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Hezbollah's Military Intervention in Syria
Political choice or religious obligation?

Hezbollah has been an important political and military actor in Lebanon and the Middle East since the mid-1980s. Its popularity grew especially after successfully deterring the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006. With the emergence of the so-called Arab Spring, however, the party's popularity declined for many reasons. One of these was its military intervention in Syria on the side of the Syrian government. This event has been interpreted in various ways, sometimes explaining it as religiously-motivated decision, due to Hezbollah's strong affiliation to Shia Islam. This empirical research finds that, on the contrary, Hezbollah's intervention is politically rather than religiously motivated. The data presented here shows that Hezbollah politicizes certain aspects of the religious sensitivities in the region in order to mobilize troops, yet, a study of its military activities inside Syria indicates that Hezbollah actually follows its political and geostrategic interests.

Introduction

Civil wars, like other types of war, have local, regional and international dimensions. Because of the interconnectedness of the actors in the international system, if a civil war breaks out in one state, those neighbouring, or even some international actors, might sense its repercussions. These foreign states may also play a role in the civil war as external actors. Such a role includes political, financial, diplomatic, military, humanitarian and other types of support. Under these conditions, the civil war ceases to be a local war and turns out to be more international in its scope. In other words, the foreign involvement in a civil war internationalizes it.

The Syrian conflict is a recent example of an internationalized civil war where foreign actors have intervened, either on the side of the government or the opposition, by officially deploying troops on Syrian territory. Nevertheless, what is rather special in the Syrian case is that those intervening are non-state rather than state actors. The most prominent and obvious example is the Lebanese Hezbollah's intervention in Syria.

Hezbollah is a non-state actor that has been present at the political, military and religious levels in Lebanon and the Middle East since the 1980s. Arguably, the party is a socio-political and military organization rather than a religious one, yet its strong affiliation to the Shia faith is evident and the majority of its members follow this stream of Islam. Hezbollah, or the Party of God, is led by the charismatic leader Sayeed Hasan Nasrallah, who serves as the general secretary of the party. Since the spring of 2013, this movement has established an official military presence in Syria, fighting on the side of the government.

Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian conflict was a controversial event that some parties welcomed and others strongly condemned. Perhaps the principal criticism that Hezbollah received was that instead of fighting Israel (Hezbollah's self proclaimed primary enemy) it was (and is) killing the Syrian people who have supported the party for decades. Due to the strong Shia background of Hezbollah, the party was accused of inflaming sectarian violence in Syria by supporting the Syrian government – in which Alawites[1] have influential positions – against a predominantly Sunni armed opposition. In the regional context, Hezbollah, after its intervention, was also blamed for bringing the war home and risking the Lebanese security.

1   A religious denomination within the Shia Islam.

However, Hezbollah has rejected these accusations, claiming that on the contrary it is defending Syria, which is the 'backbone of the [Iran–Syria–Hezbollah] resistance', as General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah put it (*The Daily Star* 2013). The party has also claimed that it is waging a preemptive war against Islamic extremists in order to hinder their expansion into Lebanon. The fact that Hezbollah is a socio-political movement with a strong Shia background and that it is fighting Sunni extremists in Syria, provides its intervention with a religious rationale.

There is no shortage of literature on the above-mentioned debate. There are also plenty of studies which cover the ideology, political and religious activities, and the historical development of Hezbollah and its role in the resistance bloc. At the same time, there is also literature available (albeit sometimes misleading) on the religio-political tensions between some Shia and the Sunni forces in the region. In that light, the aim of this research is not to repeat, but to try to understand whether Hezbollah's intervention has been religiously or politically motivated.

