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journals.sagepub.com/home/sdi**Marina Calulli** 

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Abstract

Hezbollah has withstood intensifying attacks since its emergence in the 1980s. Major powers – especially the United States and Israel – have led the assault through political, legal and military means to ostracize and eradicate it. Without success. Hezbollah has repelled these attacks and grown stronger as a result. The systematic scale of assault on Hezbollah makes its very existence, let alone growing strength, paradoxical. This article explains why. It locates Hezbollah's strength in its prudent mobilization of religious ideology to counter the justifications that major powers use to ostracize and destroy it. Transcending explanations based on pragmatism and normalization, the article theorizes Hezbollah's struggle for survival as a form of 'mimetic hedging', leveraging its extra-institutional and institutional roles to absorb internal and external assaults. Hezbollah prudently applies simulation and dissimulation to avert present, and potentially mortal, threats to buy time for pursuing an Islamic liberationist order in the future. Building on extensive fieldwork and media archives in Lebanon and interviews conducted with Lebanese and UN officials, this article contributes to theorizing the resilience of non-state armed organizations and their role in the security of postcolonial states.

Keywords

Insecurity, international security, intervention, peace building, terror, violence

Introduction

The size of Hezbollah is hardly proportional to the enormous scale of international assault it has provoked since its inception in the 1980s. The United States, together with Israel and other Western states, has endeavoured to debilitate Hezbollah, including by using the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to outlaw and disarm it. The magnitude of international effort to eradicate Hezbollah through political, military and legal means is extraordinary. But even more extraordinary is the failure of this effort. Not only has Hezbollah resisted these attacks, it has become stronger as a result. It has diversified its military action from resisting Israel in South Lebanon to supporting and training allies in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, to confront Israel with sophisticated military technology and counteract its genocidal war on Gaza in 2023–2024.¹ It has evolved from an anti-system political party in the early 1990s to the leader of a strong parliamentary coalition.

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Hence, the question this article asks: how does Hezbollah resist concerted attacks that seek its destruction? This is puzzling, especially if we consider the asymmetry between Hezbollah and its powerful rivals.

Mainstream security studies scholars maintain that non-state armed organizations resist by function of their capacity to occupy liminal areas where the state lacks institutional and infrastructural control (Day, 2019); when they become themselves state-makers (Krause, 2017); or when they establish ‘armed orders’ – temporary arrangements with the state, expected to end with their own incorporation into the state or their takeover of the state (Staniland, 2017). Critical and historical international relations scholars challenge these perspectives ontologically, approaching non-state armed organizations as state-like, performing as states, yet lacking the legitimacy the state has historically acquired (Davis, 2009; Owens, 2015; Winter, 2011). The case of Hezbollah challenges these views. It does not resist from the margins, but from the institutionalized core of the state. It is not fading away with time and, whilst it engages with the state as a contingent institution, it projects its power beyond it. Furthermore, even if one assumes that a weak Lebanese state is what makes Hezbollah strong, Lebanon’s weakness does not explain why international powers repeatedly fail to eradicate Hezbollah.

Scholarly perspectives on Hezbollah’s resilience do not explain these idiosyncrasies either. Three major explanations stand out. One explanation views Hezbollah’s ‘secrecy’ as key to strengthen underground as a ‘state within the state’, thriving at the expense of the state (Gabrielsen, 2014). Yet, focusing on its ‘mysteriousness’, this scholarship overlooks Hezbollah’s role as an institutionalized political party, acting not only in secrecy, but also through formal institutions. Furthermore, it fails to explain how Hezbollah escapes scrutiny by the international community, whilst the latter is fixated on debunking its informal activities, especially through the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Another explanation situates Hezbollah’s resilience in its integration within Lebanon’s political system (May, 2019; Norton, 2007; Saouli, 2011). Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) argues that Hezbollah’s national agenda has taken over its Islamist agenda, making Hezbollah a pillar of Lebanon’s stability. This view illuminates Hezbollah’s role *within* and *in support* of the state. But it simultaneously overlooks its parallel operation *outside* and *against* it – for instance, its participation in the Syrian conflict at odds with Lebanon’s neutral position, and its role in the ‘Axis of Resistance’ (*mihwar al-muqawama*), an alliance of actors committed to counter Western imperialism in the Middle East, denoting an expansion of Hezbollah’s horizon from its traditional local focus: the ‘Society of Resistance’ (*mujtama‘ al-muqawama*) (Alagha, 2023). Balancing these contrasting views, the third explanation focuses on Hezbollah’s ‘contradictions’ (Alagha, 2012) or ‘Janus-faced’ character (Knio, 2013). Harb and Leenders (2005) see Hezbollah’s resilience as deriving from the construction of an ‘Islamic sphere’ (*hala islamiya*), made of religious institutions operating parallel to the state. Fregonese (2012) shows how Hezbollah constructs ‘hybrid sovereignties’ with the state. This scholarship offers a vivid account of Hezbollah’s duplicitous engagement with the state. But *how* can Hezbollah systematically operate outside the state, all while integrating within the state and under international watch? This question remains unexplored.

This article integrates and moves beyond these lines of scholarship. It views Hezbollah as committed to defending an Islamic liberationist project against and beyond the state and the secular international order that underpins it, yet hyper-aware of its own limits, and therefore strategically prudent. It treats Hezbollah’s institutional and extra-institutional roles as two separate forms of action and traces their mutually reinforcing character to reveal the mechanisms of the theory of ‘mimetic hedging’ this article proposes. ‘Mimetic hedging’ shows how Hezbollah hides within the fabric of the state, rendering itself invisible to its enemies to dissimulate its ideological project at present and secure the prospect of realizing it in the future.

The empirical analysis builds on a range of methods to collect and analyse evidence. I use process tracing to reveal the causal links between Hezbollah's institutional and extra-institutional role, focusing on two distinct periods of political-normative reconstitution of Lebanon: (a) after the civil war (1990–2000); and (b) after the end of Israel's occupation of South Lebanon (2000–present). To assess Hezbollah's operation within formal institutions, I analyse official speeches, drawing on Hezbollah's manifestos, publications and media archives. For its informal operation, I draw from my own fieldwork carried out in Lebanon between 2010 and 2019, in addition to elite and semi-structured interviews with UN officials, diplomats, Lebanese politicians, and officers of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and LAF-Intel (Intelligence Branch), as well as media archives and UN reports.

