ‘context’ (Mitchell 1990, 555). This is even more salient as the internal dispute over whether to participate in elections or not does not necessarily lead to unambiguous determination. On the contrary, it often leads to a situation where rebels stand with one leg inside and the other one outside the political system. If 65% of rebel groups that converted into politicians from 1990 to 2016 happened to take part in all subsequent post-war electoral contests (Manning and Smith 2019), a significant number of them competed in those elections without relinquishing their military capabilities (Matanock 2016, 894). In other words, we are dealing with discrete, not transient, phenomenon — that of armed political parties.

(p.359) To be or not to be part of the political system?

In order to make sense of the military and political operation of rebel groups, scholars tend to consider armed political parties as unintended consequences, if not parasites and deviations that need to be rectified. There is undoubtedly a visible discrepancy between rebels’ discourse and praxis: when rebels enter politics, they need to reconcile their resistance to the state in wartime and acceptance of its authority in peacetime (Skocpol 1979). Sprenkels (2019, 541) argues that rebel groups that mutate into political parties pursue ‘ambivalent moderation’, as can be observed in “the use of different

ideological stances towards different audiences” which in turn results in “a bifurcation or segregation of the ideological discourses – and concomitant practices – used for internal party politics and electoral politics”.

Relatedly, the perception of rebels’ duplicitous behaviour often reinforces suspicions about their ‘genuine’ commitment to electoral politics. What emerges is a tension that inevitably triggers a spiral of mistrust permeating the entire political system. What seems to be key in this context is the discrepancy between rival meanings attributed to ‘moderation’. When dominant political forces expect rebel groups to ‘moderate’ they often expect them to abandon, not simply their armed struggle, but also their ideology. Even when rebels fully demilitarise but remain loyal to their original ideology, they face enormous pressure from their internal but also external rivals. This is especially true for ethnic, sectarian or secessionist projects, like in the case of the Irish *Sinn Féin* that has been facing systematic suspicion from rival forces in the Irish parliament about its readiness to resort to violence at any time (Sindre 2019). But whereas rebel groups might be willing to renounce armed struggle when they seek to participate in elections, they tend to resist externally-controlled ‘ideological’ moderation, especially when this entails disfiguring the identity of the organization and transforming it into something else. Consequently, the stigmatization of their ideological stances can reinforce rebels’ lack of trust in the system and their conviction that preserving an autonomous armed force is in fact a necessity.

But to tackle the problem, we need to first identify the ideological project underpinning the framing of peace deals and electoral processes to solve the violent conflict. In general, peace deals, especially when they are supported by the international community, are portrayed as impartial mechanisms to catalyse reconciliation and democratization (Jarstad and Sisk 2008; Przeworski 2011). But, as Dahl (1971) noticed, they rarely expunge wartime hatred. Quite on the contrary, they are more likely to reproduce the logic of conflict in the new-fangled electoral system put in place after the cessation of hostilities (*idem*). Lyons also recognizes that “[f]ear, distorted social structures, and (mal)distribution of power created by war will shape the political context of voting in post-conflict elections” (Lyons 2004, 39). This is because, beyond the classical distinction between ‘negative peace’ (e.g. the mere cessation of violence) and ‘positive peace’ (e.g. the construction of a political system), the establishment of post-war institutions and norms to peacefully regulate the conflict among political forces does not necessarily stem from a newfound common ground among the parties who fought during the war, but can perpetuate the conflict through novel forms of structural injustice (Galtung and Fischer 2013). What is more, elections are often included in peace deals when the termination of hostilities is more convenient for dominant actors than the continuation of violence (Roeder and Rothchild 2005).

