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Hezbollah:

An Autonomous Non-State Actor or a Regional Proxy?

By

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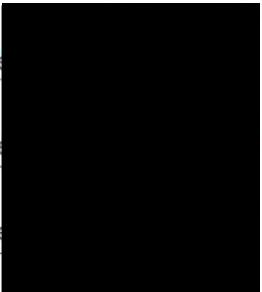
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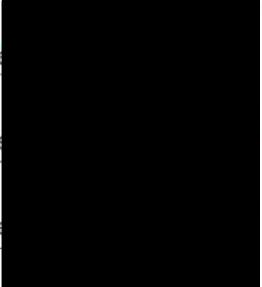
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To my Father...

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Hezbollah:
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Hadi Wahab

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines what kind of label as a non-state actor does Hezbollah fit. Can it be described as an autonomous non-state actor or, alternatively, a proxy one? To explain this puzzle, the thesis focuses on specific theatres of operation: namely, the Lebanese context and its environs along the border area with Syria, and the larger geopolitical context in which Hezbollah operates as a proxy for Iran's geopolitical interests, in Iraq, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Syria, and Yemen. The thesis argues that the more Hezbollah operates in the former context the more it approaches the status of an autonomous non-state actor, while its extensive activities in the latter turn it into a proxy non-state actor. The implications of this argument to International Relations (IR) theory are straightforward: in the ongoing geopolitical battle over the Middle East, non-state actors are as important as state actors.

Keywords: Hezbollah; Non-State Actors; Lebanon; Occupied Palestinian Territories; Syria; Iraq; Yemen; US

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List of Abbreviations

FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MP	Member of the Parliament
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territories
SSNP	Syrian Social Nationalist Party
STL	Special Tribunal for Lebanon
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	Resolution
US	United States

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Throughout the Cold War, and beyond, realism was the dominant theoretical approach in International Relations. The theory of realism consists of four key assumptions: the international system is anarchic, states are the main actors in this system, states behave like rational actors, and, finally, they all want to survive in an anarchic system (Donnelly, 2008, p.150).

Nevertheless, realist thought has given rise to different variations: classical realism, neorealism, offensive and defensive realism. Nevertheless, all realist scholars focus on the state as a unitary actor, and ignore the role of non-state actors in inter-state relations. However even staunch realists like Stephen Walt have started rethinking basic realist assumptions, in the process accepting a role for non-state actors: “All you have to do is think about terrorist organizations equipped with biological weapons or nuclear weapons; they could do extraordinary levels of damage; far more than any non-state actor could ever have done in the past” (Walt, 2009).

Transnational organizations are playing a major role in world politics, and the effectiveness of non-state actors is growing. In a liberal world, with interconnectedness and cross-border technologies, the role of non-state actors has become more robust. A terrorist organization such as the Islamic State cannot be ignored in international relations

studies. Al-Qaeda is a non-state actor that successfully executed the 9/11 explosions on American grounds. Realism ignores all these non-state actors considering the state as the only actor. This thesis tackles the role of perhaps one of the most important non-state actors in the Middle East: Hezbollah. The role of Hezbollah has certainly evolved over time. From a resistance group fighting to liberate Lebanon from Israeli occupation, Hezbollah became a decision maker and an essential actor in the geopolitics of the region.

Writings before the Arab uprisings typically examined the emergence of Hezbollah, the impoverishment of the Shi'a in Lebanon, their marginalization and confrontation with Israel. The party's role has grown substantially, however. Hezbollah is now operational in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Consequently, a new literature examines the situation and the role that the party is playing in the region. "Hezbollah has transformed itself from a little-known, secretive apparatus founded by Iran's Revolutionary Guards into one of the most powerful non-state domestic actors in Lebanon and a major player in the regional politics" (Mikaelian and Salloukh, 2015). Hezbollah's evolving role beyond the Lebanese borders made them a key player in the region's politics.

In 1982, Hezbollah emerged as a resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. "The social-economic and political predicament of the Lebanese Shi'a community" (Mikaelian, 2009), and the politicization of the Shi'a after the Islamic revolution in 1979 were two major causes of the new role the Shi'a are playing in Lebanon. Funded, trained and supported by Iran and Syria to some extent, Hezbollah managed to force Israel to retreat from Lebanon in 2000 after sustaining heavy losses. Following this withdrawal, Hezbollah enjoyed much Lebanese and Arab support. Hezbollah's political role in Lebanon evolved with time. Three major events shaped Hezbollah's strategic environment after the Israeli withdrawal: the 1559 UNSC resolution which referred to the

need to disarm militias in Lebanon – a direct reference to Hezbollah, the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, and the 2006 war against Israel.