Beyond pragmatism and socialization

Dominant conceptualizations of Hezbollah oscillate between two opposite frames – *pragmatism* and *socialization* – offering rival understandings of its actorness. Realists see Hezbollah as power maximizer, opportunistically mobilizing its religious ideology to pursue its agenda (Azani, 2013; Daher, 2019; Neumann, 2007; Ranstorp, 1998). Certainly, ideology can be instrumentalized (Farida, 2019). It can also evolve over time. But an interpretation that reduces ideology to a power tool collapses the boundaries between beliefs and interests to the point of making them indistinguishable. Also, in constructing an artificial separation between a supposedly pragmatic leadership and a religiously motivated popular base, it leaves unexplained how Hezbollah systematically averts popular disillusionment. Conversely, constructivists see Hezbollah's moderation as a sign of 'normalization' (Al-Aloosy, 2020; Norton, 2007) or 'socialization' of international norms (Dionigi, 2014; Saouli, 2019). These scholars seek to counter Eurocentric stigmatizations of Hezbollah. Yet, in offering a 'polished' image of the party as somehow at ease with the normative status quo, they leave unexplained the various instances in which Hezbollah acts deliberately against dominant norms. Paradoxically, whilst attempting to salvage Hezbollah from Eurocentrism, they reason according to Eurocentric standards of politics – a recurrent short-circuit in constructivist and postcolonial debates (for a critique see Barkawi and Laffey, 2006; Bilgin, 2010; Eriksson and Verweijen, 2018).

Like all modern actors, Hezbollah is a 'contrapuntal' creature – to borrow Edward Said's concept – shaped by the encounter with different normative visions (Bilgin, 2016). But the way it navigates such encounter cannot be defined a priori. It depends on the extent to which Hezbollah accepts or rejects other visions, and how it reacts to contingencies. In this vein, Zarakol (2014) warns against the conflation of 'norm-internalisation' and 'norm-socialisation'. She claims that non-Western actors often internalize and simultaneously reject Western-imposed norms when they become hyper-aware of their colonial origins.

This article moves beyond the pragmatism vs. socialization debate, refuting explicit or implicit expectations of 'normal' behaviour against which mainstream scholars scrutinize the operation of non-state armed organizations (Toros, 2008). Such expectations inform intellectual enterprises aimed at stigmatizing non-conforming behaviour and/or indicating a path to conformity, as the inclusion-moderation scholarship has done for over three decades, albeit in pretty inconclusive ways (for a critique of this scholarship see Schwedler, 2011). What these perspectives are uninterested in seeing, let alone retrieving, is the agency and ingenuity of the alleged 'deviant'. But this is precisely where we can observe 'multiple ways of imagining, ordering, and inhabiting our world as a global space' (Muppidi, 2005: 274). Such approach must refrain from a priori stigmatization as much as from romanticization of alternative visions of order (which can indeed produce alternative hierarchies and forms of injustice).

In this spirit, I uncover the dialectic engagement of Hezbollah with its rivals, between contestation and conformity with the status quo, to offer a systematic explanation for its behaviour. I consider Hezbollah a *prudent utopian*, committed to realize an Islamic order that can emerge only after dismantling the current one, where religion becomes a vehicle to forge a liberationist project defiant of global hierarchies (Dabashi, 2011; Kanaaneh, 2021; Saade, 2016). Its behaviour embodies a rejection of secularism, as the core ideology underpinning international society and justifying global hierarchies, not least between states – secular creatures par excellence – and non-state actors (Hurd, 2004). Yet, Hezbollah treads prudently with the normative environment that ostracizes it. The ambiguities in Hezbollah's 'normalization' are not flaws in an undefined trajectory from deviance to normalcy but derive from its awareness of how international norms threaten its survival. It is this acute awareness – I show – that underpins Hezbollah's logic of action. We can see Hezbollah's participation in formal institutions not simply as a means to gain power, but as a condition for defending its liberationist vision. This is how we can also understand Hezbollah's role in the 'Axis of Resistance', although this article will parsimoniously focus on how Hezbollah resists its global rivals from within the Lebanese state, viewing the state as the source from which Hezbollah extracts the autonomy to operate beyond it. I see Hezbollah's action as part of a global struggle to prevent Lebanon from becoming a fully fledged neo-imperial outpost under Western domination. To make sense of Hezbollah's behaviour, I inductively develop the theory of *mimetic hedging*.

Mimetic hedging

In security studies, 'hedging' refers to a strategy whereby the small ambivalently aligns with its powerful rivals to resist complete domination by them. Realists often evoke it to fill the conceptual void between 'balancing' and 'bandwagoning' (Kuik, 2016), when the small opts for limited alignment with the powerful 'featuring a mix of cooperative and confrontational elements' (Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019: 367). Yet, the cooperative side of the engagement serves to 'preserv[e] some autonomy and security' (Stiles, 2018: 11). This is crucial when small actors navigate a strategic arena marked by high power asymmetry and uncertainty of future, to avoid being overexposed to the arbitrariness of the powerful (Tessman, 2012). In short, realists reduce hedging to the outcome of a risk–benefit calculation.

I problematize this perspective. Even in rationalist terms, hedging – as an ambiguous, unresolved commitment – entails additional risks, deriving from preserving the benefit of doubt. Why do small actors assume the costs of ambiguity to preserve their own autonomy, instead of trading it for greater security, opting for bandwagoning instead? To answer this question, we need to bring ideology back in. As one option among others, 'hedging' involves careful calculation of risks, but ultimately reflects ideological/agential dispositions – something that could be equally inferred about balancing or bandwagoning (Lawson, 2006: 408).

Drawing from the literature mentioned above, I isolate three interrelated factors inducing a choice for hedging: (a) contestation of the status quo; (b) determination to change it; and (c) strategic prudence to avoid imminent destruction. Hedgers choose to live according to their own norms: preserving their autonomy and refusing heteronomy. At the same time, they are aware of their own limits – both material and determined by the contingent social environment. But they attempt to overcome these limitations, nonetheless. This is where hedging fundamentally escapes a mere pragmatist interpretation. Whereas hedgers avoid confrontation with their rivals, when the conditions would most likely lead to their annihilation, they rule out alternative available options that would ensure their survival at the cost of their beliefs. Instead of moulding ideology to serve their interest, they are driven by ideology and commitment to preserve it. This is especially crucial when we study how non-state armed organizations resist the state, in a context marked by material

inequality, subordinate to – and shaped by – the normative inequality between the ‘legitimate’ weapons of the state and the ‘illegitimate’ weapons of the non-state.

Hezbollah’s hedging through mimesis

Mimetic hedging captures the synergy between Hezbollah’s institutional and extra-institutional roles. It shows how Hezbollah hedges against powerful rivals seeking to destroy it, by miming the state, becoming indistinguishable from the state and thus invisible to its enemies. It simulates normalization within the state to dissimulate the political goals it pursues outside the state. Hezbollah’s institutional role makes its extra-institutional operation disappear from its rivals’ radar.

Simulation. Hezbollah simulates normalization through its political party, by acting as if it were separate from its military wing or ‘resistance’ (*muqawama*). This evokes what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) call ‘institutional isomorphic change’: when organizations face uncertainty, they ‘[model] themselves after similar organisations . . . they perceive to be more legitimate’ (1983: 151–152). But this does not entail *changing into* something else. It falls in the lines of what Scott (1990: 136) described as ‘political disguise’ by which vulnerable groups ‘insinuate their resistance’ into the ‘public transcript’ to avoid ostracization. Scott maintains that ‘[m]ost acts of power from below . . . largely observe the “rules” even if their objective is to undermine them’ (1990: 93). This is how vulnerable organizations exploit the loopholes of the hostile system in which they operate, ‘[setting] a course at the very perimeter of what the authorities are obliged to permit or unable to prevent’ to ‘[carve] out a tenuous public political life for themselves in a political order that, in principle, forbids such a life unless fully orchestrated from above’ (1990: 138–139).