Therefore, elections after civil wars can also crystallise an artificial *status quo* desired by international actors and their proxies at key junctures (e.g. the end of the Cold War), rather than the desire of local actors to overcome the strains of war. Howard and Stark notice that, whilst during the Cold War civil wars “ended in military victory for one side”, after the Cold War “they ended mainly in negotiated settlement” (Howard and Stark 2018, 171). They explain this shift (p. 360) as the result of the triumph of international liberal norms (*idem*). Yet, whereas there is little doubt that liberalism has provided the vocabulary and toolkit for implementing democratization and post-war ‘nation-building’ in post-colonial states, scholars have largely overlooked the extent to which the expansion of the liberal project has produced structural violence embedded in peace deals, negotiations, and the design of post-war institutions. For instance, the incumbent or external hegemonic forces may also call for elections and include undesired rebels with the very purpose of weakening and destroying them. In some cases, they have been ready to sabotage the electoral success of rebel groups, by weaponizing suspicion about their ‘true’ goals and identity-based preferences, so further worsening the trust-building process (Calculli 2019). The 2006 legislative election in Palestine is a case in point. The US and Israel sponsored the election, expecting Fatah to win it and Hamas to take a hit (Hilal 2010). But, as Hamas won the election, Israel and the US refused to acknowledge, and ultimately discarded the electoral result, by imposing new sanctions on Hamas, whilst Israel waged a new war on Gaza.

What might instead be puzzling is that Hamas maintained its commitment to electoral politics, in spite of the stigma of ‘terrorist organization’ and the new sanctions the US and Israel imposed on it (Berti 2015). But Hamas’ commitment to electoral politics is not an exception. Armed political parties – this chapter argues – respond to increasing hostility and stigmatization from rival forces by intensifying their commitment to and integration in an otherwise hostile institutional system which they aim to change or upend. To capture the rationale of their behaviour we need to better explore how actors whose ideology is not in line with the liberal world order have come to terms with it. We know little about the ideological interaction between proponents and contesters of the liberal project also because, as Jillian Schwedler (2011) notices, when discussing the ‘moderation’ of Islamists, scholars of democratization often implicitly project in their work their intimate desire to see Islamists mutate into liberals or simply disappear.

The next section proposes an explanation that goes beyond these accounts. It suggests that, in order to trace the rationale of rebels’ ‘ambivalent’ participation in electoral politics, we need to look more closely at their own ideological vision of the world from a bottom-up perspective. We also need to see how they respond to top-down pressure and requests of ‘acting rationally’. Therefore, the question of why rebels preserve their armed forces, in spite of their commitment to compete through

elections, should be treated in conjunction with – and not separated from – the interaction between rival political forces and how it unfolds through the electoral contest. More specifically, the understanding of armed political parties cannot be detached from the tension between the way hegemonic forces – e.g. war victors and their external sponsors – have designed post-war institutions and expect them to function, and the way non-hegemonic forces seek to change and renegotiate them.

Negotiating sovereignty through elections

This section builds on previous work (Calcutti 2018) which seeks to explain ‘armed political parties’ as intermediaries to defend visions of world order against the existing international system that they perceive as exclusive, and therefore unfair towards the population they claim to represent. I argue that rebels enter politics to change from within the ideological orientation of post-war institutions (**p. 361**) they see as unjust and immoral. But in order to do so, rebels rely on the hegemonic language of the state and participate in institutions to absorb and mitigate pressure from policies directed against them, and this way engineer their autonomy from state institutions; they operate within the state to prevent the state from neutralising their autonomy. They simulate compliance with the state, without renouncing or compromising their ideological and vision of order (e.g. an Islamic *umma*) that they continue to pursue outside of the state. What results is not integration, moderation or hybridization between the state and the non-state, but rather decoupling of rebel organisations through the creation of political parties that serve as a cover to disguise their extra-institutional objectives.

Decoupling is a tactic to cope with the asymmetry of power between the rebel group and the international community that supports the state. Simulating compliance with the expectations of the international community, which invariably seeks their disbandment and neutralization, is a key strategy for rebel groups to survive as well as to continue to pursue their goals underneath. Through creating political parties and participating in elections, rebels buy time: they simulate integration within the state, yet they invoke ‘exceptional circumstances’ to postpone the dismantling of their military wings. They use their institutional power to justify and legitimize their military operation, by presenting it as a temporary measure when in fact they seek to make it permanent. Political participation is therefore a way for rebel groups to secure exceptions in order to ensure their de facto autonomy from the polity in which they belong de jure, whilst avoiding direct confrontation with the state until they feel strong enough to overthrow it. But in the meantime, their political participation contributes to reinforcing the state, at least formally. It results in a mutually reinforcing dynamic

between the state and the non-state, in which the armed power of rebel groups serves to deter the state, but also reinforces it.

To elucidate the rationale of ‘armed political parties’ and the role they play in rebels’ interaction with the state, the next section of this chapter analyses the case of Hezbollah’s political participation in Lebanon.

