

Hezbollah: A localized Islamic resistance or Lebanon's premier national movement?

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Introduction

Lebanon's 2009 parliamentary elections was a watershed moment in Lebanon's history. After having suffered years of civil war, political unrest, and foreign occupation, Lebanon closed out the first decade of the 21st century having proved to itself and the rest of the world that it was capable of hosting fair and democratic elections. Although Lebanon's political structure is inherently undemocratic because of its confessionalist nature, the fact that the March 8th and March 14th coalitions could civilly compete with each other following a brief but violent conflict in May of 2008 bore testament to Lebanon's growth as a religiously pluralistic society.

Since the end of Lebanon's civil war, there have been few political movements in the Arab world, let alone Lebanon, that have matured and achieved as much as Hezbollah has since its foundation in 1985. The following thesis is a dissection of Hezbollah's development from a localized militant organization in South Lebanon to a national political movement that not only represents the interests of many Lebanese, but also functions as the primary resistance to Israeli and American imperialism in Lebanon and throughout the broader Middle East. Particular attention is paid to the shifts in Hezbollah's ideology, the consolidation of power and political clout through social services, and the language that Hezbollah uses to define itself.

The sources I used are primarily secondhand; Joseph Alagha's dissertation titled, *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program* was one of the more significant references I used in substantiating my argument. Nicholas Noe's *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan*

Nasrallah was also crucial, as it provided reliable translations of Hassan Nasrallah's speeches throughout his ongoing tenure as Hezbollah's Secretary General. Nasrallah's words provided the backbone to my arguments, as they helped clarify Hezbollah's complex relationships with Israel; Lebanese Sunni Muslims, Maronite Christians, and Druze; and Syria, Iran, and the Lebanese government. Lara Deeb's *Enchanted Modern* was critical to my own understanding of how the Iranian Revolution influenced Shiite political activism in Lebanon; through the Islamic Revolution, Shiite Muslims were given a contemporary example of how religion can be used to realize political and social change.

At the same time, I acknowledge that my reliance on secondhand sources detracts from the novelty of my research and my argument. In an attempt to mitigate such a concern, I devoted the last section of my thesis to a discussion of Lebanon's 2009 parliamentary elections, and the implications of the results on Hezbollah's standing in Lebanon. Despite this, I recognize that my thesis would most certainly benefit from firsthand research and more primary source documentation. At the moment, my Arabic language skills are not advanced enough to undertake such a challenge. However, I look forward to adding new dimensions to this thesis in the future.

The following paper is divided into thematic sections that provide a background to Hezbollah's creation, an analysis of its dynamic political platform, an overview of its social service network, and an examination of Hezbollah's identity following Israel's withdrawal from most of Lebanon in 2000. Through this thesis, my hope is that the reader develops a more nuanced and honest understanding of Hezbollah, especially

considering that it is one of the most important sociopolitical movements in the Arab world.

Hezbollah's roots

On May 24, 2000, more than 22 years after Israel began interfering directly in Lebanon's internal affairs, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak unilaterally ended Israel's occupation of most of South Lebanon. Although Barak claimed that his decision to remove Israeli troops from Lebanon was a "calculated government decision" and that Israel had not been defeated, there is little doubt that were it not for Hezbollah, Israel would still be in Lebanon today.¹ Since 2000, Hezbollah has remained a force to be reckoned with in Lebanon, working hard to emancipate and repatriate Israel's Lebanese prisoners, and maintaining a political program that has already brought Lebanon's Shiite population out of political and social despair by directly challenging Lebanon's longstanding internal political hierarchy.

Even so, because of its identity as a non-state actor that espouses violence as a means of resistance to Israeli aggression, Hezbollah is often described as a "terrorist" organization, hell-bent on Israel's destruction. In Lebanon and throughout the rest of the Arab world, Hezbollah is generally seen either as a destabilizing force that functions as Iran's pawn by rentier states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, or as a popular sociopolitical guerilla movement that exemplifies strong leadership, meaningful political action, and a commitment to social justice. By simply writing off Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, however, countries like the United States and Israel unfairly dismiss Hezbollah's genuine

¹ Norton, Augustus Richard. *Hizballah and the Israeli Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon*. p. 1

grievances, which often coincide with those of Lebanon's tormented Shiite population. Some western governments, political analysts, news pundits and academics have chosen to demonize Hezbollah by misconstruing its relationship with Iran and with other Islamist movements. The goal here is to challenge Hezbollah's growing clout in Lebanon by claiming that Hezbollah serves no other purpose than to do Iran's biddings in the Middle East with total disregard for the security and stability of Lebanon or the surrounding Arab nations.

Since the release of its political manifesto in 1985, Hezbollah has experienced significant changes to its religious ideology and political program. This paper deals with the implications of the shifts in Hezbollah's ideology; Hezbollah's sociopolitical transformation; the obstacles Hezbollah continues to overcome in order to remain politically relevant domestically and regionally; the impact Hezbollah's 2006 "war" with Israel had on Hezbollah's political program. Through its political and military activities – most of which have been made possible by the Islamic Republic of Iran – Hezbollah has carved out its own niche: the Party of God functions as the chief vanguard against US and Israeli imperialism in Lebanon, while simultaneously serving as the primary caretaker of Lebanon's historically disenfranchised Shiite population. Since its inception, Hezbollah's location in relation to these local and transnational forces is constantly changing. Accordingly, in spite of the fact that Hezbollah has been unfairly typecast as a "terrorist" organization, Hezbollah has consistently demonstrated a sense of political pragmatism and practicality, which has contributed significantly to its longevity, political normalization in Lebanon, and unrivaled military success. As a result, Hezbollah has managed not only to thrive as a localized Shiite Islamist movement, but has also

transformed itself into a popular national movement that represents the interests of many Lebanese, Christian and Muslim alike.

Following quickly behind Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and Israel's invasion of Southern Lebanon and parts of Beirut in 1982, Hezbollah emerged as a cohesive organization in the mid-1980s.² Between 1982 and 1985, Hezbollah, although not known as such at the time, consisted basically of a group of young, committed Shiite Lebanese who were disillusioned by the oppression Shiites faced in Lebanon and angry over Israel's devastating military invasion. Since Lebanon's independence from France in 1943, Lebanon's political structure was based exclusively on the National Pact established during that same year.³ Although this agreement was never formally integrated into Lebanon's constitution, it established a firm and uncompromising political hierarchy that would have lasting consequences for Lebanon's Shiite population.

According to the National Pact, the Maronite Christians, then the largest of the religious sects according to the 1932 Census,⁴ would be given the presidency; the Sunni Muslims, the second-largest community, were offered the premiership; and finally, the Shiite Muslims, the third-largest sect, were granted the speakership of the Parliament, a relatively weak and nominal position in contrast to those granted the Maronites and the Sunnis.⁵ The Shiites were not the only Lebanese sect to express discontent with the "proportional representation" established by the National Pact; because of their small numbers, the Druze were relegated "to minor governmental positions and few seats in

² Norton, Augustus Richard. *Hezbollah*. p. 35

³ Hamzeh, Ahmad Nizar. *In the Path of Hizbullah*. p. 12

⁴ 1932 was the last time a census was taken in Lebanon. To this day, Lebanon's demographic realities remain ambiguous, and demographic issues have continued to fuel distrust and inequality amongst Lebanon's various religious sects.

⁵ Hamzeh, Ahmad Nizar. *In the Path of Hizbullah*. p. 12

parliament” and were also resentful of Maronite hegemony.⁶ It is important to note, however, that while the Druze suffered from political and demographic discrimination, both the “Druze and Maronite communities developed group consciousness and were politically mobilized more than a century before this phenomenon occurred among the Lebanese Shi’is.”⁷ Essentially, while the Druze were able to benefit from Maronite assets like parochial schools and credited universities as a result of the proximity of the respective sectarian enclaves, the Shiite regions were isolated from Beirut’s economic and social advantages thereby worsening their collective condition vis-à-vis Lebanon’s various religious sects.⁸ The Shiites were also underrepresented within Lebanon’s bureaucracy. For example, in 1946, “40 percent of the highest posts in the civil service were occupied by the Maronites, 27 percent by the Sunnis, and only 3.2 percent by the Shiites.”⁹ Although the number of Shiites participating in civil services grew over time, Shiite gains continued to remain insignificant until 1982.

Compounding the political imbalance that existed between Lebanon’s various religious sects, the Shiites were also economically disenfranchised and were substantially worse off than their Maronite and Sunni counterparts. Having been excluded from elite posts and positions within the government, the Shiites were grossly overrepresented within Lebanon’s working class.¹⁰ Almost 85 percent of Lebanon’s Shiites were concentrated in the rural Baalbek and Bekaa regions, living off of subsistence crops like tobacco and receiving virtually no developmental assistance from their government. The urban Sunni and Maronite communities benefitted greatly from a “network of western

⁶ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hizballah’s Public and Social Services and Iran*. p. 4

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 4

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3

⁹ Hamzeh, Ahmad Nizar. *In the Path of Hizbullah*. p. 12

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 13

capital inaccessible to the relatively isolated Shi'a, who were by far the most rural of Lebanon's communities."¹¹ Yet, Lebanon's confessional structure did not find itself in a real political deadlock until a steep rise in the Shiite population dragged Lebanon's Shiites into the spotlight. Between 1956 and 1975, the year that Lebanon's civil war officially began, the Shiites tripled in size from 250,000 to 750,000 people, bringing their proportional size to almost 30 percent of Lebanon's population.¹² Additionally, following a short civil war in 1958 that resulted in the deposal of President Camille Chamoun, President Fuad Shihab implemented a "program of nationwide development and 'modernization'" known as Shihabism.¹³ Through his programs, Shihab sought to elevate the standard of living for Lebanon's rural population by building schools in villages and transportation routes that would help facilitate increased interaction between urban and rural Lebanon. Consequently, Shihabism encouraged a mass migration of rural Shiites to Beirut, and the majority of these migrants settled "in a ring of suburbs around the capital known as the 'misery belt.'"¹⁴ Hezbollah's ability to galvanize support amongst the Shiite masses in, around, and south of Beirut through its vast public service network will be discussed later.

In addition to becoming a sizable demographic reality that could no longer be disregarded, the coalescence of the Shiites was a direct result of Sayyed Musa al-Sadr. The presence and charismatic leadership of the Iranian-born cleric in Lebanon between 1959 and 1978 "was the harbinger of the Shi'a's emergence as a major political force in

¹¹ Deeb, Lara. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. p. 73

¹² Hamzeh, Ahmad Nizar. *In the Path of Hizbullah*, p. 13

¹³ Deeb, Lara. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. p. 73

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 73

Lebanon.”¹⁵ After having made his first trip to Lebanon in 1955, Musa al-Sadr was invited by community leaders to return in 1957 following the death of Sayyed Abdulhusayn Sharafeddin, a well-respected cleric and community organizer.¹⁶ Although scholars have typically focused on Musa al-Sadr’s experiences in Lebanon, his participation in *Mektab e-Islam*, an Iranian publication, helps explain his popularity amongst Lebanon’s Shiites in spite of the fact that he had been raised in Iran. Although the content of the publication was not necessarily rebellious, the fact that Musa al-Sadr and others printed material accessible to a wide-range of readers, and not simply the religious scholars, broke away from the elitist tradition of religious scholarship.¹⁷ His participation in *Mektab e-Islam* helps clarify why he was invited by Lebanon’s Shiites to lead them, and why his relationship with Iran’s ruling powers became increasingly tenuous. Musa al-Sadr demonstrated that it is possible to use theology in order to challenge the political status quo. By establishing a connection with Lebanese that was both organic and entrenched in religious piety, Musa al-Sadr gave Lebanese Shiites an opportunity to take pride in their community, which undoubtedly pushed the Shiites to realize their political potential. The fact that Lebanon’s Shiite population invited an Iranian to lead their community also reveals much about the clerical establishment of Shiism; specifically the existence of a “transnational hierarchy” unrestricted by real or perceived social differences.¹⁸

In 1970, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was expelled from Jordan and relocated to South Lebanon, the Shiites found themselves caught in the

¹⁵ Chehabi and Tafreshi. *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the last 500 years*. p. 137

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 138

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 139

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 148-149

middle between Palestinian guerillas and the Israeli Defense Forces. As a result of PLO-Israeli hostilities, many of South Lebanon's Shiites were forced to flee from their homes and relocate; some of them even escaped to Palestinian refugee camps. Ironically enough, although the Shiites had historically been overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, the relocation of the PLO to Southern Lebanon complicated the lives of so many Shiites that when the Israeli Defense Forces invaded Lebanon in 1978, the Shiites all but welcomed the Israelis under the auspices that they would force the PLO out of South Lebanon.¹⁹

Nevertheless, it was Israel's reinvasion and subsequent occupation of South Lebanon in 1982 (Operation Peace of the Galilee) that provided the final catalyst for the emergence of Hezbollah. Initially, while many Shiites feared that the PLO's hegemony over South Lebanon would eventually result in the creation of a Palestinian state on Lebanese soil, the Israelis were soon identified as the greater threat to Lebanese sovereignty and the survival of the Shiites. Between the massacres at the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps – in which almost a quarter of the victims were Lebanese Shiites – and the extensive damage Israel caused to 80 percent of southern villages, the stage had finally been set for a coordinated and highly militarized Shiite response.²⁰

Although Hezbollah was not the first in Lebanon to fight back against Israel, the United States, and other foreign entities that were helping fascist Maronite Christian parties maintain control over Lebanon, the ideas articulated in Hezbollah's Open Letter “conveyed an uncompromising attitude anathematizing the Lebanese political system in

¹⁹ Hamzeh, Ahmad Nizar. *In the Path of Hizbullah*. p. 16

²⁰ Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal. *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*. p. 11

its entirety, regarding the Lebanese government as an infidel.”²¹ Unlike other armed Islamist organizations – for example Islamic Jihad, which carried out targeted attacks and kidnappings throughout Lebanon’s civil war without an overarching philosophy – Hezbollah appeared with a coherent statement of purpose that adopted an exclusively religious ideology.²² The ideas Hezbollah articulated in 1985, however, continued to evolve well after the Open Letter was published and disseminated. Hezbollah’s beliefs adapted to the changing geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and reflected not only a commitment to political pragmatism, but also a desire to remain politically relevant.

A question of identity: What is the ‘Party of God’?