By acting as a political party, Hezbollah signals that it accommodates the state as the outside world expects – that is, gradually subjecting itself to state authority. Such performance responds to the need to be seen as ‘legitimate’, in the legal-moral terms defined by its rivals: a vehicle to acquire ‘normative legitimacy’ and contain uncertainty.

Dissimulation. Institutional operation allows Hezbollah to control and mitigate from within the state the attacks its enemies wage through the state. This echoes Lenin’s (1920) auspice that ‘revolutionaries [should be capable] of combining illegal forms of struggle with every form of legal struggle’. Dissimulation captures Hezbollah’s ability to mould state institutions informally and invisibly, to deflect harm to the ideology, society and military power of the ‘resistance’. This echoes the religious notion of *taqiyyah* (from Arabic *waka*, ‘to shield oneself’) – ‘precautionary dissimulation’ or ‘prudent fear’ (Encyclopaedia Britannica): a religiously sanctioned duty to dissimulate one own’s faith under unjust rule, to avoid persecution and extermination.

Resilience. The strategic symbiosis of simulation and dissimulation produces Hezbollah’s resilience: its capacity to withstand permanent hostile conditions, whilst quickly recovering from sanctions, military blows or psychological warfare. It results in Hezbollah’s capacity to keep and strengthen its military power, whilst deepening its roots in society. It also ensures Hezbollah’s autonomy over time – a necessary condition for pursuing the ideological project of ‘resistance’.

Whilst simulation enables Hezbollah to gain temporary legitimacy and buy time, dissimulation enables it to mould institutions to deflect harm, by undercutting its rivals’ ability to canvass international consensus to wage a destructive attack against it at present, whilst postponing direct confrontation to a more opportune time in the future. Hezbollah’s resilience against all odds is thus the result of clear strategy, as depicted in Figure 1.

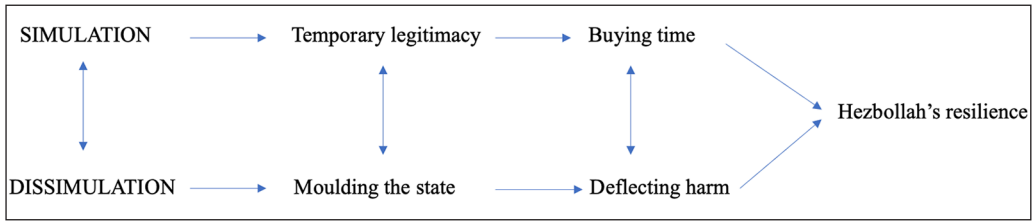


Figure 1. Mimetic hedging.

Peacetime and wartime

Mimetic hedging captures Hezbollah's operation in peacetime, not wartime. This is because whilst wartime creates possibilities to realize a vision through violence, peacetime crystallizes ordered hierarchies that foreclose those very possibilities, especially for those who do not lead the peace process. Hence, this article focuses on the internationally crafted order that was imposed on Lebanon to end the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) with the Ta'if accords (henceforth: Ta'if).

In wartime, Hezbollah described the Lebanese conflict as 'not [one] for narrow profits, domination, change . . . [but] a conflict between two sides: the Islamic block confronting Western – mainly American – influence . . . and the other forces that are hostile to the renaissance of the Umma' (Al-Ahad, 22 April 1988). War was the propitious temporality for revolution, as largely outlined in its 1985 'Open Letter' (*risala al-maftuha*) (Alagha, 2011: 40–55).

Yet, Ta'if ended such possibility. The condition for a post-Ta'if Lebanese state to emerge was its submission to international tutelage at a time of alignment between the United States and Syria, which obtained a mandate (a de facto military occupation) over Lebanon, alongside Israel's occupation of the South (Corm, 2012: 280). Ta'if essentially ended the wartime dialectic among different visions of Lebanon. It called for all militias to surrender their weapons, to '[spread] the sovereignty of the State of Lebanon over all Lebanese territories' (Ta'if agreement II, 3.G). Seen from Hezbollah's vantage point, peace represented the normative suppression of its liberationist project. It was not simply the military power of its rivals, but the new postwar institutions that threatened its existence. Hezbollah denounced Ta'if as a 'conspiracy' aimed at 'supporting the Israeli presence [and] strangling the Islamic resistance' (Al-Ahad, 28 October 1989). Yet, by 1992, it agreed – albeit partially and temporarily – to work within its terms (Alagha, 2012: 104).

Still, the boundaries between war and peace remained fragile. Hezbollah kept using violence as a 'moral duty' (Bou Akar, 2012: 169) when its rivals – especially the United States – threatened its own survival by moulding the political order emerging from Ta'if to forcefully exclude Hezbollah from it. These blatant attempts to change the state from above prompted interruptions of Hezbollah's mimetic hedging, or its simulative concession to the secular-liberal logic of international order and a revelation of the sacrificial logic of the resistance.

Hezbollah, the Lebanese state and 'the international': 1990–2000

External pressure

Israel and the United States saw 'peace' in Lebanon as a means to normalize Israel's occupation of the country. Peace was declared, but war continued in the South, where Israel became even more aggressive toward civilians, with the backing of Lebanese Christian nationalists and their militia, the 'South Lebanese Army' (SLA) (Fisk, 2001: 669). Various local armed groups continued to

attack Israel, whereas the ‘Islamic resistance’ – Hezbollah’s fighting force – remained committed to liberate Lebanon.

All of this happened under UNIFIL’s watch. Established by UNSC Resolutions 425 and 426 (1978), UNIFIL was officially designed to ensure the end of Israel’s occupation and restoration of state authority in South Lebanon (United Nations, 1978a, 1978b). US President Jimmy Carter sought to use UNIFIL to indirectly force Israel to withdraw, but in 1982, his successor Ronald Reagan changed this policy, trying to render UNIFIL ancillary to the expansion, rather than termination, of Israel’s occupation (Fruchterman et al., 1985: 220–221). Yet, despite its overwhelming power, the United States could not control UNIFIL, whilst other states interpreted its mandate differently, turning UNIFIL into an ‘arena of contestation’ against US–Israeli attempts to monopolize it (Makdisi, 2014).

Simulation

Against this hostile environment, Hezbollah formed a political party and participated in the first postwar elections in 1992. Contrary to prevailing accounts, I argue that Hezbollah sought to be seen as a national liberation movement, associating itself with the normative framework that lends liberation movements legitimacy. This framework includes most importantly the legal right of people under occupation to use all means, including armed struggle, to liberate themselves from an occupying power (for a discussion see Longobardo, 2018: 149–159). In 1985, responding to criticism of UNIFIL’s alleged failure to prevent local groups from attacking Israel, UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar stated: ‘UNIFIL, for obvious reasons, has no right to impede Lebanese acts of resistance against an occupying force, nor does it have the mandate or the means to prevent countermeasures’ (United Nations, 1985). In 1990, the UN General Assembly reaffirmed this right in Resolution 45/130 recalling ‘the universal realization of the right of peoples to self-determination’ (United Nations, 1990: 235), expressing ‘alarm’ at ‘the deplorable consequences of Israel’s continuing acts of aggression against Lebanon and its continuing occupation of parts of southern Lebanon, as well as its refusal to implement the relevant resolutions of the Security Council, in particular Resolution 425 (1978)’. Ta’if reflected this normative framework. Despite its call for disbanding all militias, it made explicit reference to Resolution 425 (1978), enshrining the duty to take ‘all the steps necessary to liberate all Lebanese territories from the Israeli occupation’ (Ta’if agreement: III C).