The Lebanese Hezbollah between the battleground and the ballot box

Hezbollah emerged during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), in reaction to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the longstanding marginalisation of the Shi’a community (Saad-Ghorayeb 2003). In 1985, Hezbollah publicly presented its ideological program for an ‘Islamic revolution in Lebanon’ (*al-thawra al-islamiyya fi lubnan*), manifesting its allegiance to the *vilayat al-faqih*, the doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which in the 1980s constituted a major innovation in Shi’ite political thought. But in 1992, Hezbollah decided to participate in the first post-war election in Lebanon, changing its dictum into ‘Islamic resistance in Lebanon’ (*al-muqawwama al-islamiyya fi lubnan*), so entering the Lebanese sectarian power-sharing system, which allocates quotas to the different sectarian communities of Lebanon. Hezbollah has participated in all post-war elections and, since 2005, in the formation of subsequent Lebanese governments. It has nonetheless resisted the disbandment of its military force which has grown stronger, not weaker, during its political participation. The diversification strategy of Hezbollah challenges both the ‘inclusion-moderation hypothesis’, and the view of Hezbollah as an outcast of the international system.

These are two extreme positions, yet they are well represented in the literature: on the one hand, there are those who see Hezbollah as being in a process of ‘integration’ into the state and the political system of Lebanon (Hamzeh 1993), otherwise called ‘lebanonization’ (Norton 2007) or ‘civilisation’ (Saouli 2011); on the other hand, there are those who deny the legitimacy of Hezbollah as a political party and see it rather as a ‘terrorist’ group (p.362) undermining the sovereignty of the Lebanese state (Azani 2013; Takeyh 2006; Levitt 2013). But these contrasting accounts reveal a common flaw: they concentrate only on some features of Hezbollah’s action, whilst neglecting other key features, and fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of Hezbollah as a politico-military organization. To be sure, there are scholars who have reflected upon the double strategy of Hezbollah. El Husseini (2010) Berti (2011) and Knio (2013), in particular, have highlighted the dichotomy between the domestic and foreign engagement of Hezbollah, but have not explored the interconnectedness between the two. Also, analysing Hezbollah’s duplicitous action through the lens of a domestic/foreign dichotomy could obfuscate the understanding of the ideological drivers of

Hezbollah's action. In this regard, Harb and Leenders (2005) have shed light on Hezbollah's construction of an 'Islamic sphere' (*hala islaimiyya*) in Lebanon. But neither of these accounts has explored the interlink between Hezbollah's contrasting ways of operating within and without Lebanon. This section tries to shed light on this nexus, by showing how Hezbollah's political participation and military activities represent two complementary aspects of a comprehensive strategy that Hezbollah has pursued to defend – including through the use violence – its autonomy and ideological commitment to the Islamic revolution, whilst complying with secular norms and practices, so to render the moral and political cost of its disbandment extremely high for its rivals.

Hezbollah's accommodation in post-war Lebanon

The end of the Lebanese civil war cannot be seen as divorced from the end of the Cold War and the way this global event ushered in a new rationale for post-war reconstruction, especially in the Third World. As Georges Corm (2012, 80) notes, the very fact that the 'document of national reconciliation' (*wathiqat al-wifaq al-watani*), better known as 'Taif agreement', was not signed in Lebanon, but in Saudi Arabia, on 22 October 1989, is symbolic of the idiosyncrasy between the Lebanon's tense battleground and the international architecture of Lebanon's peace. Notoriously, the Taif agreement sanctioned a major compromise between the United States and Syria: the US accorded to Syria the control of Lebanon, in the legal form of a 'mandate' to "assist the Lebanese government in the reinstatement of state authority"¹, as an informal compensation for Syria's support for the US-sponsored Arab-Israeli peace process (Gani 2014, 101) . Seen from this perspective, the Taif agreement reflected the ideological orientations of both the United States and Syria in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War: Lebanon had to be reframed as a pro-Western state, with Syria as the new pillar of a US strategy in the Levant. However, during the Arab-Israel peace process, Syria was keen to use South Lebanon (that Israel had occupied in 1982) as a terrain of negotiation with Israel.