Analytical framework

For centuries, religion has been a crucial unit of analysis for gaining an understanding of the political developments in the Middle East. One key reason for this lies in the inseparable nature of religion and politics in a region where the majority of the inhabitants are Muslims. Even in the countries where the official representatives claim their states to be secular (such as Syria), the *din wa dawla* debate (concerning religion and the state) pertains. Theoretically, in a secular political system, state and religion are separate, whereas in an Islamic state this separation is more difficult to achieve because the 'legitimacy [of the state] derives from the application of *Sharia* and the fusion of religion and politics' (Kalyvas 2003: 300; also see Karaman 2004: 45).

The Syrian political system, for instance, seems to occupy a position somewhere in between the systems mentioned above. While the Syrian authorities describe Syria as a secular state, the third article of the country's 1973 constitution states that Islamic jurisprudence is the sole source of legislation (the Syrian 1973 Constitution). This article argues that religion and politics in the Middle East are neither separate nor identical; instead, these two variables often interact and intersect at political, social, educational, economic and other levels.

To study the research problematic in the men-

Hezbollah's Syrian Arab Republic's flags used by demonstrators to illustrate the alliance between the two.

tioned context, there is a need for an analytical tool which carefully examines the interplay between political and religious factors respecting the interceding variables between these factors. The socio-political conflict model is an appropriate analytical tool for this study because it 'argues that religion offers ideological and organizational resources, and the socio-political forces will seek to mobilize these resources if the strategic situation is such that this tends to strengthen their position *vis-à-vis* their adversary' (Schmidt 2009: 125).

Stathis Kalyvas (2003: 294) argues that in spite of the versatility of religious doctrines and socio-political environments, religious mobilization is an integral phenomenon amongst religious institutions. Among the key features of this kind of mobilization are the recreation of religious identities and 'mass mobilization relying on the wide use of selective incentives and a concomitant focus on economic and social issues' (Kalyvas 2003: 294). Reconstructing religious identity indicates that some religious institutions do not merely use the existing identities to mobilize but rather they recreate these identities in accordance with their social, economic or political concerns (Kalyvas 2003: 303).

Religious parties often have broad grassroots bases, which are critical for mass mobilization. In most of the cases, these religious actors ally with the poor and the middle classes in order to challenge the elite (see Labat, cited in Kalyvas 2003: 305). The religious parties, however, do not address this cause by means of abstract religious notions, but by providing actual socio-political and economic incentives such as social services, economic assistance and education (Kalyvas 2003: 305). Islam, in particular, offers

a powerful ideology for mobilization. As Maxime Rodinson puts it, Islam is an *ideologie mobilisatrice* (cited in Karaman 2004: 48). Yet, it is also important to note that religious mobilization does not necessarily follow a religious objective; it can deploy sacred symbols to serve political purposes (Smith 1974 cited in Karaman 2004: 43).

Currently, religious mobilization is certainly a key factor in understanding the dynamics of the conflict in the Middle East. After the 'secular' states (such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq) were unable to satisfy

Figure. Adopted from Flanigan and Abdel-Samad 2009: 125.

large portions of their societies, non-state religious institutions started filling some of the gaps left by the state authorities. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is a prominent example which initiated a social-political-religious movement in the 1930s through to the 1950s (Munson 2001). The Sadr Movement also filled the gap left by Saddam Husain in Iraq by helping the poor, but also by playing a key religio-political role in the country after the US led invasion (Schmidt 2009). Similarly, Hezbollah has been established as a popular party in Lebanon which offers a 'way out' for the marginalized Shia population in the country.

Hezbollah and religious mobilization

Hezbollah's establishment in 1980s is strongly associated with, albeit not limited by, two factors: ending the Israeli occupation in south Lebanon and the Palestinian cause. After pushing the Israeli Army out of Lebanon in 2000, the party achieved victory, but lost its *raison d'etre* (ICG 2003: 1). Nevertheless, the party quickly redefined its aims and objectives, putting Palestine, the defence of Lebanon from Israeli aggression and preserving the resistance bloc as its central causes (ICG 2003: 9; ICG 2002: 4). Since Hezbollah has been actively present as a political party in Lebanon, its military wing has remained as a key self-defining characteristic; even a *raison d'etre* (Harb and Leeders 2005: 186).