In parallel, Hezbollah changed its attitude from open defiance to tactical acceptance of international law. Na‘im Qassem, at that time Deputy Secretary-General, described Hezbollah’s political participation as ‘dual strategy’: ‘on the one hand, the “resistance” and liberation had to work “without subjugation” to preserve its effectiveness; on the other, it followed by the government in pursuit of the implementation of UN Resolution 425’ (Qassem, 2009: 278). This shift was further accentuated by a change of Hezbollah’s motto from ‘Islamic revolution in Lebanon’ (*al-thawra al-islamiyya fi lubnan*) in wartime to ‘Islamic resistance in Lebanon’ (*al-muqawama al-islamiyya fi lubnan*) in peacetime, thus eclipsing its original goal of replacing the existing political order. Meanwhile, Hezbollah’s regional allies, Syria and Iran, pushed Lebanon to officially recognize Hezbollah as part of its national liberation strategy (Bloom, 2008; Daher, 2019: 76). Whilst Hezbollah never explicitly endorsed Ta’if, it consistently used it as an anchor to resist Israel. In the words of Hezbollah’s MP ‘Ali Fayyad (Interview 1): ‘Our criticism notwithstanding, there are parts of Ta’if we never disagreed with. These parts could have never been implemented without the “resistance”, especially forcing Israel out of Lebanon.’

However, this shift did not lead Hezbollah to shed off its wartime legacy altogether, as it presented its participation in politics as resistance by other means. Hassan Nasrallah – then newly

elected Secretary-General of Hezbollah after Israel assassinated its former one – rejected the definition of ‘political party’: ‘Hezbollah is a *jihadi* movement’, he stated, ‘[in the process of] building relations with other groups, reaching out to them and forming coalitions’ (As-Safir, 27 February 1992). In its ‘[p]arliamentary elections program’, Hezbollah emphasized the need to ‘support the [resistance’s] fighters, backing up their ways of *jihad* . . . and granting them popular and governmental support’; to ‘erect a withstanding “resistance society”’; to ‘stand up firmly against and condemn every attempt of normalization of relations or establishing peace with the “Zionist Entity”’ (Alagha, 2011: 61). The programme outlined the strategy Hezbollah would have pursued within and without the state. It does not, however, contain any formal recognition of the state, but an explicit commitment to work *with* and *within* it. In telegraphic form, Nasrallah described what is here viewed as simulation.

Dissimulation

Hezbollah’s decision to enter formal politics produced a temporary compromise with the state. The state recognized Hezbollah as part of its national defence strategy through the formula ‘the army, the people and the resistance’ (*jaysh, sha ‘ab, muqawama*). The international community acknowledged such configuration. Although the United States and Israel resisted it, key European states – including France – embraced it, reflecting their political stances within UNIFIL. The late Timur Gökse, former UNIFIL spokesperson, noticed:

When Hezbollah became a political party, most UNIFIL contingents considered it a national liberation force. Israel and the United States have always reproached UNIFIL of engaging with Hezbollah, although Israel had itself signed a deal with the movement in 1993. (Interview 2)²

Yet, Hezbollah itself adopted a novel approach toward UNIFIL after 1992. Goksöl (2007: 72) himself recalled in his memoir:

[a]fter [Nasrallah] became head of the movement, we met, and I told him: ‘Look, we don’t have to like each other, but we don’t have to shoot at each other either. We can talk.’ He said, ‘Yes, that’s what I want also.’ And he appointed an official liaison officer to UNIFIL for the first time. He said, ‘Any problem you have, find that guy.’

In its everyday practices, UNIFIL treated Hezbollah ‘as a force emanating from the state’ (Interview 3). UN peacekeepers ‘knew that southern civilians regularly provided intelligence information to Hezbollah’ (Interview 4) – a factor that significantly improved Hezbollah’s military performance (Gabrielsen, 2014: 268). Incidentally, what at least some peacekeepers saw as respect for the preferences of Lebanon’s southern population was core in Israel’s criticism of UNIFIL. Israel expected UNIFIL to curtail Hezbollah’s activities – something that was however not part of Res. 425, as multiple UN reports asserted. Israel’s misinterpretation of UNIFIL only galvanized the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) into systematically harassing peacekeepers (Fruchterman et al., 1985: 221) – a tension that culminated in the 1996 ‘Operation Grapes of Wrath’. UN reports record that when the operation began, Israel bombed Beirut with the ‘declared objective [of putting] pressure on the Government of Lebanon so that it would curb the activities of the Islamic Resistance’ (United Nations, 1996a: 3). Yet, Israel’s attempt to force Lebanon and UNIFIL to help the IDF consolidate the occupation backfired.

UNIFIL remained committed to implement Res. 425, in coordination with the Lebanese state, which in turn acknowledged Hezbollah’s continuation of armed struggle in the South. This is the

essence of Hezbollah's dissimulation: mobilizing a formal normative framework to strengthen its autonomy from underneath, thus constructing a circular interlocked dynamic where formal politics shields its informal role. The possibilities arising from such liaison between Hezbollah and the state probably triggered Israel's infamous 'Qana massacre' – the 1996 bombing of the Fijian UNIFIL compound in Qana, in which Israel killed 106 and injured another 116 of the 800 civilians sheltered therein. This massacre only tarnished Israel's moral credentials and urged the international community to pressure Israel to end the assault.

Resilience

The combination of simulation and dissimulation consolidated Hezbollah's military capabilities and political legitimacy, showing how these are not mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing. By 1996 Hezbollah's moral role as a resistance movement was recognized beyond its Shi'ite constituency. At the same time, Hezbollah sophisticated its military capabilities and even penetrated the Israeli-controlled area (ICA) of Lebanon, killing IDF officers (United Nations, 1996a: 2).

To strengthen this favourable situation, Hezbollah decided to support the 1996 'April Understanding' – a US-brokered agreement between Lebanon and Israel on the interdiction to target civilians. Hezbollah worked to preserve the temporary endorsement of the Lebanese government. Quite explicitly, 'the worry [for Hezbollah] was being sold out . . . while challenging the grander and more worthy cause' (Qassem, 2009: 306). Whilst it coordinated with the government, Iran and Syria negotiated with the United States, 'ensuring the participation of France in the committee for overseeing the implementation of the accord' (Qassem, 2009: 306). This is because France had committed to defend Res. 425, calling for the end of Israel's occupation prior to any other action (Interview 5). France ended up being Hezbollah's unlikely shield.