Explanations of Hezbollah as a static or one-dimensional organization are incomplete considering that Hezbollah has experienced significant political and ideological shifts since its 1985 Open Letter, the foundation of Hezbollah’s political and religious ideologies. Specifically, the impact local and regional politics have on Hezbollah’s adaptable political rhetoric, and the language that Hezbollah uses to define itself in relation to Lebanon, Israel, and the Islamic Revolution in Iran are necessary to understanding Hezbollah’s internal organization, its decision-making processes, and how it has evolved from a localized sectarian faction into a popular national movement and regional player. How has Hezbollah’s language changed in order to expand its sphere of influence and evolve into an organization that represents the interests of many Lebanese, Muslim and non-Muslim, Sunni and Shiite? Is it appropriate to simply label Hezbollah as

²¹ Alagha, Joseph. *The Shifts in Hizbullah’s Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*. p. 373

²² Ibid, p. 373

a typical “Islamist” organization that rejects nationalist rhetoric and seeks to impose an Islamic state on a religiously diverse Lebanon? How does the Shiite notion of *Wilayat al-Faqih* influence Hezbollah’s relationship with Iran and the Ayatollah?

Cursory examinations of Hezbollah often treat its religious ideology, political ideology, and political program as synonymous with one another. Yet, there is a sense of cognitive dissonance between Hezbollah’s relatively static ideological foundation and its dynamic political ideology and program; since its inception, Hezbollah has embraced a pragmatic approach to Lebanese politics that has created a forceful political philosophy embedded in an understanding of the Quran as the ideal ideological vehicle for achieving social justice.

Hezbollah’s ideological nucleus revolves around the concept of oppression; as an organization that represents a community of Muslims that have suffered centuries of political and religious persecution, Hezbollah’s primary political goals cannot be understood in a vacuum. Essential to Hezbollah’s political program and ideology is the division of the world into “oppressors” (*mustakbirin*) and “oppressed” (*mustad’afin*), a distinction made by former Ayatollah Khomeini.²³ Such a *zeitgeist* combines Marxist theory with the Quran – both of which champion and glorify the plight of oppressed peoples – and is cited by Hezbollah’s leadership in almost all of their speeches.²⁴ Hezbollah sees itself as the forerunner for political, civil, and human rights in Lebanon in the face of a confessionalist political system that places the Shiites near the bottom of the totem pole, and against the constant threat of American and Israeli imperialism. As a result, Hezbollah feels a strong connection with the experiences of other oppressed

²³ Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal. *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion*. p. 16

²⁴ Ibid, p. 16

populations in spite of the fact that its political and military agendas are mostly confined to Lebanon's borders.

Israel's military presence in South Lebanon was a particularly acute form of oppression that was undoubtedly a necessary component to Hezbollah's ideological formation. As author and professor Amal Saad-Ghorayeb states, "[Hezbollah's] resistance to the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon and the West Biqa' constitutes the very backbone of its intellectual structure."²⁵ Articulated more clearly by Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, "had the enemy not taken this step [Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon], I do not know whether something called Hizbu'llah would have been born. I doubt it."²⁶ Hezbollah's political ideology and program are thus further complicated by the reality of Israel's existence and continued aggression toward Lebanon. As a result, it is inappropriate to claim that Hezbollah was created solely out of a need to mobilize and empower Lebanon's Shiites; Hezbollah is an organized reaction to Israel's invasion and occupation of Lebanon, and self-identifies as the Islamic *Resistance* in Lebanon.

Joseph Alagha's distinctions among Hezbollah's religious ideology, political ideology and political program are useful because it problematizes the notion that Hezbollah's ideologies essentially determine the nature of its activities. In its Open Letter, Hezbollah describes itself as "neither a closed organizational party nor a narrow political framework."²⁷ Rather, Hezbollah saw itself as an "umma tied to the Muslims in every part of the world by a strong ideological-doctrinal, and political bond, namely, Islam... Each of us is a combat soldier when the call of jihad demands it and each of us

²⁵ Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal. *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion*. p. 112

²⁶ Ibid, p. 11

²⁷ Alagha, Joseph. *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*. p. 224

undertakes his task in the battle in accordance with the legitimate and religious responsibility of the Wilayat al-Faqih, the leader.”²⁸ There is no doubt that from the outset Hezbollah adopted a strong ideological platform that emphasized its commitment to Islamic principles and ideals; Hezbollah defined itself in relation to the global Muslim community and did not confine its religious ideology to events taking place within Lebanon’s borders. At the same time, it is important to not misinterpret what Hezbollah says about Islam and its role in Lebanon; Hezbollah is explicit about its refusal to impose its religious beliefs on Lebanon, frequently citing a verse from the Quran that outlaws forced conversion and adherence.²⁹ Islam simply creates the context through which Hezbollah understands its existence. Islam is perceived as the primary means to achieving social justice by mobilizing enough people and material resources to resist against western interference in the Middle East, provide basic social services and create a salient political voice for the Shiites. Islam is not used as a rationale for starting a revolution in Lebanon that seeks to depose the secular regime and establish an Islamic Republic.³⁰

Hezbollah has also been intentional in explaining why it maintains a hostile attitude toward the United States and Israel as stated in its Open Letter. According to the memorandum, Hezbollah identifies the United States and the “Zionist entity in Palestine” as the two main *oppressors* and therefore worthy of resistance: “They invaded our country, destroyed our villages, slit the throats of our children, violated our sanctuaries, and appointed masters over our people who committed the worst massacres against our

²⁸ Alagha, Joseph. *The Shifts in Hizbullah’s Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*. p. 224

²⁹ Ibid, p. 228

³⁰ Ibid, p. 112

umma.³¹ Hezbollah's sense of righteous indignation toward America and Israel stems not from the fact that they are non-Muslim countries, but from what Hezbollah views as subversive and imperialist actions in Lebanon, Palestine, and the rest of the Middle East. While the remainder of the Open Letter is laden with religious rhetoric that establishes Hezbollah as an exclusively Islamist organization, Hezbollah still acknowledges that it is necessary to reach out to the Christians in Lebanon, confirming that its issues with the Christians fall along political, and not ideological, lines. "The politics followed by the chiefs of political Maronism through the 'Lebanese Front' and the 'Lebanese Forces' cannot guarantee peace and tranquility for the Christians of Lebanon, whereas it is predicated upon *'asabiyya* (narrow-minded particularism), on confessional privileges and on the alliance with colonialism and Israel."³² As discussed earlier, the division of power amongst various Lebanese sects – before the Taif Accord³³ – unfairly prioritized Maronite Christians above everyone else.

In a 1992 interview with the pan-Arab magazine *Al-Watan Al-Arabi*, Hassan Nasrallah explicitly rejects the idea that bureaucratic positions in Lebanon should be divided along sectarian lines:

"We want to eliminate political sectarianism and lay down the foundations for a system of governance that reflects the people's aspirations for justice and equality in the [social] services and development sectors. The aim is to establish a balance between rights and responsibilities, to make ability the yardstick for promotion, and to lay down the foundations of a suitable infrastructure headed by competent people. For example, the most competent president of the Central Bank could be someone who is not a Maronite, but rather someone who – thanks to his financial and business acumen – is able to take the country out of the impasse. Why insist on appointing a Maronite at the head of the Central Bank? What is the logic behind it?"³⁴

³¹ Alagha, Joseph. *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*. p. 225

³² Ibid, p. 229

³³ The balance of power following the ratification of the Taif Accord redistributed political power in such a way that while the Maronites still had exclusive access to the Presidency, the Premiership, which belonged to the Sunnis, enjoyed greater privileges and authority.

³⁴ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 90

Nasrallah emphasizes his aversion to dividing power according to one's religious affiliation in an interview with the Egyptian *al-Ahram* nearly one decade after his interview with *Al-Watan Al-Arabi*:

“The situation in Lebanon is complicated to some extent. In theory, we are working to end political sectarianism in Lebanon. The problem is that political sectarianism benefits the Lebanese Christians, based on the fact that the country has a Muslim majority. So, when we call for the abolition of political sectarianism in Lebanon, the first thing that comes to our Christian brothers' minds is that we are advocating an open democratic system that would automatically lead to Muslim domination of the National Assembly and the state administration. We respect their fears, and feel that it is necessary to deal with various Lebanese domestic issues with a great deal of empathy and understanding; we want to get rid of political sectarianism, which is a backward and tribal system, and replace it with a modern one that would govern the country and preserve internal cohesion. In this context, and to allay the fears of our Christian brothers, we call for the formation of a Higher National Council, as was provided for in the Constitution, with a mission to abolish sectarianism. So far, no one has taken up or discussed this call in any serious way, and all that is taking place right now in this regard is only for press and election sloganeering purposes. We are not calling for the abolition of direct political sectarianism; this could happen at a later stage, and could take up to 30 more years to happen.”³⁵

While admitting that Lebanon's religiously pluralistic society necessitates a political compromise that respects Lebanon's tumultuous history, Nasrallah unequivocally rejects any solution that arbitrarily assigns governmental positions to certain religious groups. Such a position reflects Hezbollah's commitment to democracy in Lebanon, and should not be misconstrued as an attempt by Hassan Nasrallah to “Islamicize” Lebanon. In the interview with *Al-Watan Al-Arabi*, Nasrallah reiterates that Hezbollah's intentions in Lebanon are not subversive, and that it does not seek to establish an Islamic state or force Islam on non-Muslims:

“We have never proposed the idea of imposing an Islamic Republic on Lebanon by force, and will not do that in the future, because the nature of the Islamic Republic does not lend itself to forceful action. This government would not be able to govern according to Islamic principles, or indeed survive, in the absence of overwhelming popular support. An Islamic government is an ideological entity committed, by virtue of its religious teachings – as well as legislatively and legally – to follow divinely inspired rules; it is

³⁵ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 228

moreover not a government of intelligence services, or of political parties, that can impose itself on the people by the force of arms. To be able to exist, an Islamic government presupposes the existence of popular support and strong conviction behind it. We do not deny the fact that it is our wish and desire to see the emergence of an Islamic system, because we are first of all Muslims, and not about to give up on our religious identity.”³⁶

As evidenced, Hezbollah demonstrated early on that it has the ability and desire to distinguish between its religious philosophy and its political program, and that its commitment to democracy in Lebanon takes into account the political aspirations and safety of Lebanese Christians. Its adherence to Shiite Islam, however, indicates that Hezbollah recognizes an obligation to the doctrine of the Imamate, the adoption and application of the *Wilayat al-Faqih*, and *jihad* in the way of God.³⁷ In contrast to its Sunni Islamist counterparts, like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood or the Palestinian Islamic Hamas, that view armed revolution against secular or non-Muslim government as the greater and more necessary *jihad*, the two most important components of Hezbollah’s greater *jihad* are mobilization and self-discipline.³⁸ For Hamas, Islam represents an opportunity to mobilize support within Palestine and throughout the global Muslim community for the liberation of Palestine and the eventual creation of an Islamic state. Therefore, Hamas can be described as an Islamic movement first and a national liberation movement second. The struggle for Palestine is seen within a more general context of protecting Muslims and Muslim land from dispossession, expropriation, and occupation.

On the other hand, while Shiite Islam plays a fundamental role in the configuration of Hezbollah’s internal structure and hierarchy, its primary concern is defending Lebanon against Israel and providing relief and social justice to Lebanon’s

³⁶ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 90-91

³⁷ Alagha, Joseph. *The Shifts in Hizbullah’s Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*. p. 112

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 113

Shiite Muslim population, through social service programs or active participation in secular Lebanese politics. While Hezbollah definitely seeks the sympathy of other Muslims for its cause, its primary sphere of influence is confined to Lebanon's borders; Hezbollah's Lebanese identity is just as important as its Shiite Muslim identity, and its behavior reflects that position accordingly. In order to justify engaging Israel militarily, Hezbollah "stressed that the base and foundation of Islamic belief is smaller military *jihad* that is practiced against the Israeli occupation army in southern Lebanon."³⁹ Through Hezbollah's application and understanding of the lesser military *jihad*, it becomes clear that when Hezbollah first appeared in Lebanon, its religious ideology and commitment to the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih* was necessary in order to justify its political program and military activities, and did not have an overwhelming bearing on Hezbollah's political program. For example, had Ayatollah Khomeini not sanctioned self-sacrifice in pursuit of the lesser military *jihad*, Hezbollah would not have been able to justify its use of suicide bombings against Israeli military outposts in Lebanon throughout the 1990s.⁴⁰

Regarding the concept of the Guardianship of the Jurisprudent according to Ayatollah Khomeini, whose theory of the *Wilayat al-Faqih* is "predicated on his belief in the necessity of establishing an Islamic Republic," Hezbollah should look to the Ayatollah for his guidance and input on all matters, political or religious.⁴¹ However, while adherence to the concept of the *Wilayat al-Faqih* remains a decisive factor for admission into Hezbollah, the Ayatollah does not directly determine Hezbollah's

³⁹ Alagha, Joseph. *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*. p. 113

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 113

⁴¹ Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal. *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*. p. 59

interaction with other Lebanese political parties or Israel; rather, Hezbollah seeks the Ayatollah's guidance on theological issues that pertain to the entire Muslim community. Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah best summarizes politico-religious relationship between Hezbollah and *Wilayat al-Faqih*: "The spinal cord of Hezbollah is wilayat al-faqih. Take out wilayat al-faqih and Hizbullah becomes a dead body, even a divided one. An ummah [community] without 'Ali is an ummah without spirit, an ummah without Husayn is an ummah without soul, and an ummah without al-wali al-faqih, who must be obeyed, is a dead, torn, ummah."⁴² Nasrallah's refusal to revolt for the sake of an Islamic state in Lebanon illustrates this relationship; in principle, Hezbollah believes that the establishment of an Islamic state is the best way to achieve social justice and equality. At the same time, Hassan Nasrallah has explicitly stated that Hezbollah believes it is inappropriate to impose an Islamic state on Lebanon's religiously diverse population – or on any religiously pluralistic society – without popular demand.