What place did international powers envision for Hezbollah in this strategy of post-war reconstruction of Lebanon? Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad opted for a temporary freezing of Hezbollah's disarmament, for Hezbollah had penetrated the whole South in fighting the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, and Asad was hoping to use it as proxy. Therefore, although the Taif agreement prescribed the dismantling of all Lebanon's wartime militias, Hezbollah and some Palestinian resistance groups continued to fight. The existence of Hezbollah was to be only for a *limited time* and with a *limited scope* in Syria's view, since the Syrian regime, whose ideology was

¹ The text of the Taif agreement is available here: https://www.un.int/lebanon/sites/www.un.int/files/Lebanon/the_taif_agreement_english_version_.pdf

based on a combination of secularism and Arab nationalism, did not view with favour the consolidation of an Islamist group near its borders (Calculli 2018, 79).

In Hezbollah's perspective, the Taif agreement was 'illegitimate'. Not only did it refuse to sign the agreement, but it also contested the liaison between its major international sponsors: Syria and the US. For instance, Hezbollah organized protests in Beirut against the participation of Arab states in the Madrid Conference of 1991 which inaugurated the Arab-Israeli peace process. Syria, one major participant in the Madrid conference, met these protests with brutal repression (Fadlallah 2014, 34). However, following the end of the civil war and calls by Syria and the United States to hold (p. 363) elections in order to give legitimacy to the externally-brokered peace, Hezbollah decided to form a political party and participate in post-war elections in 1992. This was not an easy decision and came only after intense internal debate within Hezbollah. In particular, the organization was split along two lines: those following Subhi al-Tufaily, the first Hezbollah's secretary general, who eventually left the party to become one of its fiercest critics, advised no compromise with the Lebanese state and its sectarian system; and those, following the Hezbollah leader Abbas al-Musawi and, after his assassination by Israel in 1992, Hassan Nasrallah, who advocated for participating in post-war Lebanese politics, in spite of the disagreement with the state and the Lebanese establishment close to Syria, Saudi Arabia and the West (Daher 2019). It was the second line that prevailed.

In order to capture the rationale of Hezbollah's decision, we need to consider the meaning that Hezbollah attributed to its political participation before its constituents. First of all, Hezbollah entered a system it continued to disagree with, but claimed that electoral consultation did not contradict the methods proposed by the party itself in the 1985 'open letter' (*risala al-maftuha*), also considered the first Hezbollah's manifesto (Fadlallah 2014, 35). In that open letter, Hezbollah proposed an Islamic state in Lebanon as a rightful political order, but rejected the idea of imposing it by force. It claimed that such order would come to pass "only if the majority of the Lebanese populace demand it and consent to it since it is necessary to choose a political system in Lebanon by mutual agreement between the Muslims and the Christians" (Alagha 2006, 17). These principles were reasserted in 1992, especially when Hezbollah was urged by its external and internal rivals to officially renounce the goal of an Islamic state – which it never did. What it did instead was to defend the claim that Hezbollah was never going to impose Islamic rule by force, but through popular consultation.

For instance, in a speech delivered in 1992, Hassan Nasrallah claimed:

"What others object to us, we will never propose in the first place; in other words, we do not want to establish an Islamic government by force. But we are calling people to join Islam, and saying that Lebanon should be an open space for all."²

² *al-watan al-arabi*, September 11, 1992.

Alongside this attempt to reconcile electoral participation and Islamic principles, Hezbollah entered the state, and adopted the language of state institutions, to counteract attempts by its rivals to label it as an outcast of the international system, which would legitimize military action against it. This was in particular the preference of Israel that opposed Hezbollah's participation in elections, and assassinated its secretary general Abbas al-Musawi to achieve this purpose. What is more, Hezbollah's electoral participation was constrained by a Syrian veto. Syria had imposed a limit to the number of MPs that Hezbollah could place in the Lebanese parliament (Norton 2007). In 1992, Hezbollah obtained 12 out of 128 seats, although anecdotal evidence suggests that it received more votes than what was officially declared (*idem*). This was because Syria was keen to grant a limited and temporary viability to Hezbollah, but intended to prevent it from consolidating its legitimacy, in view of a future dismantlement of the organization, as also envisioned by the informal agreement with the US (Calculli 2018). What is striking here is that Hezbollah insisted on participating in a political system that formally and vigorously constrained the influence it could gain from. This is an indication that Hezbollah was not so much driven by the immediate tangible benefits of political participation but rather by more subtle and broader aims of simulating closeness with the system in order to reduce the mounting pressure on themselves. It was not an expression of compromise and adaptation, but rather one of simulation. In fact, Hezbollah has never relinquished its firm ideological commitment to an **(p. 364)** Islamic order, but it has channelled it into the institutional mechanisms of the state it ultimately seeks to replace, to cope with a situation of extreme power asymmetry.