This was a turning point in the US–Israeli strategy to eradicate Hezbollah – shifting from military pressure to normative-political pressure. In 1997, the United States designated Hezbollah as a 'Foreign Terrorist Organisation' (United States Department of States, 2021: 266), hoping to pressure Lebanon to demilitarize Hezbollah and other Western states to do the same. Without success.

Hezbollah against the world: A normative battle (2000–2019)

External pressure

Israel's occupation of Lebanon ended on 25 May 2000. Hezbollah took credit for the 'liberation' (*tahrir*), but found itself exposed. With Israel being no longer the occupier, the 'resistance' was expected to hand over its weapons to the state. On 18 June 2000, the UNSC issued a Presidential Statement, calling upon the Lebanese government 'to proceed with the deployment of the Lebanese armed forces as soon as possible, with the assistance of UNIFIL, into the Lebanese territory recently vacated by Israel' (United Nations, 2000: 1).

To slow down the impact of such renewed international pressure, Lebanese President Émile Lahoud put the LAF redeployment on hold, enabling Hezbollah to remain the de facto sovereign in the South (Knudsen and Gade, 2017: 8). Hezbollah tried to exploit a territorial dispute between Lebanon and Israel on the Shebaa Farms: Lebanon claimed this territory as its own and, since Israel had not withdrawn from it, Hezbollah claimed the 'resistance' had yet to absolve its duty. However, most Lebanese dismissed such narrative as a pretext for preserving the autonomy of its weapons. This also probes the simulative character of Hezbollah's 'normalization', functional to buy time and pursue its goals beyond the state.

Israel and the United States exploited the momentum. In 2002, former Israeli PM Ehud Barak defended the end of occupation in these terms: '[had Israel not withdrawn], Hezbollah would have enjoyed international legitimacy in their struggle against a foreign occupier' (Morris, 2002). At the same time, the United States launched an unprecedented lawfare campaign against Hezbollah within the framework of the 'war on terror' (El Hussein, 2010). On 12 December 2003, the US Congress passed the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Restoration Act (SALSRA), accusing Syria of sponsoring terrorist groups in Lebanon. However, the ultimate goal of the United States was to mobilize the UNSC against Hezbollah. SALSRA essentially codified the rhetoric of counter-terrorism that was doomed to shape the UNSC approach towards Hezbollah in the 21st century, shaping Res. 1559 (2004) and Res. 1701 (2006). What ensued was a US-led process of 'terroristification' of Hezbollah, meant to strip off its image of 'national liberation movement' – a forceful encroachment on Lebanese domestic politics to eradicate Hezbollah by external decree and something that even Hezbollah's domestic rivals opposed. The then Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri travelled to Western countries to have Hezbollah removed from the US State Department's list of 'terrorist organizations', whilst his deputy PM Issam Fares declared an 'unacceptable mistake' to consider Hezbollah a terrorist, 'because Hezbollah was behind the liberation of part of southern Lebanon' (Al Jazeera, 2001).

Yet, the United States disregarded Lebanese views, whilst working on bringing France closer to their own position. Only in 2002 French President Jacques Chirac had invited Hassan Nasrallah to attend the Francophone summit in Beirut. But two years later, France joined the United States in sponsoring Res. 1559, calling for 'the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias' (United Nations, 2004: 2). The assassination of former Lebanese PM Hariri in Beirut in 2005 offered a pretext for intensifying international pressure on Hezbollah, including leveraging the UNSC to elevate his death from a local event into a matter of international security (Makdisi, 2011: 9). They went on to establish the 'Special Tribunal for Lebanon' (STL) to tighten their grip on Lebanon and further marginalize Hezbollah (Abboud and Muller, 2013). Working in parallel, the United States supported anti-Syria popular protests and political attempts to push Syrian troops out of Lebanon to reformat Lebanon's domestic politics (Geukjian, 2016: 70–88). With Syria's withdrawal in 2005, they sought to establish indirect control over security institutions – especially the LAF and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) – mainly by resuming unilateral military aid to Lebanon, with the manifest aim of 'supporting the implementation of UNSC resolutions' (Congressional Research Service, 2012: 13). The latent aim was to transform the LAF and ISF into parallel counterinsurgency forces under US supervision (Picard, 2009). The ISF was the first beneficiary of US aid, given its closeness to the pro-Western Hariri's entourage. Ashraf Rifi, known for his loyalty to Hariri, became head of the ISF, replacing 'Ali al-Hajj, accused of working for Syrian intelligence services. Within a few months, the institution grew from 14,000 to 20,000 members, trained by France and equipped by the United States (Picard, 2009: 257). Furthermore, the ISF created a novel intelligence agency – *shub'at al-ma'lumet* – designed to counterbalance the General Security (*al-amn al-'am*) led by the pro-Syria General Jamil Sayyed. In 2006, the United States also supported Israel's invasion of Lebanon, joined by the anti-Hezbollah Lebanese elite that collaborated undercover with Israeli invaders (Abu Khalil, 2011). Israel had killed over a thousand civilians when international actors issued calls for a ceasefire, which the United States capitalized on to recast the mandate of UNIFIL, through the UNSC, tying the LAF to UNIFIL, thereby establishing formal international control over a domestic institution. Through its Res. 1701, the Security Council called for a full cessation of hostilities, redeployment of the LAF to South Lebanon, and the establishment of a demilitarized zone between the provisional Lebanese–Israeli border (the 'Blue Line') and the Litani River (United Nations

2006). It also gave UNIFIL the mandate to assist the LAF in capacity building, redeployment and confiscation of ‘illegal weapons’ – de facto repurposing the LAF as a counter-terrorist unit.

Simulation

Following Syria’s withdrawal, Hezbollah joined the national unity government led by Fuad Seniora in 2005, assuring its rivals that ‘the resistance’ would keep a low military profile (Interview 6). This was the first time Hezbollah joined a cabinet, breaking a policy of distance from the sectarian system. The move was tactical because its past experience made it fear of ‘[being stabbed] in the back’ (Alagha, 2011: 120). It formed an alliance with a time-honoured rival, the Shi’a party Amal, led by Nabih Berri, with which it had fought during the civil war.³ Both parties were tied to Syria, yet for different reasons. Both felt under threat and overcame their past rivalry to form a parliamentary bloc named ‘8 March’, opposing the pro-Hariri bloc ‘14 March’ supported by the United States. In a coup de theatre, Hezbollah also brought in its camp the Christian ‘Free Patriotic Movement’ (FPM), led by Michel Aoun, despite their differences over Syria’s role in Lebanon.