Reaching across the divide: Distinguishing between the resistance and internal political disputes

The most important features of Hezbollah's political ideology are its understanding of the world through the paradigm of oppressors and oppressed, the Islamic state ideal, and relations with Lebanon's Christians, anti-Zionism, pan-Islamism, anti-imperialism, *jihad*, and martyrdom.⁴³ Although Hezbollah appears to employ an exclusivist discourse that separates people according to the Quranic classification of a

⁴² Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal. *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*. p.36

⁴³ Alagha, Joseph. *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*. p. 141

Hizb'ullah (party of God) and a Hizb al-Shaytan (party of the Devil), in its political discourse, Hezbollah uses the language “oppressed” and “oppressors” to produce an inclusive concept in the pursuit of political and social justice.⁴⁴ Hezbollah does not admit that there may exist a conflict between its inherently exclusivist religious ideology and its espousal of inclusive political ideals because it sees Islam as a means of unifying people. Nevertheless, the fact that Hezbollah uses different language to articulate its religious and political ideologies is demonstrative of Hezbollah’s desire to maintain a commitment to Islamic principles while remaining politically relevant and attractive. If Hezbollah were to conflate its religious and political ideologies by using selective and potentially isolationist language, it is unlikely that Hezbollah would have been able to transform itself into a popular national movement following the conclusion of Lebanon’s civil war.

Considering that the anti-Zionist element of Hezbollah’s political ideology is just as much a fixture of its political identity as is its distinction between oppressed and oppressor, relations with the Christians, particularly the Maronite factions, was less of a priority between 1985 and 1990, because of the chaos that embodied Lebanon’s civil war and Hezbollah’s outright refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the Gemayel regime – which was supported by Israel – in Lebanon. While Hezbollah’s emphasis on resisting Israeli aggression and occupation militarily has never wavered, the ratification of the Taif Accord represented a shift in Lebanon’s political arena that made political accommodation with Lebanon’s Christians not only possible, but also more of a priority for Hezbollah.

⁴⁴ Alagha, Joseph. *The Shifts in Hizbullah’s Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*. p. 141

Hezbollah's *infitah*, literally opening, policy following the end of Lebanon's civil war demonstrated a desire on Hezbollah's behalf to reach out to other religious groups in Lebanon, mainly Christians. Unlike its uncompromising pre-Taif position that characterized the Lebanese state as an "infidel," Hezbollah exhibited a relaxed stance after the Taif Accord, which reflected its willingness to compromise.⁴⁵ It is unlikely that Hezbollah would have been so willing to participate in municipal elections in 1992 had the Taif Accord not rearranged – albeit slightly – the previous Lebanese power structure that prioritized Maronite Christians above all other Lebanese. Although Hezbollah rejects, on an ideological level, the validity of a government that guarantees certain positions and privileges to specific sectarian groups, Hezbollah demonstrated its political pragmatism by accepting the Taif Accord in spite of the fact that the 1943 National Pact was not fully disregarded. In this instance, Hezbollah viewed participation in Lebanon's government under the authority of Lebanon's pre-Taif government, which virtually ignored the political rights of Shiites while demonstrating a preference for the Maronites, as impossible because it provided no semblance of democracy or fair representation for all Lebanese. However, while the Taif Accord did not get rid of confessionalism entirely, Hezbollah was willing to be flexible with its political program by recognizing the validity of the new government. Such a shift cannot be written off as superficial or insincere, especially considering the differences in the language used and the ideas conveyed between Hezbollah's 1985 Open Letter and its 1992 Parliamentary Elections Program.

Unlike the often gratuitous verbiage used by Hezbollah in its Open Letter, which painstakingly enumerates the various points of Hezbollah's religious ideology and its

⁴⁵ Alagha, Joseph. *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*. p. 41

complaints against Israel and the Lebanese state, Hezbollah's 1992 parliamentary platform outlined a specific action-plan that Hezbollah sought to pursue in the interests of all Lebanese, and not strictly for the benefit of the "*umma*," or Hezbollah's membership. In its parliamentary platform, Hezbollah all but abandoned its appeal for broad Islamic participation in reforming Lebanon, and expressed its enthusiasm for realizing the "abolishment of political sectarianism" and an end to Israel's occupation of Lebanese territory.⁴⁶ Hezbollah's desire to participate in a confessionalist system represents a dramatic shift from the implicit ultimatum given in its Open Letter regarding the existence of political sectarianism: "The present regime is the product of arrogance so unjust that *no reform or modification can remedy it. It should be changed radically.*"⁴⁷ [Emphasis Added] Since the Taif Accord can hardly be considered a radical change to Lebanon's governmental power structure, Hezbollah's decision to validate the Lebanese government through participation in the municipal elections is indicative of its capacity to compromise and embrace more 'moderate' political tendencies. The decision to participate formally in Lebanon's government also gave Hezbollah a sense of permanence within Lebanon's political framework. Had Hezbollah resisted integration into Lebanon's government on the grounds that such a move is anathema to its identity as Lebanon's "Islamic Resistance," it is unlikely that Hezbollah would have survived after South Lebanon was physically liberated.

Hezbollah's civic responsibilities and the rise of a popular base in *al-dahiyeh*

⁴⁶ Alagha, Joseph. *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*. p. 249

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 228-9

Hezbollah's public service agenda is another important aspect of its political program that represents an evolution of Hezbollah's desire to mobilize Lebanon's Shiites in pursuit of the greater *jihad*. Although Saad-Ghorayeb established that Hezbollah's *raison d'être* was to form a military resistance against Israel's occupation of South Lebanon, Hezbollah also gained widespread support and popularity by providing various social services to Lebanon's Shiites, particularly after implementing its *infitah* policy. Hezbollah's public service network matured at virtually the same rate as its militant activities throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and was necessary in order for Hezbollah to remain a politically relevant organization. There were several factors that compelled Lebanese political parties and movements, like Hezbollah, to assume responsibility for public functions typically handled by the state. These include certain "situational features" like, the outbreak and continuation of Lebanon's civil war, the "geo-strategic location of areas to be administered, size of locale, and the material resources already in place and exploitable."⁴⁸

Hezbollah's capacity to develop and sustain social service programs throughout South Lebanon and various suburbs of Beirut was, and continues to be, a direct result of Iranian organizational assistance and monetary aid.⁴⁹ In fact, Hezbollah was able to differentiate itself from Amal – another Shiite political movement that appeared before Hezbollah, but would lack the kind of legitimacy and political organization that Hezbollah would eventually enjoy – through grassroots political activities, community-based social services, and by taking an uncompromising stance against the United States and Israel. Above all, Hezbollah's public service network has been essential to its growth

⁴⁸ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah's Public and Social Services and Iran*. p. 2

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 8

and survival; by engaging the community through its social services, Hezbollah broadens its sphere of influence, promotes its own image, and ensures that its political program remains viable by indirectly excluding the state from having control over South Lebanon and parts of Beirut.

In her essay *Hizballah's Public and Social Services and Iran*, Judith Harik argues that civil services have been essential in allowing Hezbollah to actively resist Israel and “that the creation of a fully-fledged fighting force meant that social assistance had to be provided for the families of the *mujahidin* and the children of martyrs.”⁵⁰ Unlike Amal, Hezbollah was afforded Iran’s material resources, training and organizational assistance, which helped Hezbollah forge its own place in South Lebanon.⁵¹ Because Iran played such a pivotal role in financing Hezbollah’s military and civil programs, there is, naturally, a temptation to equate Iran’s monetary and social support with a de facto control over Hezbollah’s operations. Unfortunately for the Iranophobic conspiracy theorists, there is little evidence to indicate that Iran is controlling Hezbollah’s decision-making processes; as discussed earlier, the concept of a transnational hierarchy as embodied by the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih* applies strictly to religious analysis and interpretations that concern the international (Shiite) Muslim community. While Iran’s monetary support of Hezbollah gives the Islamic Republic certain leverage within the Party of God, Hezbollah exercises autonomy over its decision-making processes; even the Supreme Leader himself has never overridden Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah.⁵²

Following the disappearance of Musa al-Sadr in Libya in 1978 and Israel’s invasion of Lebanon that resulted in the displacement of 250,000 people that same year,

⁵⁰ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah's Public and Social Services and Iran*. p. 7

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 7

⁵² Shatz, Adam. *In Search of Hezbollah*. New York Review of Books Vol. 51

Amal experienced a period of organizational revitalization as it continued to expand and become a more visible, yet not necessarily significant, player in the civil war.⁵³ The failure of Lebanon's government and leftist parties to secure rights for the poor and protect the south respectively set the stage for the mass mobilization of Lebanon's Shiites.⁵⁴ However, it was the Islamic Revolution in Iran that served as the "ultimate locus" of inspiration for Shiites in Lebanon.⁵⁵ According to Lara Deeb, the Islamic Revolution "provided an alternative counter narrative to the West from that espoused by the political left, at precisely the moment when all Lebanese left lost the faith of many of its Shi'i constituents."⁵⁶ The "Islamism" that appeared following the Revolution fed directly into the redemptive narrative that exists within Shiite Islam, and proved to Lebanon's Shiites that it was possible for them to challenge their position within society in a way that accommodated both their spiritual and political interests. As mentioned previously, Hezbollah's emergence and subsequent successes were a direct result of Israel's second invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the fissures that were created in Amal as a result.⁵⁷ In 1980, Lebanese politician Nabih Berri assumed leadership over Amal. His decision to take part in US-led negotiations in 1982 compelled many of Amal's more prominent members – including Hassan Nasrallah – to leave the organization and lay the foundation for Hezbollah.⁵⁸

Clashes between the Lebanese army and Amal in 1984 left whole neighborhoods destroyed in *al-dahiyeh* and created a truly desperate situation; access to electricity and

⁵³ Deeb, Lara. *The Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. p. 79

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 79

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 80

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 80

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 82

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 82

water was severely limited, and an already decrepit civil infrastructure was strained by mass migration from the *Bekaa* and the South.⁵⁹ Even garbage collection was suspended, which created a severe humanitarian crisis that Hezbollah addressed directly starting in 1988.⁶⁰ In fact, while this particular service continued for another five years until Lebanon's Sanitation Department restructured itself, Hezbollah is still responsible for collecting up to 300 tons of garbage a day.⁶¹ While Hezbollah's predecessors began providing health and social services to their respective communities as early as 1983, "the crown in the burgeoning network of Islamic institutions – al-Rasul al-Azam Hospital/mosque complex – opened its doors in the *dahiyeh*."⁶² The importance of the Islamist institution to the residents of *al-dahiyeh* and South Lebanon cannot be understated, especially considering that there are no public hospitals, few public schools, and that its services are available to all residents of the areas it serves.⁶³ Hezbollah also commits itself to keeping hospital costs and doctors fees to a minimum, which helps boost the popularity of its programs and services.⁶⁴ In terms of public education, Hezbollah manages its own primary and secondary schools, and has demonstrated its commitment to cooperation across sectarian lines by teaching the national curriculum while setting aside several hours a day for religious studies.⁶⁵

Many of the smaller-scale, but no less vital, services that Hezbollah provides are done through subsidiary associations,⁶⁶ like Jihad al-Binaa (Reconstruction Campaign). Within *al-dahiyeh* specifically, Hezbollah is also recognized for having brought drinkable

⁵⁹ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 83

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 83

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 83

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 83

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 83

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 84

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 84

⁶⁶ *Ibid*. p. 84

water to the impoverished and densely populated suburb after years of polluted and unreliable water supplies. From 1988-1990 when General Michel Aoun was President of Lebanon, “water and electricity sources were almost completely cut off due to fighting. Through years of neglect and extensive war-related damage, an estimated 40 per cent of the water from *Ain al-Diblih*, the area’s major source of drinking water, had been lost and its purity had been gravely compromised.”⁶⁷ Hezbollah’s commitment to providing *al-dahiyeh* with clean water is also fundamentally related to its resistance activities against Israel. Water continues to be a hotly contested natural resource in the Middle East, and Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria alike have all struggled to secure as much water as possible for their respective populations. By diverting natural sources of water away from Israel, which allows Hezbollah to provide a basic public service, Hezbollah further vindicates its resistance and minimizes the potential for its political program to be marginalized.

Using the al-Rasul al-Azam Hospital as an example, most of the Islamist institutions that provide necessary services to the public also employ “large staffs and maintain substantial pools of medical professionals whose livelihood depends on Hezbollah.”⁶⁸ Hezbollah’s relationships with the various communities it serves are thus complicated. On the one hand, Hezbollah creates a useful image for itself as a necessary humanitarian and bureaucratic organization. This serves two purposes. First, it ensures that the people feel an allegiance to Hezbollah that they would only otherwise feel toward their government if the Lebanese authorities reliably provided the services expected from a modern nation-state. Second, because Hezbollah employs the people that it ultimately

⁶⁷ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 84

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 84

seeks to serve, Muslim and non-Muslim communities throughout the *dahiyeh*, South Lebanon, and the *Bekaa* are compelled to accept the moral and religious baggage inherent in Hezbollah's institutions, let alone any religious institutions. According to interviews that Judith Harik conducted with patients and "unaffiliated" doctors in 2001, the ability to receive excellent health care from Hezbollah's hospitals often supersedes some people's resentment toward hospital rules and regulations regarding clothing and gender relations. In one instance, Harik described a situation in which a young woman expressed frustration over the fact that she and her sisters were unable to join their father in the hospital because none of them were wearing *hijab*.⁶⁹

On the other hand, by addressing Shiite Lebanon's most basic needs, Hezbollah challenges Lebanon's sectarian status quo and better positions the Shiites on a national level, thereby closing the social political gaps that exist between the Shiites and their Sunni, Druze, and Maronite counterparts. The assertion that Hezbollah, through its civil service programs, has created a "state inside of a state" that implicitly challenges Lebanon's legitimacy and territorial contiguity is not a fair assessment of Hezbollah's relationship with Lebanon. Although Hezbollah assumes responsibilities that the state is typically charged with, Lebanon undoubtedly benefits from Hezbollah's civil activities. According to Hajj Hussein Shami, Hezbollah's director for social services, Hezbollah dug 57 artesian wells, laid 15,000 meters of water pipes, built four reservoirs, and installed five electrical power stations along with 4,100 meters of high-voltage wires as Lebanon's civil war started to wane.⁷⁰ If the state had felt seriously threatened by Hezbollah, "the fact that this work was undertaken by a political party and financed by a

⁶⁹ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 85

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 85

foreign country, Iran, rather than by the government's Public Works Ministry certainly removes all doubt about the state's capacity or desire to undercut the Party of God's services in order to reduce its political appeal."⁷¹ Hezbollah has not simply created an alternative to the official Lebanese state that is both effective and reliable, but its assistance in providing basic utilities to overcrowded and impoverished suburbs also reduces the potential for social disorder and rebellion. This is obviously in the interest of Lebanon's stability, especially considering the sectarian tensions that have existed, in varying levels of intensity, since Lebanon's independence in 1943.