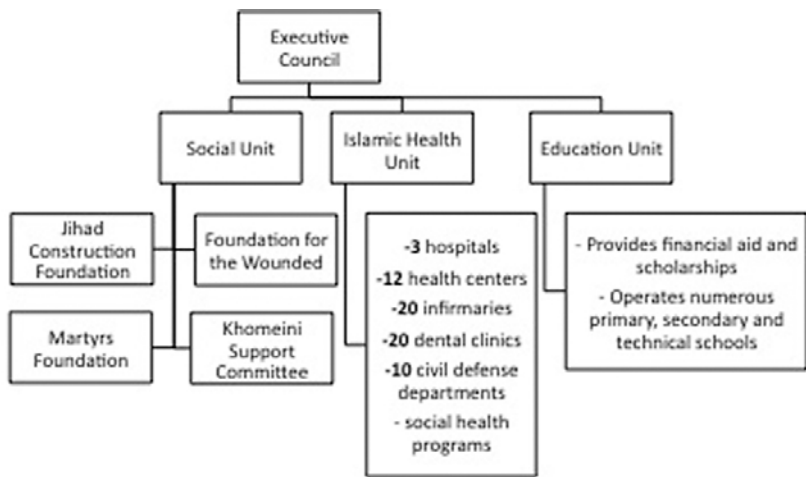Hezbollah follows the theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih* and in Lebanon it is the official representative of the Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran and the *Wali al-Faqih* (see ICG 2002: 4).[2] In this way, the party acquires a significant Shia religious identity. Theoretically, the *Wilayat* 'is necessary to maintain and apply Islam. It is impossible to realize the great Islamic project by means of timely and isolated operations. [It is necessary to have] a guiding axis that links the *umma* together' (Qassem cited in Harb and Leeders 2005: 191). In practical terms, this idea is translated into action throughout Hezbollah's complex and wide-ranging socio-political network in Lebanon (Harb and Leeders 2005: 191).

This network of Hezbollah is crucial to its religious mass mobilization capability and its reconstruction of religious identity. Concerning the former, Hezbollah manages dozens of institutions which provide social, economic and educational services. These institutions are ordered hierarchically under one administrative unit, called the Social Services Central Unit (Harb and Leeders 2005: 191; Flanigan and Abdel-Samad 2009: 124–6) (see fig.). These services include charitable, financial and material support to rebuild the ruins of the Hezbollah–Israeli wars, as well as hospitals, clinics and pharmacies delivering reliable services and affordable prices in comparison to the private sector. The central unit of this organization also includes NGOs for the empowerment of women, a research centre for study and to offer solutions to socio-economic problems that concern the party, as well as schools, social welfare organizations

2 To read more about *Wilayat al-Faqih* see Asharq Al-Awsat 2009.

and religious institutions (ICG 2002: 5; Harb and Leeders 2005: 187–8).

Hezbollah also provides assistance in relation to military affairs. It has associations such as Al-Shahid (the martyr) and Al-Jarha (the wounded), which manage schools, hospitals and ensure access to resources dedicated to help the families of the martyrs, the wounded, prisoners and missing individuals (Harb and Leeders 2005: 187). These few examples indicate that Hezbollah's mission is not just military-political, but also socio-economic and religious. This practice of mass mobilization provides Hezbollah with wide support, religious and political credibility and human resources to achieve its aims, which may be political and not religious. Mass mobilization, however, is not the only characteristic of Hezbollah; it has a rather deeper and more religious/ideological mobilization policy portrayed via what I would consider its efforts at identity reconstruction.