This realignment reflected two rival visions of Lebanon’s security, which materialized in the ‘national dialogue’ (*al-hiwar al-watani*), a semi-institutional setting where Lebanese parties define the national defence strategy. Whilst the ‘14 March’ endorsed the international designation of Hezbollah’s weapons as ‘illegal’, the ‘8 March’ defended ‘complementarity’ (*al-takamul*) between the LAF and Hezbollah, a doctrine elaborated by Hassan Nasrallah (Calculli, 2018: 56). For Michel Aoun, ‘[a]s long as the Lebanese army lacks sufficient power to face Israel, we feel the need for [Hezbollah’s] arsenal because it complements the army’s role’ (Reuters, 2017). One of the core issues at stake was (and still is) Israel’s daily violations of Lebanon’s air space and sovereignty, against which Hezbollah, especially after 2000, invoked the ‘right to self-defence’, as sanctioned by Article 51 of the UN Charter.

The ideological polarization was the result of US–Israeli attempts to cast Lebanon’s security policy in their favour. It effectively shaped negotiations on whether Lebanon had to accept UNSC Res. 1701 or not. For its part, Hezbollah reassured other parties that it would not interfere with UNIFIL (Interview 6), whilst there was an informal entente at the international level whereby countries contributing troops to UNIFIL would recognize Hezbollah’s political role (Interview 7; see also Calculli, 2014). Whereas Res. 1701 essentially repurposed UNIFIL with the latent aim of disarming Hezbollah, Lebanon would have not been able to accept it without the tacit consensus of Hezbollah, a cabinet member. Hezbollah did not openly defy Res. 1701 but it worked against its full implementation covertly.

Dissimulation

Even after the redeployment of the LAF to South Lebanon, Hezbollah was neither demilitarized, nor was its role in the South diminished – a necessary condition to ensure its readiness to confront any Israeli attempt to reoccupy Lebanon. Yet, in its everyday practices, Hezbollah dissimulated its presence, honouring its promise to keep a low profile – at least until October 2023. Hezbollah transferred most of its weapons to the Bīqā’ valley, outside UNIFIL’s mandate; yet it kept operational capabilities in the South, prompting UNIFIL to repeatedly acknowledge ‘lack of progress’ regarding the disarmament of armed groups (see, among others, United Nations, 2020: 5). However, Hezbollah’s military presence under the Litani River became undeniable after 7 October 2023, when Hezbollah launched multiple attacks in solidarity with Hamas – first on the Israeli-occupied Shebaa Farms and then on villages in North Israel, as part of a regional coordinated effort to distract Israel from the Gaza front.

How could Hezbollah avoid demilitarization by a UNIFIL-supported LAF, required by Res. 1701? In what follows I will argue that Hezbollah transported its ideological struggle from the ‘national dialogue’ to the ranks of security apparatuses, successfully promoting an understanding of Lebanon’s security antithetical to the US–Israeli vision: not a zero-sum game, but complementarity between security institutions and Hezbollah.

Hezbollah and Lebanon’s security. Despite their reputation of ‘neutrality’, Lebanon’s security institutions have been traditionally shaped by sectarian competition (Knudsen and Gade, 2017). Sectarian leaders rely on informal, yet well-established, prerogatives to appoint public officers from their sects – a system known as *muhasasa* (‘allotment’) (Leenders, 2012). This form of ‘corruption’ does not simply engender transactional exchanges, it turns institutions into perennial sites of competition among different visions of the state, as public officers are not simply opportunistic traders of favours (Moussa, 2016), but behave as they think the state *should* behave.

Admittedly, Hezbollah has no share in the *muhasasa* system. This ensues from its choice to remain outside and critical of Lebanon’s sectarianism, especially in the period prior to 2005, when its power relied on religious institutions, funded by Iran, independent from and operating parallel to the clientelist networks of Lebanon’s sectarian elite. But with its 2005 alignment with two veterans of the sectarian system, Nabih Berri and Michel Aoun, Hezbollah got stealthy access to the *muhasasa*, and from there to key security institutions. I reconstruct this operation through semi-structured interviews conducted with LAF officers, whom I will often refer to by their sectarian affiliation. This should not be intended as a priori reification of their religious identity, but a simplified mark of their political-sectarian role, deriving from (not preceding) the confessional character of Lebanese institutions.

LAF officials across sectarian lines and ranks overwhelmingly corroborate the strengthening of the LAF–Hezbollah relationship after the 2005 Syrian withdrawal. Whilst under the Syrian mandate, some saw Syria as an ‘ally’ and others as an ‘occupier’, all agree that Syria ‘treated the state and Hezbollah distinctly’ (Interview 8). Officer B. (Interview 9) claimed that ‘[under Syria], the LAF inspected Hezbollah’s militants and confiscated their weapons’. Many recall that ‘even Amal was intolerant toward Hezbollah’, in contrast to ‘now’, when ‘if Hezbollah is around, the LAF looks the other way’ (Interview 10).

Whilst the LAF could not escape the post-2005 polarization along the ‘8 March’/‘14 March’ divide, its relationship with Hezbollah became cooperative, as a result of Hezbollah’s alignment with Amal and the FPM. Shi’ite officers, in particular, revealed a tendency to align with Hezbollah as they saw US/Western encroachment on the LAF as an attack on Shi’ites altogether, evoking traumatic memories of historical marginalization of Lebanese Shi’ites. Officer M. claimed that ‘an attack on the Shi’ites commenced in 2006, when Defence Minister Elias Murr created 10,000 new LAF positions, reserved to Christians and Sunnis only’ (Interview 11). He defines such act as ‘an attempt to exclude Shi’ites from power *once again* [my emphasis]’ (Interview 11). Officer A. affirmed: ‘Our disagreements notwithstanding, we respect Hezbollah for its commitment to Lebanon’ (Interview 12). More forcefully, former LAF-Intel (*mukhabarat al-jaysh*) Commander in South Lebanon, Ali Chahrour, stated that ‘[t]he LAF and Hezbollah have common objectives: liberating Lebanon from Israel and terrorist threats [i.e. rival armed groups in Syria], and strengthen each other mutually’ (Interview 13).

Similarly pro-Aoun Christian officers – admittedly most high-ranking Christian officers⁴ – also changed their view of Hezbollah after 2006. Cooperating with Hezbollah was for them functional to ‘strengthening Lebanon’s sovereignty’ (Interview 14). Echoing their leader, they were concerned with ‘lack of strategic parity with Israel’. They saw Hezbollah as an ‘anomaly’ but also ‘the result of LAF anomaly: an army that cannot prevent Israel’s daily violations of Lebanon’s airspace’

(Interview 15). Yet, they deemed ‘inevitable’ that ‘Hezbollah [would] be integrated within the LAF’ (Interview 16).

It is noteworthy that alongside the LAF, the United States tried to establish indirect control over the General Security (GS), Lebanon’s major intelligence branch. In 2005, the United States backed attempts to undermine its credibility. GS Director-General Jamil Sayyed was forced to resign under accusations – later dismissed as false – that he co-conspired to assassinate Hariri. His successor, Tawfic Jezzini, gained support from all factions, thanks to his reputation as a ‘politically independent Shi’ite’. Yet, when Interior Minister Ahmad Fatfat asked him to accept US foreign assistance, he refused. US assistance was officially ‘intended to increase security service information sharing to combat smuggling’ and designed to ‘permit interconnectivity among . . . Lebanon’s various security services’ (Wikileaks, 2006). But the ‘8 March’ camp suspected the language of ‘harmonization’ was less an attempt to increase the efficiency of Lebanon’s multiple intelligence agencies, and more an attempt to put them under US control (Interview 17).