There are other aspects of Hezbollah's civil projects in *al-dahiyeh* that are more directly related to its political program, namely the assistance given to the families of "resistance martyrs" in order to help them remain self-sufficient.⁷² While many of these programs were initially intended to benefit families that lost loved ones fighting against Israel's military occupation of South Lebanon, some of them have evolved and are now available to a broader range of people. For example, professional schools for young women were established in order to train the daughters of deceased Hezbollah militiamen so they could provide for their respective families. Hezbollah even subsidized "workshops" in order to employ other dependents of dead or incapacitated fighters.⁷³ Hezbollah is also known for having subsidized textbook costs for the children of dead or disabled fighters, a service that may appear trivial, but helped alleviate additional financial burdens on already impoverished families.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 85

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 85

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 85

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 86

Consolidating control over the *Bekaa* and South Lebanon

Hezbollah's activities in *al-dahiyeh* demonstrate its commitment to serving the public and compensate for Lebanon's inability to adequately provide for communities in and around its capital. However, as desperate as the plight is for Shiite Lebanese living near Beirut, the predominantly Shiite citizens of the *Bekaa-Hermel* region – Hezbollah's effective "heartland" – have been forced to overcome years of Israeli military occupation and decades of economic neglect and political isolation.⁷⁵ Protecting the South has been a priority of Hezbollah for two reasons. First, the brunt of Israel's occupation and reprisals against Hezbollah's military activities have been felt most by the civilian population of South Lebanon.⁷⁶ Second, because these "oppressed regions"⁷⁷ are not only comprised of Shiite Muslims, but also of Maronite and Greek Orthodox Christians, Hezbollah's social programs help legitimize its identity as the "resistance" across sectarian lines.

Throughout Israel's occupation of South Lebanon, it was necessary for Hezbollah to develop an intimate and trustworthy relationship with the villagers. According to Hala Jaber, "The continued presence of civilians in [South Lebanon] is vital for the movement and protection of Hezbollah's fighters: the success of the Islamic Resistance depends upon the cooperation and hospitality of the villagers as well as their support."⁷⁸ By providing civilians with protection, assistance, and access to basic necessities, Hezbollah nurtures a symbiotic relationship with rural villagers, which undoubtedly help Hezbollah establish a popular base.

⁷⁵ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 86

⁷⁶ Jaber, Hala. *Hezbollah: Born With a Vengeance*. p. 156

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 156

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 156

The nature of Hezbollah's relationship with rural South Lebanese is constantly evolving in order to adapt to the community's changing needs. In the context of Israel's occupation of South Lebanon, Hezbollah has provided programs and services that respect both the complexity of life under occupation and decades of governmental neglect. Israel has historically maintained that throughout its occupation of South Lebanon the Israeli Defense Forces did not intentionally destroy Lebanese villages or target Lebanese civilians. Instead, Israel claims that Hezbollah launches its attacks against Israel and Israeli military outposts from within rural Lebanese villages, which results in Israeli reprisals that leave behind destroyed neighborhoods and scores of dead civilians.⁷⁹

The idea that Hezbollah uses "human shields" in its encounters with Israel has been posited by Israel, the United States government, and news pundits for the last two decades, especially following Hezbollah's war with Israel in 2006. However, there have been numerous reports conducted by non-partisan humanitarian organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International that prove, through physical and testimonial evidence, that Hezbollah has made it a point to not attack Israel from within the villages, unless of course ridding Israel's military presence from particular villages was a priority. I will devote more space to this particular topic in my discussion of the 2006 "war" between Hezbollah and Israel. For right now, however, it is necessary to understand why Israel has an explicit interest in targeting Lebanese villages and civilians. By creating the appearance that Hezbollah is ultimately responsible for Israeli attacks that typically kill a disproportionate amount of civilians, like the massacre at Qana in April of

⁷⁹ Jaber, Hala. *Hezbollah: Born With a Vengeance*. p. 156

1996 that left more than 100 Lebanese civilians dead after seeking refuge from an Israeli assault on South Lebanon,⁸⁰ Israel attempts to undermine Hezbollah's credibility.

Hezbollah, having recognized that its popularity hinges on its ability to provide for and protect an otherwise defenseless population, is constantly prepared to provide assistance to areas under its control at any given moment. Jihad al-Binaa, one of Hezbollah's reconstruction organizations, keeps "permanent teams ready to enter areas of destruction and repair the damage."⁸¹ In 1985, one of Jihad al-Binaa's first operations occurred in the village of Maydoun following a large-scale Israeli ground and air assault that forced many of its citizens to flee.⁸² Jihad al-Binaa also helped rebuild two villages, Kafra and Yater, which had been virtually wiped out in 1992 after the Israeli assassination of Hassan Nasrallah's predecessor, Sayyed Abbas Musawi.⁸³ That year, Jihad al-Binaa was responsible for rebuilding almost 1,000 homes, which helped Hezbollah prove its usefulness to South Lebanon and simultaneously prevented Israel from further expanding the territory it occupied. Through the efforts of Jihad al-Binaa and its reconstruction activities in South Lebanese villages, Hezbollah's added another dimension to its resistance efforts against Israeli aggression.

Rather than limiting resistance activities to individuals willing to take up arms against Israel, Hezbollah created a space for Lebanese civilians to take an active part in liberating South Lebanon by helping them rebuild their homes, thereby encouraging them remain in their villages. Hezbollah's image and reputation even improved amongst those that disliked Hezbollah before Jihad al-Binaa's reconstruction and relief efforts; families

⁸⁰ Jaber, Hala. *Hezbollah: Born With a Vengeance*. p. 169

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 156

⁸² Ibid, p. 157

⁸³ Ibid, p. 157

that had once attempted to distance themselves from the group accepted Hezbollah's aid.⁸⁴ This is not surprising considering that the Lebanese government has consistently failed in offering reimbursement or assistance to families most affected by Israel's military activities in South Lebanon and Beirut's Shiite suburbs.⁸⁵ Through its reconstruction programs, Hezbollah gives Lebanese villagers an incentive to remain inside their homes and resist the temptation to relocate or flee in the face of Israeli aggression and military campaigns. During Israel's occupation of South Lebanon, this ensured Lebanon's territorial contiguity and the impossibility of Israeli settlements on occupied Lebanese land. Had Hezbollah failed to protect and rehabilitate South Lebanon throughout Israel's occupation, it is unlikely that Israel would have withdrawn its troops in the summer of 2000. This is important because it demonstrates that while Hezbollah's guerilla tactics made Israel's presence in Lebanon too costly, Lebanese villagers' reluctance to flee from their homes in the face of devastating Israeli attacks deterred Israel from expanding further north, as it had done during its 1982.

In some instances, Hezbollah even "assiduously tracks down absentee owners whose property requires repair."⁸⁶ Take, for example, Hala Jaber's anecdote about a resident of South Lebanon that had immigrated to London, nicknamed Hassan for the purpose of this story. Following Israel's 1996 offensive that resulted in the destruction of many South Lebanese villages and the infamous bombing of a Red Cross facility in Qana,⁸⁷ Hassan received a phone call from someone in his village, Nabatiyeh. Although Hassan's house had not been completely destroyed, Hezbollah was interested in repairing

⁸⁴ Jaber, Hala. *Hezbollah: Born With a Vengeance*. p. 157

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 157

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 157

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 157

whatever structural damage the house had endured. However, because Hezbollah did not offer to replace or reimburse Hassan for damaged “marble floors and expensive tiles,” the villager respectfully declined Hezbollah’s offer.⁸⁸ The point here is that Hezbollah’s reconstruction efforts in South Lebanon are widespread and strategic. While the villager in the previous anecdote refused Hezbollah’s services, the fact that Hezbollah offered to repair (albeit partially) the home of an expatriated Lebanese indicates that Hezbollah realizes that South Lebanon’s appearance as war-torn and battered undermines its public image and its interest in realizing South Lebanon’s political potential.

Like its work in *al-dahiyeh*, Hezbollah’s services in South Lebanon are not limited to reconstruction efforts and municipal activities. The Islamic Health Committee (IHC) has been instrumental in providing health care to “injured members of the Resistance and supporting Lebanese civilians who are subjected to shelling and dispossession in the South.”⁸⁹ Considering that the Lebanese government’s access to South Lebanon during Israel’s occupation of the territory was severely limited, the creation of hospitals and health centers fulfills a critical need by providing emergency care and daytime clinics that include pediatric and gynecology wards.⁹⁰ The health center in Jebaa, a South Lebanese village, was opened in 1987 for the explicit purpose of tending to people’s health needs immediately following an Israeli attack.⁹¹ Hezbollah has also created “mobile clinics” that are very popular amongst rural Lebanese civilians. Although there are five permanent clinics in South Lebanon that are charged with providing medical care for most of the surrounding villages, Hezbollah’s “mobile clinics”

⁸⁸ Jaber, Hala. *Hezbollah: Born With a Vengeance*. p. 158

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 158

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 158

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 158

travelled to villages located on the border of the “security zone” and gave medical care to those that were too afraid to leave their homes.⁹² Hezbollah’s accomplishments around health care in South Lebanon have also played a crucial role in transforming the organization into a permanent political and civil fixture in Lebanon. Hezbollah also had to overcome significant obstacles in implementing its health care program; years of economic and social neglect contributed to widespread illiteracy and ignorance around mental and physical health issues.

Additionally, Lebanon lacks a national health care plan, and health insurance remains a virtually inaccessible luxury to many of the Shiites in Beirut, South Lebanon and the *Bekaa Valley*.⁹³ The few government-run hospitals that were established for the explicit purpose of catering to the needs of the disenfranchised provided inadequate health care and developed negative reputations as a result. Through the IHC, Hezbollah “opened more than forty health centres and clinics in Beirut, South Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley,” which are “divided into three types: general medical centres, clinics and first-aid posts, and dental centres.”⁹⁴ After participating in Lebanese municipal elections in 1992 for the first time in Hezbollah’s history, the IHC’s main Beirut clinic served 15,272 patients in 1993.⁹⁵ Although Hezbollah’s ability to realize its political potential in 1992 was impeded because it was forced to cooperate with the comparatively weaker and less popular Amal, its success during the 1992 elections represented not only a dramatic shift in the way Hezbollah had positioned itself within Lebanon, but it also demonstrated

⁹² Jaber, Hala. *Hezbollah: Born With a Vengeance*. p. 158

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 158

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 159

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 159

the extent to which Hezbollah had become a lifeline for Shiite Muslims across suburban Beirut and South Lebanon.

Confrontation with Beirut and the lead-up to Israel's withdrawal

By maintaining a fully functional network of public and social services and a de facto monopoly over most civil services throughout South Lebanon, the *Bekaa* Valley, and *al-dahiyeh*, Hezbollah created a situation in which conflict with Lebanon's government was inevitable. Initially, before having participated in the 1992 municipal elections, Hezbollah's relationship with Iran and Syria made cooperation with Lebanon's central government undesirable. Specifically, Hezbollah's ability to sustain itself with Iranian money and other resources actually provided a disincentive for Hezbollah to "build a working relationship with Beirut."⁹⁶ Even after Hezbollah demonstrated a commitment to working, at least in part, within Lebanon's government, Beirut struggled to exercise any semblance of control over South Lebanon.⁹⁷ Although Hezbollah was arguably the only fighting force capable of resisting Israel's occupation of South Lebanon, Hezbollah's military operations in particular were a point of concern for governmental authorities. Besides having to compete with Hezbollah's popularity as the only serious Islamic Resistance in Lebanon, the very nature of Hezbollah's military operations against Israeli Occupying Forces made it difficult for the government to influence, and in some cases hinder, Hezbollah's behavior.⁹⁸ Although Hezbollah's military campaigns were premeditated and carefully executed, Lebanon's government

⁹⁶ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 113

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 113

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 113

had no idea when or how Hezbollah planned its operations against Israel. As Harik points out, “Opportunities for blows against the Israelis are planned in advance but often put into operation as a result of a conjuncture of factors that are not easily predicted. Secrecy is paramount.”⁹⁹ Hezbollah’s secrecy and lack of coordination with Lebanon’s government was, and continues to be, a significant point of contention amongst some Lebanese.

Lebanon’s government became further disadvantaged in its contest with Hezbollah, especially in addressing massive population dislocation and infrastructural destruction caused by the civil war and Israel’s occupation. Unable to realize its authority through the monopoly of violence within its borders, the Lebanese government sought to “regain” control over South Lebanon by encouraging Israel to end its occupation through diplomatic means. The goal of the Lebanese authorities was twofold. First, by campaigning for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 425 – which called for the immediate withdrawal of all Israeli forces from Lebanon – Lebanon’s government attempted to undermine the credibility of Hezbollah’s guerilla activities. Second, Syria’s military presence in Lebanon after the conclusion of the civil war further complicated the government’s relationship with Hezbollah. Syria’s relationship with Hezbollah intimidated the Lebanese authorities; fearful that Syria would enforce its political desires on Lebanon through Hezbollah, Lebanon’s government attempted to weaken Syria’s influence by encouraging Hezbollah to disarm. If Beirut were successful in putting an end to the “freewheeling activities of the last of Lebanon’s operating

⁹⁹ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 113

militias” then it would have been in a better position to “initiate talks with Damascus about removal of Syrian troops from Lebanese soil.”¹⁰⁰

Hezbollah’s reservoir of public support, however, remained virtually untouchable throughout the 1990s. Such popularity gave Hezbollah a clear mandate to continue its military resistance against Israel’s occupation, and its continued participation in Lebanon’s government. Hassan Nasrallah best summarizes this stage of Hezbollah’s evolution into a representative national movement with serious mainstream political aspirations in an interview with Egypt’s *al-Ahram*. The interview took place on February 14th, 2000, a little over a month after Hezbollah killed seven Israeli soldiers during a particularly gruesome three-week period. Israel “responded” – with the assumed intent¹⁰¹ of weakening Hezbollah – by bombing three different power plants in Lebanon. Nearly half of the country was without electricity, and almost two-dozen Lebanese civilians were injured.¹⁰² The following statement was Nasrallah’s response to a question regarding why Israel bombed civilian installations after seven of its soldiers were killed:

“Thanks to the publicity campaign that accompanied [Israel’s] recent operations, we are now pursuing two objectives: first to foil the fait accompli that [Israel] is trying to impose on the ground. Israel says that it wants to protect its troops by targeting Lebanon’s infrastructure, and that this bombardment is their way of applying pressure on the resistance to stop their operations. We said in response that our operations would continue, because they are the right tools to foil their ‘troop protection vs. the bombardment of installations’ plan. Based on that, on the very day that followed the Israeli operations, we shelled the occupying troops and killed a number of them and their Lebanese agents. We did the same thing on Thursday against Antoine Lahd’s¹⁰³ troops, and yet again today, Friday, killing one Israeli and wounding three others. Some sources say that two Israelis have died. To put an end to these attacks, we are determined to continue mounting operations, regardless of the measures the enemy chooses to put in place,

¹⁰⁰ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 114

¹⁰¹ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 214. After the killing of seven Israeli soldiers in January of 2000, the Barak government threatened “dire consequences that would not spare Lebanese civilians...that would surprise the terrorists.”