Besides the material aspects of Hezbollah's activities, the party also disseminates and reshapes values, norms and identities which produce the 'resistance society' or *Mujtama' al-Mukawama.* Hence, resistance does not solely have a military significance but also a social, political and religious one; it is a way of life, or a life choice (Harb and Leeders 2005: 189; Flanigan and Abdel-Samad 2009: 122, 126). The party advocates these values and norms through the services that it provides, including education, literature, teaching in schools such as the Imam al-Mahdi Institute and the Imam Khomeini Cultural Centre, organizing youth activities, and providing childrens books (Blanford 2011). Furthermore, the vice president of the Islamic Institute for Teaching and Education claims, for example, that the institute aims at 'redefining the structure of society' (cited in Harb and Leeders 2005: 190).

The reconstruction of its identity also challenges the Shia sense of victimhood, characterized as *mahrumin* (disinherited) and *mustada'afin* (disempowered) and instead it implants a sense of pride and victoriousness (Harb and Leeders 2005: 189). The sense of victory is strengthened by Hezbollah's achievements on the battlefield against Israel (with the liberation of south Lebanon in 2000 and the victory over Israel in 2006). This triumph is also advocated as being a result of the efforts put in by the resistance bloc countries. In this manner, the perception of resistance becomes a self-identification factor (*ibid.* 190), similar to other common self-defining and identifying factors such as family, religion, ethnicity and language, to name a few (Brubaker *et al.* 2004: 33).

This effort of Hezbollah in 'redefining the structure of society' by non-military means also has its justification in the religious sense. The resistance society that Hezbollah's network wants to achieve is a form of *jihad*; not a military, but a spiritual *jihad* (Harb and Leeders 2005: 190; Flanigan and Abdel-Samad 2009). Islam, contrary to the traditionally accepted idea, places more importance on the spiritual *jihad* than the military *jihad*. The Prophet Mohamed explained that the military *jihad* is minor (*jihad al-asghar)* whereas the spiritual *jihad* is the great *jihad* (*jihad al-akbar*) (al-Ashmawi 1986: 130). Theoretically, the *jihad* in Shia Islam, however, needs to receive the approval of the *imam* who serves as the religious reference or *al-marja'iya* (Vaezi 2004: 73). Accordingly, the abstract notion of resistance, and its actual military and political practice, become *fard shar'i* or religious obligation for Shias if a religious leader such as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei affirms it.

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria

Hezbollah's decision to deploy troops in Syria expressed the party's character and ideological reasoning. Mass mobilization and the commitment of Hezbollah members to the idea of resistance played a partial, yet important, role in carrying out Hezbollah's decision to intervene militarily in Syria. Both religious and political factors certainly played and still play a fundamental role. What is disputable, however, is how?

Throughout Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict, its leadership has offered various justifications. One of the first, in 2012, was related to the defence of Shia-populated villages inside Syria (Neriah 2012).[3] Another of its justifications was the necessity of protecting religious sites from possible attacks by extremists. The party did not intervene officially to protect these sites but it also did not stop the volunteers who, by April 2012, had already moved into Syria to carry out this duty (*Al-Monitor* 2013).

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3   Nasrallah at this stage did not claim that there is an official Hezbollah presence in Syria but he 'acknowledged, however, that there were more than two dozen villages and farms located just inside Syria, north of the border with Lebanon, that are home to around 30,000 Lebanese, many of whom are [Shias] and members of Hezbollah. Mr Nasrallah said that they 'had been coming under threat from "armed groups" and had chosen to defend themselves'. (Blanford 2012)

Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham fighters.

The funeral of a Hezbollah fighter.

The party officials further justified their party's position claiming that they wanted to avoid a similar scenario to what had happened in Iraq after 2006 when Shias were victims of sectarian violence, orchestrated by radical extremist groups (ICG 2014: 5).