Framing the exception

The creation of a political party is then a means for Hezbollah to justify its penetration of the Lebanese state, to contrast with its military wing that attracts most pressure and use its formal participation to strengthen its informal existence. Hezbollah has pursued this strategy to gain access to the state, and negotiate with political rivals and foreign actors in the capacity of official interlocutor, rather than an outcast. Yet, to maintain such political/military 'duality', Hezbollah had to create a 'legal' justification for the autonomous maintenance of its military force – that is, to construct a juridical 'exception' and maintain its dissimulative strategy.

In the 1990s, Hezbollah made this case by justifying the permanence of the 'resistance' against the Israeli occupation in South Lebanon within the internationally-sponsored Taif agreement of 1989. Although Hezbollah was not among the signatories of Taif (and has never recognized the accord), the agreement offered clear prescriptions about the right of the Lebanese state to end the Israeli

occupation of South Lebanon ‘by all means’. This included the use of force, as foreseen by the United Nations resolution 37/43 (3 December 1982). Hezbollah has recurrently referred to International Law, and constructed the ‘resistance’ as ‘complementary’ to the state in an attempt to restore Lebanon’s sovereignty (Calculli 2018, 91-95).

Furthermore, the formalisation of such ‘state of exception’ has come in the guise of a specific formula – ‘the army, the people, the resistance’ (*‘al-jaysh, al-sha’ab, al-muqawwama’*) – adopted by all Lebanese governments since 1992. The formula has constituted the foundation of Lebanon’s national security strategy after the civil war, which has included and not excluded Hezbollah, whilst at the same time recognising the ‘resistance’ as distinct and autonomous from the state.

This triadic formula remained valid even after the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, at a time when the very existence of Hezbollah was in question. Yet, as Israel withdrew from all its territories, except for the Shebaa farms, a small strip of land that Lebanon claims as its own but Israel continues to occupy, Hezbollah has centred the Shebaa farms in a renewed discursive strategy of revamping the legitimacy of the resistance. By 2000, which also coincided with the death of Hafiz al-Asad, Syria aligned with Hezbollah, increasingly seeing it as a partner amidst rising tensions with the US.

The year 2005-2006 represents another juncture in which we can observe the nexus between Hezbollah’s political participation and preservation of its extra-institutional autonomy. In fact, this juncture was the culmination of a mounting international pressure on Hezbollah to disband its military wing. In 2003, the United States included Hezbollah in the list of terrorist organizations, without distinguishing between its military and political wings. In addition, the US issued in 2003 the ‘Syrian Accountability Act and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act’ (SALSRA), which paved the way for the UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (2004), calling for the ‘full restoration of Lebanese sovereignty’ and elimination of ‘illegal weapons’ from the Lebanese territory. But after the assassination of former Prime Minister of Lebanon, Rafiq Hariri, in 2005, under US and international pressure, Syria was forced to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. The internationalisation of the 2005 assassination of Hariri was followed by the establishment of a UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), and triggered an internal political polarization between pro-Syrian and pro-Western political forces. What is more, the US resumed its financial and training support to the Lebanese army, with **(p. 365)** the aim of rendering it a pro-Western counterinsurgency force which could eventually eliminate Hezbollah’s military capabilities.

Amidst renewed international pressure, in 2005 Hezbollah participated in a general election, gaining 14 seats, and stipulated a political alliance with the other Shi’a party Amal. Hezbollah’s electoral success was unprecedented and contradictory with the low profile the party had assumed

within the Lebanese political system. But, most crucially, it allowed Hezbollah to participate in the formation of the Lebanese government. The move marked a further transformation of Hezbollah's political strategy, for Hezbollah was no longer tangential to, but entrenched into, the Lebanese state. But – again – its main aim was to prevent its rivals, supported by the US and other Western states, from using state institutions, especially the Lebanese army, to disarm Hezbollah.