¹⁰² Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 214

¹⁰³ Antoine Lahd was the general of the South Lebanese Army (SLA), one of Israel’s strongest proxy Maronite militias. After having survived an assassination attempt in the mid-1980s, Lahd went on to lead the SLA throughout Israel’s occupation of Lebanon. The SLA was most known for its torture of Lebanese prisoners in the *Khiam*, a prison in South Lebanon that Israel used to incarcerate and intimidate political activists, militants, and civilians throughout South Lebanon.

or the pressures it chooses to exert. I do not believe that Lebanon's government and people would accept that the occupation stays, unmolested, on its territory; as Lebanese, therefore, we have no other choice but to expel the occupiers from our country.

"Our second objective is to protect Lebanon's infrastructure and population. Based on that, we believe that it is in Lebanon's national interest, and the interest of the resistance, that we restrain ourselves while reserving the right to respond when we see fit. We believe that Israel's main intention was to provoke Hezbollah into responding violently, and that our self-restraint de-stabilized their entire plan. Although we will not use our Katyushas at this time, we reserve the right to respond at a time and in a manner of our own choosing; all options are still on the table. Settlers in the north should expect our revenge to come at any moment. I also believe that the position we took will keep Israel in a constant state of anxiety, because they know that our operations will continue as long as its occupation troops are still on our territory. "Regardless of their intellectual, religious or political affiliations, Lebanon's government, people, and army have expressed their support for the resistance, and for putting an end to the occupation. Lebanon has no problem regarding this issue, because it is not only the resistance's right to fight occupation, but also the right of the Lebanese people.¹⁰⁴

Nasrallah's commitment to self-restraint, particularly in response to Israeli attacks, represents his desire to advance Hezbollah's political evolution by actively adapting to changing political forces in both Israel and Lebanon. It is no coincidence that in his interview with *al-Ahram*, Hassan Nasrallah emphasizes Hezbollah's pursuit of two objectives, neither of which includes the dissolution of Israel. Mindful of the fact that Hezbollah has assumed new responsibilities as a result of its membership in Lebanon's government, Hassan Nasrallah articulates his position using nationalistic rhetoric that speaks to a broader audience than his core Shiite constituency. This not only affirms the previous argument regarding the shifting nature of Hezbollah's political program and ideology, but it also illustrates that Hezbollah's relationship with Lebanon is anything but static. Throughout the 1990s, many Lebanese respected Hezbollah "for its unshakable pursuit of the Israelis and its successes in inflicting damage over the years" yet also, to a certain extent, expected the Party of God to act in its own self-interests and not necessarily out of a concern for Lebanon's interests. However, Hassan Nasrallah contextualizes Hezbollah's mission to end Israel's occupation of South Lebanon within a

¹⁰⁴ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 215-16

nationalist framework by identifying resistance against Israel as a priority amongst all Lebanese. While some may attempt to write-off the language that Hassan Nasrallah uses in the above answer as political double-speak aimed at lulling Lebanon into a false sense of security, one cannot deny the strides that Nasrallah has taken as leader of Hezbollah for almost 18 years in developing Hezbollah's political agenda and promoting Lebanese unity by integrating Shiite Muslims into the mainstream.

Israel's withdrawal and its consequences on Hezbollah's identity and standing within Lebanese society

When Israel unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon a little more than three months after Nasrallah's interview with *al-Ahram*, the Islamic Resistance became the "only Arab army to have compelled Israel to unconditionally abandon occupied [Arab] territory through force of arms."¹⁰⁵ Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon was hardly a surprise; Israel's presence in Lebanon was too politically and economically costly, especially considering the consistency and effectiveness of Hezbollah's military resistance. In February of 2000, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak himself set an ambiguous timetable for Israel's pullout. As a result, Hezbollah had begun preparing for the withdrawal by warning Lebanon that Israel may punish Lebanon with a wide-scale offensive on its way out.¹⁰⁶ Although Israel's unilateral decision to remove its soldiers from Lebanon, with the exception of the hotly contested Shebaa Farms, validated Hezbollah's identity as the "Resistance," the independence of South Lebanon brought Hezbollah's relationships with

¹⁰⁵ Blanford, Nicholas in *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nassrallah*. p. 1

¹⁰⁶ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 218

Iran and Syria into the spotlight, and made it more difficult for Hezbollah to justify an armed Islamic resistance that cannot be held directly accountable by Lebanon or its national army. Considering that on May 24th, 2000 Lebanon was still not fully independent because of Syria's physical presence in much of North Lebanon and areas around Beirut, questions regarding Hezbollah's relationship with Syria intensified. In that same interview with *al-Ahram* months prior to Israel's withdrawal, Nasrallah addressed Hezbollah's relationship with Syria:

“We are a Lebanese Islamic jihadist movement that has its own cause, ideology and plans, as well as its own leadership and elected cadres; and Syria is a sister country, and a friend, with whom we share a common fate. We say that very earnestly, not to placate the Syrians but to state a fact, because our hopes are pinned on the unity of purpose among the Arabs and the common fate of the entire Islamic nation. At a time when the rest of our Arab brothers are busy pursuing their own interests, our friendship, brotherly relations, mutual trust, cooperation, and exchange of views with Syria are as strong as ever. But in the pursuit of the national and popular interests, Hezbollah makes its decisions alone and as it sees fit, and Israel's portrayal of Hezbollah as a Syrian tool is completely wrong.”¹⁰⁷

Nasrallah explicitly defines Hezbollah as a *Lebanese* movement in order to emphasize its dedication to advancing Lebanon's interests. Nasrallah clarifies Hezbollah's relationship with Syria, an Arab country led by a government that has had a history of animosity (to say the least) toward jihadist or Islamist elements, under the assumption that Syria and the rest of the Arab and Muslim world face dire consequences unless the problems Israel's existence poses are addressed collectively. Regarding the degree to which Hezbollah coordinates with Syria and the Lebanese government, Nasrallah had the following to say:

“We coordinate with Syria in the general sense, but we coordinate with no one regarding all that has to do with the resistance and the relevant details of its activities – neither with Syria nor the Lebanese government. In this respect, Hezbollah, the Lebanese government, and Syria are in agreement regarding the legitimacy of the resistance against occupation. On the other hand, what takes place in south Lebanon is

¹⁰⁷ Noe, Nicholas in *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nassrallah*. p. 226-227

governed by the terms of the April Understanding¹⁰⁸, and Hezbollah reiterates its commitment to this Understanding on a regular basis to the Syrian and Lebanese governments. The Lebanese government is not responsible for the actions of the resistance, because we do not coordinate our plans with it; this situation serves the interest of the resistance well, as well as that of the Lebanese government. Had the resistance been under the control of the Lebanese government, it would have been better for it to send the Lebanese army to fight in the south instead of relying on the resistance. In this case, the responsibility for all that took place would have fallen on the shoulders of the Lebanese government. Under the present circumstances, non one can blame the government for the actions of the resistance; furthermore, the situation as it is now makes the resistance more effective, genuine, and fit for the task of liberating the occupied territories.”¹⁰⁹

While it is certainly possible that Nasrallah intentionally downplayed Hezbollah’s “general” coordination with Syria, Nicholas Noe agrees that, “[Nasrallah’s] response to the question of Syrian involvement in the specifics of Hezbollah’s planning and implementation is generally plausible.”¹¹⁰ While Israel was occupying South Lebanon, it was not unusual for Hezbollah’s fighters to operate with virtual autonomy, taking advantage of opportunities to attack Israeli troops and outposts when they arise.¹¹¹ On Syria’s end, President Assad rejected the idea that Syria will impede Hezbollah’s resistance efforts, particularly if Israeli actions created a legitimate “rationale for Hezbollah responses.”¹¹²

However, the following questions still remain: how has Hezbollah justified its military wing following Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon – with the exception of the disputed Shebaa Farms – and the still unresolved assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri? How did Hezbollah reposition itself politically in Lebanon between the end of Israel’s occupation in 2000, the war between Hezbollah and Israel in the summer of 2006, and the hostilities between Hezbollah and militias that support Lebanon’s March

¹⁰⁸ The April Understanding, also known as the Grapes of Wrath Understanding, was a ceasefire agreement between Hezbollah and Israel in 1996 at the conclusion of Israel’s “Grapes of Wrath” operation in Lebanon.

¹⁰⁹ Noe, Nicholas in *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nassrallah*. p. 228-229

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 228

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 228

¹¹² *Ibid*, p. 228

14th movement? Lastly, how can we now evaluate Hezbollah's growing influence in Lebanon and its evolution into a national political movement that represents a broad spectrum of Lebanese?

Hezbollah's increased participation in Lebanese politics placed its military wing in a precarious position following Israel's May 2000 pullout. Initially, the Lebanese government supported the idea that Hezbollah constitutes a resistance organization, and not a terrorist network. In substantiating this argument, Beirut relied on international law, specifically the 1989 Fourth Geneva Convention.¹¹³ This particular convention "protects civilians under illegal occupation by a foreign power and stipulates that if the occupying power persistently violates this convention, the civilians can announce civil disobedience. If further provoked, they may use military force – again in the spirit of self-defence."¹¹⁴ All United Nations Security Council resolutions following Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1978 have labeled Israel an occupying power and demanded its immediate and unconditional withdrawal from Lebanon.¹¹⁵ Lebanon was thus able to rely on international law when arguing that Hezbollah had a right to resist Israel militarily. Through a dynamic political program, a vast bureaucracy dedicated to providing the most basic public services to Lebanon's most destitute, and a fierce resistance campaign against Israel's occupation, Hezbollah enjoyed widespread legitimacy throughout Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world. Hezbollah entered the 21st century as one of the most, if not the most, powerful political entity in Lebanon.

At the same time, considering that there was no longer a pervasive physical Israeli military presence in South Lebanon after May 24, 2000, the Lebanese government and

¹¹³ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 165

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 166

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 166

Hezbollah found one another in a position where they had to justify Hezbollah's military wing, especially after members of President George W. Bush's administration called for Hezbollah's immediate disarmament. While the US government had always considered Hezbollah a terrorist organization since its establishment, the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th, 2001 resulted in a media frenzy over Middle Eastern/Arab/Muslim terror networks. For example, when America's "Most Wanted Terrorist" list was published in October of 2001, the (now deceased) Imad Mughniyeh became the "focal point of America's pursuit of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization."¹¹⁶ Despite a lack of concrete evidence, Imad Mughniyeh was widely believed to have been responsible for numerous attacks against Israelis and Americans, including the 1982 truck bombings of US Marine barracks in Beirut, the systematic kidnapping of western foreigners in Lebanon throughout the 1980s, and the bombing of the Israeli Embassy and a Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires that left 144 dead.¹¹⁷ Consequently, the United States used Mughniyeh as a means of vilifying Hezbollah and putting pressure on Beirut to capture Mughniyeh, turn him over for questioning, and disarm Hezbollah.¹¹⁸

Hezbollah vs. the Bush administration: Testing Lebanon's loyalty to Hezbollah

America's uncompromising stance against Hezbollah contributed significantly to internal Lebanese conflict over Hezbollah's identity and makeup. Bush's "antiterrorism"

¹¹⁶ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 170

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 175

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 173-74

campaign applied a significant amount of pressure on former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri to freeze Hezbollah's bank accounts.¹¹⁹ When Hariri refused this demand based on Hezbollah's status within Lebanon as a resistance rather than a terrorist organization, the United States began applying pressure on Beirut to acquiesce by threatening Lebanon's economic health and vitality. In an interview with ABC in 2002, former National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice said the following: "Lebanon's efforts to reinvigorate its economy and advantageously integrate itself into the global economy will remain thwarted if Beirut doesn't respond to America's demands."¹²⁰

America's attitudes toward Hezbollah had two lasting effects. First, it added credibility to Hezbollah's identity as the vanguard against US and Israeli imperialism in the Middle East, especially considering that America's interest in disarming Hezbollah was directly related to America's desire to protect Israel's northern border and to curb perceived Syrian influence in the Middle East.¹²¹ Second, by linking Lebanon's economic prosperity with Lebanon's official position towards Hezbollah, the United States definitely exacerbated already existing tensions between Lebanon's various sects, and set the stage for future hostilities between Hezbollah and other Lebanese political parties. In 2002, the strategy of the Lebanese government was to rally popular support behind the official governmental position that Hezbollah is a resistance organization and not a terrorist network.¹²²

At the same time, the "diplomatic" pressures that the United States had placed on Lebanon complicated this objective. In order to ensure widespread support for its stance,

¹¹⁹ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 178

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 179

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 179

¹²² Ibid, p. 179

Beirut needed to “reassure the Lebanese public that their position on Hezbollah as resistance organization could stand up to America’s pressure rather than Israel’s and that no negative repercussions would befall Lebanon as a result of this stance on the terrorism vs. resistance controversy.”¹²³ In an attempt to quell sectarian tensions early, former President Emile Lahoud encouraged political leaders from various Christian sects, particularly Maronite political leaders, to help maintain Lebanese solidarity around Hezbollah. Lahoud’s rationale was simple: if the liberation of South Lebanon could be accomplished through national unity, then internal solidarity would protect Lebanon from the “upsets registered in many countries after the September 11th attacks.”¹²⁴