Amongst the arguments that Hezbollah offered at the time its involvement in Syria deepened, were ones about fighting what they call the *takfiris* – religious extremists who denounce others as infidels. Hezbollah believes that its battles in the al-Qalamoon region, adjacent to Lebanon, are preemptive measures for the prevention of an expansion of the war into Lebanon (ICG 2014: 5). Nevertheless, their intervention rendered the Shia community in both Syria and Lebanon primary targets for *takfiris*[4]. The success of groups such as Jabhet al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham and the fragmentation of the 'moderate' Syrian armed opposition has served to support Sayeed Nasrallah's claims. For Hezbollah, the *takfiris* also threaten the resistance allies in the region. Nasrallah has repeatedly referred to a conspiracy on the part of the US and Israel to undermine the resistance, using the *takfiris* as instruments (Sullivan 2014: 14; Slim 2013; *Naharnet Newsdesk* 2013).

Usually the terms and the practice of a *jihad*

4   While writing this article, there were reports of clashes between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Army, on the one hand, and groups who claimed affiliation to Jabhet al-Nusra, or the Islamic State, on the other, in the Lebanese town of Arsal (Brog 2014). In late October 2014, some reporters wrote that Jabhet al-Nusra is also active in the coastal city of Lebanon, Tripoli (Nemr 2014). These developments inside the Lebanese territories put Hezbollah's preemptive strategy against the extremist groups' spillover into Lebanon under question.

becomes subject to politicization by religious leaders who are closely associated with some political tendencies. Syria is a good example of an arena in which such *jihad* and counter-*jihad* statements and *fatwa*s (see Tokmajyan 2014) play themselves out. For instance, the *takfiris* in Syria are in a state of military *jihad* against non-believers, including Shias. This clears the way for Hezbollah propaganda calling for troop mobilization and justifying military intervention. Yet, they deploy the *jihad* 'card' more carefully than that. Despite there is no *fatwa* from any credible regional Shia religious leaders who urge *jihad* in Syria (Mamouri 2013), which means that Shias are not obliged to fight in Syria, Hezbollah treats its soldiers who die in Syria as martyrs who died while being in the state of *jihad*. According to some reports, the party considered defending the religious sites in Syria as a religious obligation (Al-Monitor 2013). When Hezbollah commander Ali Hussain Nassif died near the Syrian-Lebanese border, Sayeed Nasrallah said that he died during his '*jihad* duty' (Chulov 2012). Nassif's case is not unique, Hezbollah fighters who die in Syria are treated as martyrs who died while carrying out their duty of *jihad* (ICG 2014: 16).

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria is often used as an example which supports the common and reductionist narrative of a Shia–Sunni struggle in the Middle East that is actively advocated in the regional and international media. While this religious dynamic does exist in the region, there are also other explanations for conflict, which are also worth taking into consideration.

The geopolitical dimension of the struggle in Syria is crucial for Hezbollah. One of the evident struggles of the party in Syria is to keep its supply routes under control. As Marisa Sullivan (2014: 9)

puts it 'Hezbollah cannot risk losing its access to critical Iranian and Syrian support'. For instance, even before the official intervention of Hezbollah, the party had deployed a limited number of troops in the al-Zabadani area near Damascus, which is a historical supply route from Damascus to Hezbollah's headquarters in the Bekka valley in Lebanon (Fulton *et al.* 2013: 23). There was a similar objective behind the battle of al-Qusayr which did not just take place to disturb the opposition supply line but also to maintain the party's communication route between the Bekka valley and Damascus (Sullivan 2014: 10). Another example is Hezbollah's (and other Shia militias') commitment to protect the shrine of Sayeeda Zainab on the Damascus International Airport highway. Even though the site is a holy place, the heavy presence of these militias enhances the defence of the airport; a vital communication link to Damascus (Sullivan 2014: 19).

The possible change of the current Syrian government is also a worrying factor for Hezbollah. If the Syrian government were to fall, what guarantee is there that the new rulers (potentially formed from the current opposition) would continue supporting Hezbollah, especially since many opposition leaders condemn Iranian and Hezbollah activities in Syria? The worst-case scenario is domination by Sunni extremist forces, who have publicly declared their aim of eradicating the Shias (Sullivan 2014: 10). Accordingly, intervention in Syria becomes both a 'necessary evil' and a 'strategic necessity' (ICG 2014: 3–4). Furthermore, a prominent figure in the Syrian opposition, Haytam Manna, has repeated many times that Hassan Nasrallah would not support a win–lose situation even if the state were to win. Rather, the party supports a political solution (Manna 2013), because a political solution would possibly secure a way out of Syria for Hezbollah.