This strategy proved successful and restored the interlink between Hezbollah's political participation in Lebanon and its autonomy from Lebanon. As in 1992, when Israel assassinated Musawi to undermine Hezbollah's attempt to seek legitimacy through elections, in 2006 Israel invaded Lebanon to eliminate Hezbollah by force. The crisis was once again 'internationalised' with a negotiated truce, which paved the way for the UNSC Resolution 1701(2006). As Makdisi (2011) noticed, resolution 1701 was constructed to give the all-clear to a further penetration of international forces in Lebanon, by strengthening the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) – the peacekeeping mission, already deployed in the South since 1978 – with a new mandate to assist and train the Lebanese army to redeploy in the South formerly occupied by Israel.

Yet, Hezbollah was able to use its electoral power and role in government to neutralise the international intervention meant to disband it, by manoeuvring state institutions from within. In particular, by entering government, Hezbollah secured access to the *muhhasasa* – the 'allotment' of public offices *informally* shared among Lebanon's sectarian political leaders. Leenders (2012) has defined the *muhhasasa* as the 'functioning principle' of the Lebanese state, or the site where the true power of sectarian leaders rests. Hezbollah's *muhhasasa* power was integrated with that of its political allies – the Shia party Amal and, since 2006, the Christian Free Patriotic Movement. By accessing the *muhhasasa* system, Hezbollah and its allies favoured new promotions and appointments within the army, replacing pro-US officers with new appointees more sympathetic to the 'resistance'. They reshaped the behaviour of the Lebanese security sector and more crucially the army as this was being redeployed in South Lebanon (Calculli 2018, 116-120).

In post-2006 Lebanon, Hezbollah consolidated a novel security equilibrium based on the complementarity (*al-takamul*) between the army and Hezbollah. A further attempt to overthrow this equilibrium occurred in 2008 when the Seniora government, backed by the US, issued a law to outlaw Hezbollah's communication network – a key of its autonomous intelligence and defence system to deter attacks by Israel in South Lebanon and Dahyieh, the Southern periphery of Beirut. Hezbollah saw this law as an 'act of war' and responded with the occupation of downtown Beirut – a display of violence, for the first time directed against the Lebanese state since the end of the civil war. This episode, however, illustrated the capacity of Hezbollah to use its military power as deterrence against the state, in the case the latter attempted at curbing Hezbollah's autonomy. To prevent the

risk of a new civil war in Lebanon the international community intervened once again. During the 2000 negotiations held in Doha (Qatar) with the aim of preventing another civil war in Lebanon, Hezbollah demanded and obtained a critical concession, whereby one third of the cabinet ministers could veto a decision by the Prime Minister. Combined with the support it gets from its allies, Hezbollah became effectively a veto player. This de facto veto power was crucial for Hezbollah to defend itself against internal and external attacks on its military wing, and political clout. The 2008 Doha proved the sophistication and strength of the interplay between Hezbollah's electoral (p. 366) and military power, and the mutually reinforcing dynamic between the two, that Hezbollah has been capable to mobilise again to 'politically' defend and legitimize its participation in the Syrian conflict.

Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the formation of armed political parties and their function in the post-war settlement of countries transitioning from war to peace. In contrast to received wisdom, which views them as transient phenomena —temporary creatures of the process of transition from war to peace — this chapter has sought to reveal their permanent character and rationale. It has proposed to view armed political parties as the continuation of 'war by political means' — as a necessary step in order to preserve their military capabilities, rather than relinquishing them in exchange for integration into state institutions and participation in normal politics.

In fact, armed political parties such as Hezbollah have shown how they can simulate integration into the state in order to disguise their extra-institutional activities, and secure, if not strengthen, their autonomy from the state, which they supposedly accept and work with. As the case of Hezbollah demonstrates, armed political parties can take part in election to enhance their legitimacy and infiltrate state institutions in order to deflect and mitigate the combined pressure of internal and external rivals, rather than surrender to democratic politics. These findings offer a useful corrective to current debates and can offer a new vantage point from which to investigate empirically the phenomenon of armed political parties, in order to obtain a better understanding of the conditions under which they arise, the goals they pursue, the strategies they deploy and the outcomes they secure within and without the state.

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