Lahoud’s tactics yielded positive results and bore testament to Hezbollah’s growing popularity across sectarian lines. Maronite Cardinal Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, a popular Christian leader that vehemently opposed Syrian influence and policy in Lebanon, bluntly disregarded the idea of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization when responding to a question on his way to an ecumenical conference in Rome: “These men are Lebanese citizens trying to free their country from foreign occupation; we all thank them for their efforts.”¹²⁵ Former Lebanese President Amin al-Gemayel, one of the more prominent members of the notoriously right-wing Gemayel political dynasty, jumped on the bandwagon to defend Hezbollah when he described the “branding of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization as ‘heresy’.”¹²⁶ President Lahoud’s efforts at maintaining national unity took place in cooperation with Muslim religious leaders, most of whom went to

¹²³ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 179

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 180

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 180

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 180

great lengths to rein in massive anti-American political demonstrations that could have aggravated tensions between Beirut and Washington DC.¹²⁷

For his part, former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri took Lebanon's defense of Hezbollah to the international arena, participating in a unique form of "shuttle diplomacy."¹²⁸ For example, at the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) meeting in Doha in October of 2002, Hariri was essential in drafting a statement that articulated the OIC's support for Muslims to defend themselves against imperialism and occupation. The statement not only condemned the September 11th terrorist attacks, but it also expressed the OIC's agreement that "any attempt to link Islam with terrorism, and any confusion of terrorism with the right of people's – notably the Palestinians and Lebanese – to legitimate defense and resistance to Israeli occupation is totally rejected."¹²⁹ If the United States were going to enjoy the support of Muslim governments in its global "War on Terror," Prime Minister Hariri made the Bush administration think twice about taking any action against Arab resistance groups. Even Lebanon's Central Bank rejected America's demand that it freeze Hezbollah's assets on the basis that such an order was not binding since it came from the United States and not the United Nations.¹³⁰ Central Bank officials called former National Security Advisor Rice on her bluff claiming that because the "demand to freeze Hezbollah's accounts did not originate from the International Court of Justice, whose requests are also binding internationally, it had no force."¹³¹

¹²⁷ Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 180

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 180

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 180

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 181

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 181

Hezbollah maintained that its military resistance was necessary despite the fact that Israel no longer occupied South Lebanon. By latching onto Israel's constant violation of Lebanon's airspace by Israeli reconnaissance planes, Hezbollah capitalized on an opportunity to remind all concerned of its liberation responsibility to Lebanon and the Middle East.¹³² Nasrallah also personally reiterated Hezbollah's commitment to defending Lebanon in a speech in October of 2002 following Lebanon's successful diversion of water from the Wazzani River, a "coveted source for the River Jordan, which, like the Hasbani River, also in the south, sprang from Lebanese lands."¹³³

"The United States, which is coming to impose its direct control over the region, knows very well that even if it brought all its military forces to Iraq, or elsewhere in the region, it would not be able to stay for long. The American and Israeli administrations have to understand that Arab and Muslim populations, and the people of this area as a whole, are not the Red Indians, whom they can annihilate or isolate in the desert or on the mountains. The people of this area are alive, and their ancestry goes back to the first human beings that walked on this land, which they call 'the Old World'.

"The onset of widespread American-Israeli barbarism in our region also marks the end of the United States' hegemony over the world, because it will unleash an open and unbalanced confrontation against it. The people on the other side of this confrontation are the leaders, officers, and soldiers, not a state that can be threatened, or a regime that can be dismantled and its financial resources dried up. As we said a few days ago, what took place, and is still happening in Wazzani, was a great victory. The fact that Lebanon could do what it did, and that Israel keeps quiet about it, is in itself a great accomplishment. Israel could make a sales pitch for its silence to the Americans, the United Nations, France, and the European Union, but the fact remains that the whole world knows that its silence, and its political sales pitch, is insincere. They all know that, if Israel had been able to respond one way or another, before or after the opening of the Summit¹³⁴, it would have done so. Now we hear people say once again that, since the Francophone Summit is over, Sharon may respond by launching an operation. I believe that it is a gross oversimplification to assume that Sharon did not bomb Lebanese installations before or after the opening of the Francophone Summit because it was being held in Lebanon. What he took into account when making this decision prior to the Francophone Summit, he will take again into account after the Summit is over.

"It is wrong for the Lebanese to assume that [the diversion of the Wazzani River] was all thanks to the Francophone Summit. This accomplishment came as a result of their unity, their state, their resistance, their people, and their solidarity with Syria – in addition to the Islamic Republic of Iran's support which endorses all Lebanon's endeavors to regain its usurped territorial, water, and other rights. All these things existed before the Francophone Summit, and will be there when it ends. We will reiterate everything we have said previously: any aggression against Lebanon will not be met by weakness, retreat, or submission; responsibility is responsibility, and a decision is a decision. Today, any weakness or lack of resolve in our

¹³² Harik, Judith Palmer. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. p. 183

¹³³ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 278

¹³⁴ According to Nicholas Noe, "the annual Francophone Summit, only days before Nasrallah's speech, brought French President Jacques Chirac to Beirut, as well as the leaders of 55 states around the world. In a well-reported appearance, Nasrallah attended the opening ceremonies."

words, our logic, or our performance does not mean that the other side will respect us, appreciate our circumstances, or cooperate with us; rather, it will lead to more arrogance, more tyranny, and more aggression against Lebanon and the region.”¹³⁵

While Hassan Nasrallah’s commentary is always useful in understanding Hezbollah’s position with regard to changing geopolitical events, his comments here are particularly telling of Hezbollah’s strategy in the months before America’s invasion of Iraq and at the height of the second Palestinian Intifada. Nasrallah was clearly taking advantage of Lebanon’s explicit support of Hezbollah’s resistance activities vis-à-vis Israel when he credited Lebanon’s unity, state, resistance, and people for the successful diversion of the Wazzani River. Nasrallah was making a political statement to both Lebanon and the international community that intra-Lebanese unity and the vitality of the resistance are far not mutually exclusive; rather, according to Nasrallah, resistance to Israeli aggression and occupation is an integral component of Lebanese national identity.

That being said, Nasrallah took a political gamble by claiming that both Syria and Iran support activities in Lebanon that benefit the Lebanese population as a whole. Such a claim was risky, especially considering that Syria’s legacy in Lebanon at the time of this particular speech was anything but uncontroversial. Although Nasrallah had articulated in previous speeches – including some of those mentioned above – that Hezbollah absolutely did not serve as a proxy of either Syria or Iran, by making the implicit assumption that *all* of Lebanon stood in solidarity with Syria and welcomed Iran’s support, Nasrallah set his own standards for what it meant to be a Lebanese nationalist. While it could be argued that Nasrallah was attempting to demonstrate to both Israel and the United States that an affront against Lebanon would not only result in a conflict with

¹³⁵ Noe, Nicholas: *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 280-81

Lebanon, but also with Iran and Syria, his statements still had the effect of alienating those Lebanese that felt differently about increased Iranian and Syrian influence in Lebanon specifically and the Middle East in general.

In February of 2005, the United States found a perfect opportunity to interrupt Lebanon's defense of Hezbollah. The assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, affectionately known as 'Mr. Lebanon', on February 14, 2005 sent shockwaves throughout Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world. Hariri's reputation as the man that had personally restored much of Beirut to its former glory following a bloody and protracted 15-year civil war was also complicated by his real estate ventures with Saudi businessmen and his subtle – yet nevertheless noticeable – detest for Syria's military presence in Lebanon.¹³⁶ As a result, Hariri's legacy in Lebanon was much different than that of other Lebanese politicians, which made his assassination particularly dramatic. The nature of his assassination further demonstrates the kind of power and influence Hariri wielded when he was alive; the bomb that had been used to kill Hariri was designed specifically to shred the doors of his heavily armored convoy of custom-made Mercedes.¹³⁷ Even the crater left by the explosion, which killed and maimed dozens of innocent passerby, was no less than 15 feet deep. By killing Hariri during the day in the middle of an always-crowded Beirut, Hariri's assassins were clearly trying to make a broader political statement about Hariri's anti-Syrian politics, his relationship with Saudi Arabia, or his reconstruction of Beirut through the privately-owned construction company, *Solidere*.

¹³⁶ Fisk, Robert. *The Killing of 'Mr. Lebanon': Rafik Hariri assassinated in Beirut bomb blast*. Independent Online. Tuesday February 15th, 2005

¹³⁷ Ibid

Although the international inquiry into Hariri's death has still failed to produce concrete results, Syria was identified as one of the primary suspects by the United States, Israel, and the European Union before the dust had even settled. The arrest of four top officers in Lebanon's security services shortly after Hariri's assassination in 2005 was, according to Time Magazine, "a sign that times had changed in Lebanon. Rarely had this war-torn country seen powerful men held to account for violent crimes – particularly when those crimes were deemed to suit Syria's agenda."¹³⁸ All four generals were eventually released from a Beirut prison, which frustrated both the leadership of the "Cedar Revolution" and those interested in curbing Syrian influence in Lebanon. The release of the generals was hardly surprising; after having served four years in prison without having been formally charged with a crime, the international community could no longer justify their detention. In fact, their release was ordered by a United Nations tribunal at The Hague, a move that cast further doubt on a case against Syria that had been initiated by The United States and France.

The case against Syria may have made intuitive sense to some, but lacked substance and was underdeveloped; even the witness that had "originally fingered the four Lebanese generals was later discredited and accused of taking bribes from anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians."¹³⁹ While there is no doubt that for years, Syrian intelligence disrespected Lebanon's sovereignty, the lack of material evidence to implicate Syria strained an already complex independent investigation. Before the investigation began, however, there was much skepticism as to the role Syria allegedly played in Hariri's

¹³⁸ Butters, Andrew Lee. *Is Lebanon's Cedar Revolution Over?* 4/29/2009

¹³⁹ Ibid

death. Professor Naseer Aruri describes the situation best in an article he wrote for

Counterpunch on February 22nd, 2005:

“There is no shortage of potential perpetrators [of Hariri’s assassination] considering that numerous actors, including Syria, Israel, the United States, Libya and Palestinian militias have all tried their hands at political assassinations in Lebanon through the use of bombing. Although the identity of the assassins may never be known and indeed may prove less important than the consequences, the important questions are, what the crime will lead to in geo-political terms, and who the greatest beneficiaries are? What is the likely impact of this heinous crime on the Lebanese political landscape and the regional map? We might even add the global dimension.

“Despite the fact that *most fingers are pointed at Syria and the Government of Lebanon*, [emphasis added] Syria has the most to lose by the revival of sectarian strife. Given the Bush administration’s pressure on Syria, and its declared intent to effect regime change in various Middle Eastern countries, *Syria would be shooting itself in the foot by taking any action that invites chaos in Lebanon*. [Emphasis added] Syria’s presence in Lebanon has become totally unacceptable to the US-President and Congress during the past four years. The Syria Accountability Act of 2003 and Security Council resolution 1559 of October 2004 impose sanctions on Syria and require Syria’s exit from Lebanon. Thus, Syria has been behaving cautiously.

“Syria’s situation today is not different from that of Iraq in 2002. Both were accused and/or suspected of supporting terrorism, building weapons of mass destruction, pursuing a policy of strategic deterrence vis-à-vis Israel, and undermining the growing US hegemony in the region. Once the United Nations, under pressure from the US, ordered Syria to quit Lebanon, the Iraq scenario came back alive. The only difference is that 1559 was more firm in its demands on Syria than were the resolutions which preceded the unlawful US invasion of Iraq in April 2003. Syria is requested to abandon its armed allies in Lebanon, to accommodate the Sharon agenda of evicting Palestinian organizations, even though they are mere press offices, and withdraw its 14,000 troops (already reduced from 40,000) inside its own borders. No such expectations are made of Israel even though it sits on top of the Syrian Golan Heights since 1967 and has a nuclear capacity without a shred of regional deterrence.”¹⁴⁰

Syria’s withdrawal, Hezbollah’s role as the ‘resistance’, and the rise of the March 8th and March 14th political alliances

According to the Taif Accord, which effectively ended Lebanon’s civil war, Hafez al-Assad was allowed to keep troops in Lebanon after the war had ended under the auspices that Syria would behave in such a manner as to protect “Lebanon’s security, independence, and unity.” Thus, Syria was obliged by the Accord to prevent “any act that

¹⁴⁰ Aruri, Naseer. *The Politics of Hariri’s Assassination: Remapping the Middle East*. Counterpunch, February 22, 2005.

poses a threat to Lebanon's security, independence, and sovereignty." While it is not necessary to discuss the internecine details of Syria's tumultuous relationship with Lebanon, it is important to note that Syria used Israel's occupation of South Lebanon as a means of justifying its occupation of Northern Lebanese regions at a time when Lebanon was rebounding. By keeping its forces inside of Lebanon after Israeli's pullout on May 24, 2000, Syria found it harder to justify such a 'relationship'. In many respects, Syria's involvement in and influence over Lebanese politics concerned many Lebanese and non-Lebanese alike. On September 2nd, 2004, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1559 which expressed the "Council's displeasure over Lebanese cabinet approval the day before of a three-year mandate extension for pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, and calling for a full withdrawal of all foreign (read Syrian) forces from Lebanon."¹⁴¹ In what became known as the American portion of the resolution, 1559 "also called for the disarming of Hezbollah and other Palestinian groups in Lebanon."¹⁴² It was this aspect of the resolution that made it politically unacceptable within Lebanon, even for those, like Hariri, that opposed excessive Syrian control and Lahoud's arbitrary "obstructionism."¹⁴³

Although many political parties, movements, organizations, and citizens were tired of Syria's presence in Lebanon – an early example being former President Michel Aoun's exile from Lebanon in the early 1990s after having taken a strong anti-Syrian position – the United States undoubtedly used Hariri's assassination to undermine Syria's influence in the Middle East and penetrate the unity Lebanon exhibited around Hezbollah's military. In order to thwart America's plans, Nasrallah discussed Hariri's assassination and the Bush administration's attempts to foment political unrest in front of

¹⁴¹ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 319

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 319

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 319

800,000 listeners on March 8th, 2005 in what was dubbed the “Independence Intifada.”

The following can be considered the ideological underpinnings of the March 8th political alliance:

“You who have come here from all regions, sects, and groups in Lebanon, and have answered the call to assemble in this place, will today decide the fate of your nation and country. You, the multitudes gathered here, are today above all suspicion, and there are no place for talk about gaps, here or there, among you any more. Today, you will answer the world, which is watching you, and I will always be one of you. Let me ask our partners in this nation, and those who watch us from abroad: Are all these people gathered here in their hundreds of thousands mere puppets? Are they all agents of Syrian and Lebanese intelligence? It is shameful to speak about one’s compatriots in such accusatory, divisive, and humiliating language...