Finally, Hezbollah's repeated use of the *takfiri* argument seems to be an exaggeration of the real situation. It is evident that not all the fighters in Syria are *takfiris* and Hezbollah leadership is well aware of this. When Hezbollah pledged support to the Syrian government and provided military support, the *takfiri* groups – mainly Jabhet al-Nusra and ISIS – were not as strong as they are today. In fact, Hezbollah is mainly located in the al-Qalamoon area where there are some jihadist activities, yet their stronghold is in the north and north east, where Hezbollah has no active military role.[5] While it does not have any

5   While writing this article, there were reports about

troops in the north east of Syria, where ISIS is strongest, it has some presence in Aleppo. Nevertheless, Hezbollah's role in Aleppo is limited to issuing military advice and does not include active participation, at least not as in al-Qusayr (Sullivan 2014: 17; Jaber 2013).

Conclusion

The destruction of the Iraqi state resulting from the US-led invasion in 2003 and the sectarian policies of the successive Iraqi governments since then have provided powerful justificatory arguments allowing sectarian groups such as the Islamic State to rise to prominence on a tide of popular support. These reciprocal developments have led to a sectarianization of the conflict in Iraq. The Syrian armed conflict also witnessed similar sectarianization following the events of the summer of 2013 when radical extremist groups dominated the scene. Hezbollah's intervention in this context can be seen as a Shia regional power fighting with the Syrian government against extremist groups who are exclusively radical Sunnis.

This view, as much as it is commonly argued and as much as it is convincing sometimes, remains, nevertheless, very reductionist. As this article has argued, religion plays an important role in enabling Hezbollah to mobilize troops and volunteers to fight in Syria. Hadad (2013 cited in Elliott 2014) finds that 53 per cent of the Shia population in Lebanon is very religious, though they do not all follow Hezbollah. On the other hand, Randa Slim (2013) argues that the 'strong inner core of devoted [Shia] families, fighters, business partners, and ideological affiliates comprises 20–30 per cent of Hezbollah's support base'.

However, even the religiously-based mobilization is only part of Hezbollah's overall tactic of mobilization. As mentioned in the text, Hezbollah's sup-

the Syrian rebels in the south 'being the last hope of the west' since they are 'moderate' and they reject radical extremism (see *Al-Hayat* 2014a). Accordingly, these groups are not categorized as *takfiris* whom Hezbollah publicly claims to fight. Yet, some reports document that Hezbollah forces are actually involved in the fights in Deraa against these 'moderate' rebels, due to Deraa province's importance in the southern front and the security of the Syrian capital (see *Al-Hayat* 2014b). This indicates that for Hezbollah it is more important to secure the southern borders of Damascus fighting the 'moderates' rather than fight the *takfiris* in Aleppo for example, where the party has only advisers and no troops.

ported process of self-identification does not include only religious factors. The notion of resistance, for instance, forms an important element of this process. Accordingly, even the mobilization is not based merely on religious factors. Hezbollah repeatedly refers to at least three main justifications for its intervention: Shia villages and religious sites, Syria as the backbone of the resistance bloc and Lebanese (and not only Shia) security.

The second argument put forward here is that this mobilization of troops and intervention in Syria in general is geared towards maintaining the party's geopolitical interests inside Syria. The empirical data presented above shows that Hezbollah has deployed soldiers in areas which are vital in the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah supply line. The same data also illustrates that supporting the Syrian troops and defending its key interests in the south, for example, where *takfiri* activities are in fact limited, is also a priority for Hezbollah – a higher priority than fighting the *takfiris* in Aleppo, in the north, for example. ∎

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