It is in this context that we need to interpret the decision by the 2008 government, led by Fouad Seniora, to outlaw Hezbollah’s private communication network and fire the security chief at the Beirut international airport, Wafiq Shuqeir, considered too close to Hezbollah. This decision was strongly backed – if not dictated – by the United States. Nasrallah labelled it a ‘declaration of war’ (Shehadi, 2008), as it directly threatened Hezbollah’s survival. Hezbollah interrupted mimetic hedging, when it occupied downtown Beirut, fighting with pro-‘14 March’ militants. What prevented the outbreak of a civil war was a return to political negotiations, sponsored by Qatar, which culminated in an agreement signed in Doha, sanctioning the right for one-third of the cabinet to veto any PM’s decision – de facto a guarantee for Hezbollah to contain lawfare directed at them (Salloukh et al., 2015: 97–104, 162). Endorsing Hezbollah’s line, Michel Aoun described this agreement as a ‘means to protect Lebanon from external interference’ (Interview 18). This episode illustrates the theory of mimetic hedging: that Hezbollah resorted to political violence to defend its autonomy shows that compliance with the state is simulative and functional to preserving Hezbollah’s pursuit of its objectives beyond the state. Once Hezbollah saw its autonomy threatened by the state, it openly defied it.

In similar circumstances, in 2011, Hezbollah joined the Syrian conflict on the side of the Asad regime – not without an intense moral dispute within its own base and allies. The decision contradicted the official policy of neutrality of the Lebanese state, and stained Hezbollah’s moral image as a resistance movement. Yet, Hezbollah saw the engagement of Israel and rival Arab states in Syria as a threat to the continuation of Iran’s arms supply to the *muqawama* – something that could have potentially suffocated Hezbollah’s military power (Al-Aloosy, 2022). The Syria intervention paused mimetic hedging, although Hezbollah framed the intervention as part of its effort to protect Lebanon’s borders, alongside national security institutions.

In the wake of this ideological confrontation, the ‘8 March’ sought to keep the GS out of its rivals’ influence. The Christian party ‘Lebanese Forces’ sponsored a Christian Maronite as head of the GS in 2011. But Parliament appointed Abbas Ibrahim – a Shi’ite officer who led various branches of the intelligence directorate (‘G-2’) from 1994 to 2011, establishing close ties with Western and Middle Eastern intelligences. He also entertained personal connections with UNIFIL commanders, mediating small disputes between UNIFIL and Hezbollah (Interview 19). During his mandate as GS Director-General (2011–2023), Ibrahim preserved good relations with Western countries, whilst collaborating with Hezbollah. Since 2013, the GS shared with Hezbollah key information about Sunni groups operating in Syria and Lebanon. For instance, thanks to intelligence information provided by the GS, in 2014 Hezbollah was able to thwart car bombs attacks by Daesh-affiliated groups in Dahyeh (Interview 20). Equally, since 2013 Hezbollah coordinated with the GS and the LAF the movement of its fighters from South Lebanon and the Bqqa’ valley to Syria

(Interview 20). Crucially, informal coordination with security institutions shielded Hezbollah's informal operation in South Lebanon. These institutions enabled Hezbollah to dissimulate its activities, in parallel to and outside the state.

Hezbollah and UNIFIL. As the transformation of the security landscape in the South did not lead to eradicating Hezbollah, a decade after its enforcement, the United States and Israel started questioning UNIFIL, accusing peacekeepers of being 'blind to illegal arms trafficking' (Guardian, 2017) or unable 'to stop Hezbollah and confiscate its arms' (Reuters, 2015). Israel has topped these verbal attacks with physical attacks, at least in 2024, without restraint from the United States, by deliberately destroying UNIFIL facilities and attacking peacekeepers, probably with white phosphorous (Jalabi, 2024). These attacks show that UNIFIL stands in the way of renewed Israeli assault to destroy Hezbollah, especially as Israel systematically targets the civilian population that forms Hezbollah's base, which UNIFIL is mandated to protect in the South (Trithart, 2024). But these direct and deliberate attacks on UNIFIL are also symptoms of the failure of the United States and Israel to fully repurpose UNIFIL and the LAF into tools for their 'war on terror' and force them to adopt their own designation of Hezbollah as a 'terrorist' in both its military and political wings. Yet, Lebanon never accepted this framing. Incidentally, even the European Union and key European states (i.e. France and Italy) maintain the distinction between Hezbollah's military and political wings. Whilst in 2013 they listed Hezbollah's military wing as 'terrorist', they continue to recognize its political party as legitimate, and even closest European allies of Israel, such as the UK and Germany, labelled Hezbollah as a 'terrorist organization' in its entirety only between 2019 and 2020. In other words, the US-enforced 'terroristification' of Hezbollah has met significant resistance and remains disputed to this day.

UNIFIL avoids the 'terror framing', too. If anything, peacekeepers are obligated to coordinate with the Lebanese government (which includes Hezbollah since 2005) and the LAF on the ground. Former Head of UNIFIL, Paolo Serra, explained that 'UNIFIL cannot substitute the LAF' (Interview 21). In rebuffing Israel's allegation of UNIFIL's complacency toward Hezbollah, Luciano Portolano, UNIFIL Head of Mission between 2016 and 2018, affirmed that 'Majors and *mukhtars* in Southern villages are also part of Hezbollah, as it is the religious leadership and the society of the South. We cannot change the electoral preferences of the population' (Interview 22). This proves Hezbollah's success in mobilizing formal institutions to shield itself from US lawfare.

At the same time, whilst UNIFIL patrols the area, the LAF is the only authority that can conduct inspections and confiscations – something the LAF has been reluctant to implement fully, precisely because, as shown earlier, officers do not necessarily see Hezbollah as a threat. Yet, 'when Hezbollah's operation becomes *occasionally* visible [my emphasis], flaws in UNIFIL-LAF coordination become visible too' (Interview 23). All this points to Hezbollah's successful dissimulation, which turned the LAF – at least core segments of it – into a force defiant of US-Israeli diktats.

Resilience

International powers expected Hezbollah to collapse after the 2006 war (Interview 7). Yet, not only did Hezbollah prove more resilient on the battlefield, it used its political power to mobilize consensus for ceasefire, which allowed Hezbollah to hedge against US-Israeli encroachment on Lebanon's domestic institutions and the unspoken aims of Res. 1701. The colossal failure of their project to destroy Hezbollah, despite the massive resources mobilized to this end, results from Hezbollah's

capacity to confront its rivals both indirectly and directly – through the state and through the ‘resistance’. This is the essence of mimetic hedging.