Brothers and sisters, we are gathered here today to endorse the goals we made public at the press conference, chief among them the need to offer our thanks to Assad’s Syria: the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, the Syria of Bashar al-Assad, and to the honorable and steadfast Syrian people. We would also like to offer our thanks to the resisting Syrian army, which stood at our side during all the years of defense and resistance. We are gathered here today to remind the world, and our partners in this nation, that this square, in which we are gathered today, Martyrs’ Square, where you are gathered, has been destroyed by Israel and by civil war, but was unified, protected and secured by Syria and the blood of its officers and soldiers. [Former Israeli General Ariel] Sharon destroyed Beirut, and Hafez al-Assad protected it...

Dear brothers and sisters, if we succeed in discussing and deliberating matters among ourselves, I assure you that Syria will endorse everything that we will agree upon, and will back our unanimous decisions. Syria has always wanted what is good for Lebanon, and still does. Dear brothers and sisters – let me say it again – we are here to reject Resolution 1559 and defend the resistance, the option of resistance, and the duty and weapons of the resistance. We are here to reject the settlement policy [of nationalizing Palestinians in Lebanon] – not for racist reasons, God forbid, for our Palestinian brothers, who are residents and refugees in Lebanon, are our kin and loved ones, and will always be in our hearts and minds. We reject the settlement policy because we favor the alternative; in other words the return of the Palestinians to their own towns, homes, and fields. We are all here to safeguard our state-building project, the establishment of civil calm, and to prevent chaos...

To the United States, President Bush, Ms. Condoleezza Rice, and to the American field commander in Lebanon, Mr. [David] Satterfield,¹⁴⁴ I would like to say: your plans for Lebanon are suspect; your plans for Lebanon are wrong. Lebanon is immune to partitioning, immune to sedition, and immune to defeat. Let me also tell you: this Lebanon is immune to death; it will never change its name, history, identity, or garb; it will neither change its skin nor throw its heart for your soldiers’ dogs to eat. Lebanon will always be Lebanon, a homeland for its people, for Arabism, for the resistance, and for the entire nation. I would like to ask all of you present here – and would like your answer to reach the ears of the Commander of US forces in the region of the man of Lebanese origin, John Abizaid: Are you Lebanese people, afraid of the United States of America’s awesome military fleet? This same navy has come here before, and was defeated; and here it comes again and shall be defeated once more. Let me tell the Americans. Do not interfere in our internal affairs; let us be... We, the people of Lebanon, care more than anyone else about our homeland, and about protecting it, building our state, maintaining our unity, coexisting and preserving civil calm. Keep away, and take your seditious hands off our country.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ David Satterfield was, at the time, the US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. He had also served as the US Ambassador to Lebanon from 1998 to June of 2001.

¹⁴⁵ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 320-26

At the time of this speech, former Lebanese Prime Minister Omar Karami, a pro-Syrian politician who had replaced Rafik Hariri in October of 2004 after he resignation following a “falling-out” with Damascus over President Emile Lahoud’s ‘mandate extension’, was trying to save face after having himself resigned due to mounting political pressure.¹⁴⁶ Hassan Nasrallah’s support for Syria must be understood in the context of the political climate following Hariri’s assassination, and should not be interpreted as a shift in Hezbollah’s relationship with Syria. Hezbollah’s regional and domestic role as the chief vanguard against US and Israeli imperialism, aggression, and interests compelled Nasrallah to articulate his unwavering solidarity with Syria; had the United States not taken such a hostile position toward Syria and Hezbollah’s military through UN Security Council Resolution 1559, perhaps Nasrallah would have toned down his pro-Syrian rhetoric.

Nasrallah was again taking a political risk of sorts when he stated, as fact, that Syria’s involvement in Lebanon during the civil war was a selfless act done on behalf of the late Hafez al-Assad. The history of Syrian-Lebanese relations, however, appears to contradict Nasrallah’s claims. According to Nicholas Noe, “Hafez al-Assad’s ‘protection’ of Beirut, initially (and most notably) during the first Syrian intervention in Lebanon in 1976 (ostensibly to prevent a Palestinian-Leftist-Druze defeat of the Maronites), was not a purely humanitarian gesture.”¹⁴⁷ There is no doubt that Assad had desired to absorb Lebanon and return back to the pre-colonial days when Greater Syria included Lebanon, Palestine, and (Trans)Jordan. By leaving its soldiers in Lebanon and manipulating the

¹⁴⁶ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 319

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 320

highest levels of Lebanon's government, Bashar al-Assad validated many concerns about Syria's motives in Lebanon.

Nevertheless, there is no mistaking that on March 14, 2005 when more than one million people descended on Beirut around Hariri's tomb and demanded that Syria withdraw from Lebanon immediately, the US State Department appropriated the event by calling it the "Cedar Revolution," and began providing diplomatic support to the fledgling March 14th political movement. While it was unclear what effect this moment would have on Hezbollah's political standing and reputation in Lebanon, the effects on Syria were felt without delay; on April 26, 2005, Syria notified the United Nations that it had removed all of its soldiers from Lebanon.¹⁴⁸ While Lebanon had finally realized true independence for the first time since its civil war, Syria's retreat from Lebanon satisfied, in part, UN Security Council Resolution 1559. This was obviously a severe setback for Hezbollah considering that Syria had essentially left Lebanon as a result of external, US-led pressure.

In terms of its popularity, Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon at essentially the behest of the United States indicated that America's power in Lebanon was growing, which represented an implicit threat to Hezbollah and its role as the resistance. Both Hezbollah and Syria remained at the center of international attention throughout the remainder of 2005 when the explicitly anti-Syrian Saad Hariri, Rafik Hariri's son, gained control of parliament following elections that gave Hezbollah substantial representation in parliament and control over a minor cabinet position. The assassination of two prominent anti-Syrian journalists, Samir Qasir and Gibran Tueni, in June and December respectively, fueled conspiracy theories regarding Hezbollah's relationship with Syria.

¹⁴⁸ UN Security Council Press Release, 4/29/2005

Some believed that Hezbollah was helping Syria assassinate anti-Syrian politicians, journalists, and newscasters including Samir Qasir, Gibran Tuani, Pierre Gemayel, and May Chidiac.

The United States, thrilled with having virtually coerced Syria out of Lebanon, was also determined implement the rest of UN Resolution 1559, particularly the portion that demanded Hezbollah forfeit its weapons. Although Israel had been anticipating and planning for a war against Lebanon since 2004, the United States was committed to seeing Israel take military action against Hezbollah.¹⁴⁹ According to the late Ze'ev Schiff, former author and dean of Israel's military correspondents, "US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is the figure leading the strategy of changing the situation in Lebanon, not Prime Minister Ehud Olmert or Defense Minister Amir Peretz."¹⁵⁰ Merely seven weeks before the start of what was dubbed a "spontaneous" war between Israel and Hezbollah, Bush "strongly encouraged [former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert] to launch an attack on Lebanon soon, offering the United States' full support for the massive military operation" at a May 23 summit with Olmert.¹⁵¹ Three days after the summit, two Islamic militants were killed in Saida, a coastal Lebanese city, in clashes with Israeli agents. This led to a series of 'tit-for-tat' events between Hezbollah and Israel that culminated in Hezbollah's kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers on July 12, 2006.

War with Hezbollah: Israel attacks Lebanon

¹⁴⁹ Zunes, Stephen. *Washington's Proxy War*. p. 2

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 2

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p. 2

The sheer magnitude of Israel’s “response” to the kidnapping of Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser proved the coordinated and planned nature of the attack. According to a groundbreaking report by Human Rights Watch titled “Why They Died,” Israeli warplanes launched nearly 7,000 bomb and missile strikes in Lebanon, supplemented by naval and artillery shelling, that resulted in the death of at least 1,109 Lebanese “the vast majority of whom were civilians.”¹⁵² Thousands of homes were destroyed, and nearly 1 million people were physically displaced. When faced with why its attacks had resulted in the death of so many Lebanese civilians, Israel staunchly maintained that Hezbollah used “human shields” and attacked Israel from within densely populated areas. Human Rights Watch’s report directly contradicts Israel claims, and puts the onus squarely on Israel:

“Our research shows that the primary reason for the high Lebanese civilian death toll was Israel’s frequent failure to abide by a fundamental obligation of the laws of war: the duty to distinguish between military targets, which can be legitimately attacked, and civilians, who are not subject to attack. This was compounded by Israel’s failure to take adequate safeguards to prevent civilian casualties...

Israeli officials content that the reason for the high fatality rate was not indiscriminate targeting by Israeli forces, but the Hezbollah military’s allegedly routine practice of hiding among civilians and using them as ‘shields’ in the fighting. If Israeli attacks on Hezbollah forces also killed civilians and destroyed homes, Israeli officials have argued, the blame lies with Hezbollah. The evidence Human Rights Watch uncovered in its on-the-ground investigations refutes this argument.

Hezbollah at times violated laws of war in its deployment of forces in Lebanon. It also frequently violated the laws of war in its rocket attacks on Israel, which is the subject of a separate Human Rights Watch report, *Civilians Under Assault*.¹⁵³ On some occasions, our research shows, Hezbollah fired rockets from within populated areas, allowed its combatants to mix with the Lebanese civilian population, or stored weapons in populated civilian areas in ways that violated international humanitarian law. Such violations, however, were not widespread: *we found strong evidence that Hezbollah stored most of its rockets in bunkers and weapons storage facilities located in uninhabited fields and valleys, that in the vast majority of cases Hezbollah fighters left populated civilian areas as soon as the fighting started, and that Hezbollah fired the vast majority of its rockets from pre-prepared positions outside villages. On the question of whether Hezbollah intentionally used civilians as “shields” – that is, whether Hezbollah forces not only endangered civilians in violation of the duty to take all feasible precautions to spare civilians the hazards of armed conflict but also deliberately deployed among civilians with the aim of protecting themselves from*

¹⁵² Human Rights Watch. “Why They Died.” p. 4

¹⁵³ Human Rights Watch found that by launching rockets into Israel indiscriminately, Hezbollah had killed 43 Israeli civilians, 12 Israeli soldiers, and wounded hundreds of Israeli civilians. These numbers do not reflect the number of Israeli soldiers in Lebanon that Hezbollah killed during the fighting.

attack – a serious laws of war violation, we found a handful of instances but nothing to suggest a widespread practice.”¹⁵⁴[Emphasis Added]

Israel’s total disregard for civilians and civilian targets also resulted in widespread infrastructural damage across Lebanon, particularly throughout the south and in the suburbs of Beirut. Lebanon’s airport had been bombed, bridges were destroyed, and dozens of buildings used by Hezbollah in order to carry out its civil responsibilities were reduced to rubble.

Israel’s attack on Hezbollah was also an attack on Hezbollah’s popularity and standing within Lebanon. As Israel has done throughout its occupation of Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories, it employed a policy of collective punishment in its “war” with Hezbollah in the summer of 2006. The goal, in this case, was to convince the Lebanese public that support for Hezbollah would undermine Lebanon’s stability and safety. In spite of widespread international criticism for its behavior, the United States gave Israel its full support throughout its bombardment of Lebanon, thus giving more credibility to Nasrallah’s claims that US interests in the Middle East are destructive and too closely tied to Israeli interests. As the hostilities progressed, it became clear that both Israel and the United States were attempting to divide Lebanese society by demonstrating that Hezbollah was more of a liability than an asset. When the hostilities ended on August 14, 2006 with the implementation of UN Resolution 1701, both Ehud Olmert and Hassan Nasrallah declared victory. For Olmert and the United States, the implementation of UN Resolution 1701 meant that Hezbollah would be forced to withdraw north of the Litani

¹⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch. *Why They Died*. P. 5

River, thereby making way for the Lebanese army and a UN peacekeeping force.¹⁵⁵ Israel and the United States hoped that such a situation would apply more pressure on Hezbollah to disarm. On the other hand, Nasrallah was able to claim victory simply because Olmert failed to completely demolish Hezbollah's power in Lebanon, an obviously absurd goal that Olmert made right as the "war" began.¹⁵⁶

Hezbollah, having insulated itself politically by joining the Lebanese cabinet for the first time in its history after the elections in 2005, recognized that it was necessary to emphasize its moral victory over Israel considering that much of Lebanon had suffered tremendously because of Israel. Hezbollah's responsibilities were also complicated by the March 8th political alliance between Hassan Nasrallah and the previously exiled, anti-Syrian politician Michel Aoun. After refusing to join Saad Hariri's March 14th alliance, which implicated Syria in the death of Rafik Hariri, Michel Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement struck an agreement with Hezbollah in February of 2006 known as the "Paper of Common Understanding Between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement."¹⁵⁷ Such an agreement was not only demonstrative of the new popularity and power that Hezbollah wielded in Lebanon, but it also necessitated that Nasrallah cater to a wider base in Lebanon than to what he was previously accustomed. In an interview with New TV, a Lebanese news station, Nasrallah said: "You ask me now: If there was even a 1 percent chance that the July 11 [kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers] would have led to a war like the one that happened, would you have done it? I would say no, absolutely not,

¹⁵⁵ Although Lebanese troops and UN peacekeeping forces have been deployed along the border between Israel and Lebanon, Nasrallah claims that Hezbollah still operates inconspicuously south of the Litani River.

¹⁵⁶ The Economist. "Nasrallah wins the War." August 19th, 2006

¹⁵⁷ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 371

for humanitarian, moral, social, security, military, and political reasons.”¹⁵⁸ In that same interview with New TV, Nasrallah again proactively addressed concerns regarding Hezbollah’s capacity to establish an Islamic state in Lebanon, and whether or not he had Lebanon’s best interests at heart:

“Hezbollah, with its huge military capabilities, and the rest of its allies, who were and still are targeted, could have staged a military coup and taken control of the country. Could we not? We are capable of that and still are. You might say that I am scaring the people here. The problem does not lie here. The problem is that this party, from the very first day, clearly declared that its weapons were pointed at this enemy [Israel]. My weapons are to defend the country, and all Lebanese. My weapons, my blood, my self, my children, and all my beloved are in the service of all the Lebanese, Arabs, Muslims, and the honorable so that their heads will remain held high.”¹⁵⁹

As a result of its growing popularity across sectarian lines and the increased role Hezbollah played on an institutional level in Lebanon, Nasrallah understood his personal responsibility to proactively quell suspicions that Hezbollah was seeking to undermine and subvert the existing political system in a way that would jeopardize the safety of Lebanese, particularly Christians and Sunni Muslims. The March 14th political movement therefore posed a unique threat to Hezbollah because it was a Lebanese political party that arguably undermined Lebanon’s security by allying itself so closely to the United States, as discussed earlier. It is through this political context that we should understand the internal hostilities between Hezbollah and militias associated with March 14th in May of 2008 and the elections in 2009. Contrary to the widespread perception that Hezbollah’s swift takeover of Sunni strongholds in and around Beirut was an attempt to “bully” March 14th into giving Hezbollah veto power in the cabinet, Hezbollah *reacted* to intimidation tactics taken at the time by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. According to

¹⁵⁸ Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 394

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 402

Marco Vicenzino of the Lebanese Daily Star, “The decision by the government of Fouad Siniora to ban Hezbollah’s phone network, which is critical to its military operations, and dismiss a Shia army officer responsible for security at Beirut’s airport, was taken as a ‘declaration of war’ by Hezbollah, which briefly took control of western Beirut.”¹⁶⁰

**Interpreting the 2009 Parliamentary elections after the May 2008 conflict
furthered the divide between March 8th and March 14th**

The swift, retaliatory action Hezbollah took virtually paralyzed Beirut; Lebanon’s airport was shut down, roads were blocked off, and violent clashes between Hezbollah and government supporters claimed more than 65 lives. The sudden escalation in violence was a purposeful demonstration of Hezbollah’s power by Nasrallah. Rather than simply taking over the government by force, Nasrallah was clearly interested in showing March 14th and its western backers that Hezbollah’s position in Lebanon was vulnerable to popular vote, and not political scare-tactics. At the same time, Hezbollah added a new dimension to its identity as a resistance organization when Nasrallah, arguably for the first time in the organization’s history, used Hezbollah’s military capacity against other Lebanese citizens. Nasrallah never described the situation as such, however, because for him and the rest of Hezbollah, Lebanese citizens acting on behalf of foreign elements constitutes a threat both to the resistance and to Lebanese sovereignty. From Nasrallah’s perspective, he was protecting Lebanon from insidious western influence. This should not have come as a surprise to Lebanon or the international community, especially considering a speech that Nasrallah made on May 25, 2005:

¹⁶⁰ Vicenzino, Marco. “Lebanon Needs political compromise.” Daily Star, May 20, 2008.

“Brothers and sisters, let us move on to today’s concerns and the challenges of the current phase, even though there is not enough time to review the entire history and accomplishments of the resistance. To sum up, the resistance has managed to regain the large majority of Lebanon’s occupied territories, release the greatest number of prisoners from Israeli jails, and establish a balance of deterrence that ensures the security of Lebanon, its people, and infrastructure. It has done this by confronting aggression politically – in other words, by enabling Lebanon to withstand new Israeli and American pressure aiming at subjugating Lebanon and submitting it to their dictates. It is the resistance as a factor of power for Lebanon that will be targeted in the phase that will immediately follow the upcoming elections – whether by America, by the West as a whole, or by Israel – and we should be ready to face the onslaught.

Some speak about the resistance’s weapons as being separate from the resistance itself; [but] weapons without the resistance have no value. The real value of the resistance and its religious and national duty is its humanity, the human being, and above all, you the people; the weapons came after all this. It is the right of [Former Israeli Prime Minister] Sharon, Shalom, and Israeli to be proud of their success in placing the international community in a confrontation with those who have defeated it in Lebanon. Israel has been able to place the international community face to face with the resistance through Resolution 1559. Look at this paradox, brothers and sisters; in 1978 the Israeli army invaded parts of South Lebanon, and the Security Council of the United Nations issued Resolution 425.¹⁶¹ Yet, the international community did nothing to implement this resolution. It did not threaten Israel with placing the resolutions under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, which allows the Security Council to launch military action against a given country, and it took no measures whatsoever against it. It adopted Resolution 425, then put it in the drawer; 22 years have since passed, and this resolution has yet to be implemented. Nothing whatsoever was done to implement it. *Neither the international community, international willpower, nor Israel’s moral principles and remorse finally forced Israel to leave Lebanon. It was you, the resistance, and the people’s blood and sacrifice, that removed Israel from Lebanon...* [Emphasis Added]

But the UN Security Council, the whole world, and the international community want us, who own a modest arsenal of defensive yet effective weapons, to disarm the resistance in Lebanon, and [they] threaten Syria, Iran, and Lebanon for that same purpose. This is the sort of climate they want. Under such circumstances, our region is doomed to weakness and disintegration; but then, who will protect whom? Who cares about whom? And who will seek help from whom? The Arab peoples and states will end up in a situation where each is preoccupied, tending to his own situation, his own problems and his own war, created by the Americans under the banner of democracy and so on. This is the climate under which the Americans will proceed, immediately after the elections, to disarm the resistance. The question that once again poses itself here is: Why this American insistence? Is it for the sake of Lebanon’s Christians, Lebanon’s Muslims, or Lebanon’s stability and security? No – it is all for Israel’s sake.”¹⁶²

Hezbollah sees the resistance as a moral imperative that is necessary in order to protect Lebanon and the Middle East from divisive American and Israeli interests.

Nasrallah also understands that Hezbollah’s ability to protect Lebanon hinges on its capacity to nurture and develop a strong base of support that transcends sectarian identities and divisions. At the same time, when he speaks about the resistance here, he

¹⁶¹ UNSCR 425 called for Israel’s immediate and unconditional withdrawal from Lebanese territory.

¹⁶² Noe, Nicholas. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. p. 341

implicitly alienates those Lebanese that have chosen to affiliate and align themselves with the United States politically. The conflict in May 2008 was a physical expression of an ideological struggle that had been taking place in Lebanon since Israel's withdrawal from Lebanese territory in 2000. The development of two distinct political coalitions, the "pro-west" March 14th led by Saad Hariri and March 8th led by Michel Aoun, further exacerbated an ongoing conflict in Lebanon regarding its relationship with the United States, Israel, Iran, and other members of the international community. The ratification of the Doha Accord on May 21, 2008 brought an end to the hostilities and proved that Hezbollah was open to serious political compromise and Nasrallah is not susceptible to political coercion. Although the agreement reached at Doha did not make tangible changes to Lebanon's electoral program, the Accord gave Hezbollah the coveted veto power within the cabinet that Nasrallah needed in order to protect Hezbollah's weapons and identity as Lebanon's resistance.

On April 1, 2009, Hezbollah released its list of candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections on June 7th, 2009. Every single one of Hezbollah's candidates won the elections in their respective districts, with the exception of Amin Shirri from Beirut's Second Constituency. While it is difficult to interpret elections in Lebanon the same way one would interpret elections in a legitimate democracy that does not make parliamentary assignments in order to fulfill sectarian quotas, Hezbollah's strong performance bears testament to its political clout throughout Lebanon. However, the March 14th coalition finished the elections having won a majority of parliamentary seats, 71, to the 57 seats won by the March 8th coalition. As a result, Hezbollah was said to have lost influence amongst its Christian allies because of its "war" with Israel in 2006 and the

outbreak in violence in May of 2008. According to an article in the Council on Foreign Relations that appeared the day after the elections took place, Mohammad Bazzi, former chief Middle East correspondent for *Newsday*, claimed that bickering within the Maronite Christian community contributed to March 8th's failure to secure a majority of parliament. For example, Nasrallah Sfeir, the Maronite patriarch that had once defended Hezbollah in reaction to pressure from the United States, urged Christian voters "to support the existing pro-Western government and not throw their backing to the Christian faction led by Michel Aoun, part of the Hezbollah-led opposition."¹⁶³

It is important to recognize, however, that while the Hezbollah-led March 8th coalition underperformed in the 2009 elections, the delicate balance of power that existed before the elections remained the same. Mohammad Bazzi from the Council on Foreign Relations had the following to say:

"One of the most important things to keep in mind is that Hezbollah itself did not lose any of the seats that it had coming into this election. The entire premise of this election was that Hezbollah's main Christian ally, General Michel Aoun, would be the one to pick up more seats – that he would pick up more of the Christian-dominated seats and therefore, this would give that alliance a shot at winning the majority. Aoun did not do as well as expected; he did not pick up more seats. So therefore this Hezbollah-led alliance did not win the majority. We have a scenario now with a distribution of seats similar to the current one we have. The March 14th coalition, the pro-Western movement, has sixty-eight seats, Hezbollah and Aoun and their other allies have fifty-seven seats, and it appears that there are three independents who've won seats. Most likely these independents will ally themselves with March 14th, so we might have a breakdown of seventy-one to fifty-seven, which for Lebanon is a significant majority."¹⁶⁴

Hezbollah's credibility across sectarian divisions should not be evaluated simply by its performance in the 2009 elections, nor should we interpret the success, or lack thereof, of the March 8th political alliance as a reflection of Hezbollah's ability to form meaningful political coalitions with influential Christian or Druze political movements or

¹⁶³ Council on Foreign Relations. *Uncertain Times After Lebanon's Vote*. June 8, 2009

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

organizations. After having once described himself as a “hostage in his own home” in a conversation with political rival Nabih Berri after Hezbollah fighters surrounded his townhouse in Beirut, Walid Jumblatt, de facto leader of the Druze population in Lebanon and a member of March 14th, appeared to question his coalition’s relationship with the United States in a speech he gave in August of 2009:

“Then, the Independence Revolution and the repercussions of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri among other martyrs emerged. We did what was logical and what was illogical, while emotions sometimes prevailed over logic. However, we did our duty in regards to the tribunal, which we hope will reveal the truth and become a headline for stability. We do not want a tribunal whose headline is chaos and we do not want it to be controlled by countries or sides, which could take it to another location...

“We also did what was illogical when we met with the neoconservatives in Washington to protect the so-called Cedar Revolution, freedom and independence. It was unnatural for the [Progressive Socialist Party] in its historical context and positioning to meet with those who spread chaos in the Middle East and destroyed Iraq and Palestine. At the time however – and I am not here to justify the decision – our main concern was the tribunal. Maybe we could have abstained from going, but what happened is done and this constituted a black mark in our history and in the white and clear history of the party at the level of its constant struggle alongside the Palestinian cause, the Arab cause, and the cause of Arab Lebanon...

“I believe [that the 2009 elections] confirmed the sectarian division in the country. Those who were pleased with the victory saw that it was a temporary one, for this opportunity evaporated and the victory had no value. It corroborated however the need to get rid of the sectarian system. Today, we have entered what is referred to as being a consensual democracy, which brings back to mind the meetings of the clans and the tribes, whether in Al-Anbar, in Basra, or even in Lebanon. When they brag about a civil society, there is no civil society. there is a popular community, or as they call it in Afghanistan a meeting of meetings or clans. Certainly they conduct elections, but the agreement over the formula is reached following the meeting of these clans. Therefore, the government formation will allow the Lebanese tribes of which we are part, to agree on a new formula under the headline of concord, centrism, or any other slogan.”¹⁶⁵

While Jumblatt would later clarify his comments in order to dispel rumors that he was potentially leaving March 14th, Jumblatt’s regretful tone in regards to the relationship March 14th formed with the United States, his conciliatory and respectful attitude toward Hezbollah indicates that the potential for the Party of God to further integrate itself into Lebanon’s mainstream is still present despite a disappointing electoral performance by March 8th. Although Hariri and his Christian Phalangist allies had campaigned on a

¹⁶⁵ Speeches Archives, Walid Jumblatt. www.nowlebanon.com

platform that promised a strong and uncompromising Lebanese state and an effective monopoly on the force of arms, Jumblatt reminded his compatriots that political compromise was always preferable to clannish and tribal conflict. His explicit criticism of Lebanon's confessionalist system is reminiscent of Hezbollah's rhetoric regarding political and electoral reform. Jumblatt's words prove that, in the aftermath of a supposedly decisive defeat of Hezbollah in the 2009 elections, Hezbollah's appeal is certainly not limited to South Lebanon, the *Bekaa*, or the suburbs of Beirut.

Conclusion

Through a dynamic political program embedded in an adaptable political ideology and a nuanced understanding of its religious obligations, Hezbollah has transformed the way Shiites are perceived in Lebanon, and created a political movement that has had lasting ramifications on the Arab geopolitical landscape. Hezbollah evolved from a localized guerilla network into a national movement by embracing an interpretation of the Quran that prioritized social justice over violent revolution; by maintaining a dynamic political program that was accountable to current events and Lebanon's needs rather than an inflexible religious ideology; and by functioning as the primary and most effective armed resistance against Israel. By providing bare necessities like health care, education, and waste management to thousands of Lebanese, Hezbollah continues to fill a void created by an inherently undemocratic Lebanese government that has virtually ignored the plight of Lebanon's Shiites and often left Lebanon susceptible to foreign occupation and general disarray. Hezbollah also engages in a unique form of social resistance against

Lebanon's confessionalist system by participating in Lebanon's government and working outside of it simultaneously, thus adding to its authority, legitimacy, and trustworthiness amongst Lebanese.

Since its 1985 Open Letter, Hezbollah continues to experience shifts in its political program and ideology that have allowed it to evolve and become a fixture of Lebanese politics and civil society. Hezbollah's March 8th alliance with Christian political parties affiliated with the historically anti-Syrian Michel Aoun is just one of the many contemporary examples of Hezbollah's developing political program. While its religious ideology remains the same as it did in 1985, Hezbollah has consistently demonstrated its willingness to modify its political program in order to adjust to the shifting political realities of Lebanon and the rest of the Middle East. Considering that the United States continues to occupy Iraq, make threatening overtures toward Iran, and unconditionally support Israel's brutal military occupation of the Palestinian Territories, Hezbollah's identity as the vanguard against US and Israeli imperialism is unlikely to change dramatically. Its position within Lebanon, however, will continue to change as Lebanon struggles to reconcile its rigid and archaic confessionalist system with its desire to become a strong nation-state that relies on true democracy. To be sure, Hezbollah's weapons will continue to be a point of contention amongst Lebanese and will, unfortunately, continue to define America's popular perception of Hezbollah. For its part, Hezbollah has done everything it can to ensure that it remains a part of Lebanon's intricate political equation.