To cope with such failure, Israel and the United States have taken the confrontation to a new level. At the time of writing (October 2024), US-backed Israeli forces are engaged in an unprecedented attack on Lebanon. To break Hezbollah, Israel orchestrated the detonation of thousands of booby-trapped pagers and walkie-talkies on 17–18 September 2024, injuring and killing hundreds of Hezbollah’s fighters and civilians. On 26 September 2024, Israel assassinated Hezbollah’s Secretary-General, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. It also assassinated several of Hezbollah’s commanders to shatter the organization. These interlinked blows aimed at knocking out Hezbollah in preparation for a reoccupation of South Lebanon. Yet, in a sign of extreme resilience, Hezbollah has rapidly regrouped and shown a capacity to repel Israeli forces in their attempts to penetrate deep into Lebanon’s territory, whilst continuing to hit military targets within Israel. As a response to Hezbollah’s steadfastness, US-backed Israeli forces have resorted to carpet bombing and annihilating entire Lebanese villages and neighbourhoods, giving people ‘unrealistically short evacuation orders’, amounting to egregious violations of international humanitarian law and possible ‘domicide’ (United Nations, 2024b). In parallel, Israeli and US top officials are inciting the Lebanese people to ‘stand up against Hezbollah’ to avoid meeting ‘destruction and suffering like . . . in Gaza’ (Al Jazeera, 2024). As the US ambassador to Lebanon put it, ‘Israel cannot achieve everything through war; it’s time for you to do your part and launch an internal uprising’ (The Cradle, 2024). These statements amount to explicit incitements for civil war, as they frame Lebanon’s population and political institutions as legitimate targets or culpable, unless they embrace the US narrative and accept to cast Hezbollah and its civilian supporters out of the body politic. This is seemingly the last resort to eradicate Hezbollah, after the failure of previous attempts to pursue this goal indirectly and whilst preserving legal plausibility for the ad hoc norms the United States invented during the war on terror. The United States is now showing its resolve to work outside international law to defeat Hezbollah, potentially putting an end to the ‘war on terror’ and opening up a new phase of imperial tutelage in Lebanon, by forcefully reshaping its domestic politics.

Conclusion

This article aimed at explaining Hezbollah’s resilience in face of sustained and intensifying attacks by powerful rivals through a novel theoretical framework: mimetic hedging. Drawing on extensive fieldwork and primary sources, it showed how mimetic hedging reveals the methodical way in which Hezbollah leverages simulation and dissimulation in both its institutional and extra-institutional roles to enhance and safeguard its autonomy as a political and military force, within Lebanon and beyond. Overall, it unearths Hezbollah’s prudent mobilization of international norms – especially the principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty and self-determination – to advance covertly and overtly its Islamic liberationist project. This novel theorization has significant implications for academic and policy approaches to Hezbollah.

Building on critical perspectives that view non-state armed organizations as not merely antagonizing the state, but engaging the state to ensure their own survival, our findings revise the view that the latter survive only if they are incorporated by the state. The case of Hezbollah shows how non-state armed organizations can transcend the state by using its constituent normative and material resources to maximize their autonomy in pursuit of resistance beyond the reach of the state. They can function as active and sometimes sole defenders of state sovereignty, self-determination and territorial integrity, even if their ultimate aim is to transcend these norms. This article also reveals how security is subject to unending ideological struggle between rival visions of order – something

not captured by the binary conception of security as a function of ‘good’ stabilizers and ‘bad’ destabilizers of order. Furthermore, Hezbollah’s resourcefulness, agility and strength contradict the view that non-state armed organizations are necessarily a symptom of state weakness, and further exacerbate it. There are structural conditions that generate and perpetuate a ‘weak’ Lebanese state that predate and go beyond Hezbollah – conditions entrenched in the way international hierarchies were constructed and consolidated in the first place. It is in this vein that this article opens new vistas on how the weak resists the strong, especially in the context of an international society that suppresses forms of political imagination defiant of the monopoly of secular-liberal norms.

Regarding policy, the unrelenting and intensifying assault on Hezbollah is unlikely to lead to its destruction, without destroying the population from which it originates and whose interests it defends. The US-led ‘terroristification’ of Hezbollah, aimed to neutralize its standing as an indigenous political armed movement as well as its role in restoring Lebanon’s self-determination, continues to obscure the illegality of subsequent US-backed Israeli aggressions against Lebanon. The fog of lawlessness that these actors have generated in 2024 to wage a war directly targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure has caused incalculable suffering to the Lebanese people, but it will unlikely break the idea of resistance that Hezbollah embodies, because of the symbiosis of Hezbollah and Lebanon. Resistance is the ideology that ensures the viability of Hezbollah and what binds it with the Lebanese people and institutions, across sectarian divisions. US rhetoric aimed at conjuring up a separation between Hezbollah and Lebanon, purportedly to safeguard the well-being of the Lebanese people, is intended to offer a plausible pretext for the annihilation of entire areas of Lebanon to safeguard Israel’s declared objective (Middle East Monitor, 2024) to occupy South Lebanon and beyond.

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Notes

1. On Israel’s acts of genocide in Gaza see Amnesty International (2024); United Nations (2024a).
2. Hezbollah and Israel agreed on not targeting civilians in 1993, after Israel assassinated Hezbollah’s former Secretary-General, Abbas Mousawi, with his wife and 5-year-old son.
3. On Hezbollah–Amal rivalry see Daher (2019: 73–77).
4. The dominance of pro-Aoun Christian officers is due to historical factors. As the latest LAF Commander before the end of the civil war, Aoun had taken under his aegis a group of young officers, aged between 20 and 30. In the mid-2000s, these officers had reached seniority status. Notably, the return of Aoun from his 15-year-long exile revamped ‘Aounism’ within the LAF (Interview 15). Informal accounts maintain that in 2017, over half of mid-career and high-ranking Christian officers in their 40s and 50s were politically loyal to Michel Aoun (Interview 16).

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- Interview 3. Retired Officer. Former UNIFIL peacekeeper. Phone interview, 7 April 2015.
- Interview 4. Retired Officer. Former UNIFIL peacekeeper. Phone interview, 13 April 2015.
- Interview 5. French diplomat. Phone interview, 13 December 2015.
- Interview 6. Member of Al-Mustakbal. Beirut, 23 April 2013.
- Interview 7. UN diplomat. New York (United States), 16 January 2022.
- Interview 8. Focus group with 5 LAF Officers. Beirut. 3 December 2014.
- Interview 9. LAF Officer. Tripoli (Lebanon), 14 December 2014.
- Interview 10. LAF Retired Officer. Srifa (Lebanon), 7 March 2015
- Interview 11. LAF Officer. Batroun (Lebanon), 3 April 2015
- Interview 12. LAF Officer. Beirut, 16 April 2015.
- Interview 13. Ali Chahrour, Former Head of LAF-Intel in the Southern District, Sidon (Lebanon), 2 September 2016.
- Interview 14. LAF Officer. Beirut, 5 March 2015.
- Interview 15. LAF Officer. Beirut, 6 March 2015.
- Interview 16. LAF Officer. Beirut, 14 March 2015.
- Interview 17. Member of Free Patriotic Movement. Beirut, 12 June 2015.
- Interview 18. Michel Aoun. Beirut, 12 June 2015.
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- Interview 22. General Luciano Portolano, UNIFIL Head of Mission. Naqura, 3 September 2015.
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