But it is Hezbollah's regional role that has established it as one of the most important players in the Middle East. Militarily, its capabilities are constantly evolving. Experts were sent to battlefields in Syria, Iraq and Yemen to train fighters and to offer logistical aid during battles. More recently, Hezbollah demonstrated its military credential in Syria. Their intervention in Syria started under the pretext of securing Shi'a religious shrines. The party then started participating directly in the clashes side by side with the Syrian army. Since 2012, Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria escalated, and is now fighting together with the Syrian forces all over Syrian territory. Hezbollah has imposed itself as a major actor on different battlefields, from Lebanon to Syria and Iraq.

How then do we classify the party? Is it a guerilla group, mercenary force, resistance, terrorist movement, non-state actor, proxy or autonomous actor? This thesis examines whether Hezbollah is an autonomous or proxy non-state actor. Given the multiple theaters in which it operates, this thesis suggests that it is best to consider Hezbollah as both an autonomous *and* proxy non-state actor depending on the theater of its operation.

1.2 Literature Review

On 12 July 2006, Hezbollah launched an operation in South Lebanon against Israeli troops that resulted in the capture of two hostages from the Israeli army. This attack was considered an act of war between Hezbollah and Israel, not a war between Lebanon and Israel. Then Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora stated that his government was

not aware of Hezbollah's raid before it happened and consequently the Lebanese state does not take responsibility of what happened at the border between Lebanon and Israel. In retaliation, Israeli air strikes focused on Shi'a residential areas, targeting Hezbollah's population, networks, and military installations. In addition, during the 2006 war, indirect negotiations took place between Hezbollah and Israel. Since day one, Israel demanded that Hezbollah release the hostages. BBC news reported that "Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said he would agree to a ceasefire if Hezbollah returned the two captured soldiers and stopped firing rockets at northern Israel, and Lebanon implemented UN Security Council resolution 1559, calling for the disarmament of the militant group"¹. On 11 August 2006, the Security Council adopted a ceasefire draft that was agreed upon by Israel and Hezbollah. The war ended on August 14, and an exchange of hostages took place two days later between Hezbollah and Israel. The 2006 war demonstrated how Hezbollah operates in Lebanon as an independent non-state actor. Bigger roles for the party would follow, however.

In 2012 Hezbollah began its gradual intervention in Syria. Alongside Iran and Russia, Hezbollah intervened to save the Syrian regime from collapse. Hezbollah fighters conducted operations with the Syrian Army. It helped the regime regain territories that it had lost to the opposition. Hezbollah fighters were also sent to Iraq and Yemen where they trained and advised Shi'a militants and the Houthi rebels, respectively.

The above examples confirm just how important non-state actors are. Scholars disagree on how best to classify Hezbollah, however. The United States declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization after the 1984 suicide attack that killed 221 Marines in

¹ "Israel hits Hezbollah leader's HQ". BBC News. 14 July 2006.

Beirut (Abd-el Samad and Flanigan; 2011). Mathew Levitt considers that Hezbollah is a terrorist movement serving Iran's interests (2013). On the other hand, Travis Fry argues that for many, Hezbollah is a resistance movement fighting against Israel (2012).

Hezbollah's relation with Iran is also a topic of debate among scholars. Iran supports Hezbollah with finances, training and weapons. Naim Qassem argues that "Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to support Lebanon's confrontation with Israel, primarily through military training and the provision of necessary infrastructure" (2005). Fry asserts that if Israel had quickly withdrawn from Lebanon, Hezbollah would not have been created. He mentions that "Hezbollah is a tool for Syria and Iran" (2012). Augustus Norton notes that US policy-makers suggest that Hezbollah is a geopolitical foothold for Tehran and not a Lebanese independent party (1998).

On the other hand, Catherine Bloom argues that Iran does not control or direct Hezbollah (2010). Lara Deeb goes even further, arguing that "this relationship does not ... mean that Iran dictates Hezbollah's policies or decision-making" (2006). Some propose that Hezbollah still relies on Iran, but that it nevertheless gained autonomy and became a partner rather than a surrogate (Byman and Saab, 2014), and that it "accommodated itself incrementally to Lebanese nationalism despite the party's subscription to the *wilayat al-faqih*" (Salloukh & Mikaelian, 2013).

1.3 Research Questions

This thesis is guided by the following research question: When does Hezbollah act as an autonomous non-state actor and when does it act as a proxy to Iran? It examines how

and where Hezbollah acts as an autonomous actor and, alternatively, as a proxy non-state actor. It contends that Hezbollah has an independent decision-making process in Lebanon and in the territories along the borders between Lebanon, Syria and Israel. Beyond these theater of operations, Hezbollah acts primarily as a proxy non-state actor, serving Iran's geopolitical interests.

Consequently, Hezbollah's acts and decisions can be separated into two spheres. The first contains the autonomy of the decision-making process of the party concerning Lebanon and everything related to Lebanese politics and decisions. The second involves the party's proxy role vis-à-vis Iran: it includes its involvement in Syria, in addition to the experts and military advisors sent to Iraq and Yemen. This thesis contends that Hezbollah is a non-state actor, and tries to establish when the party acts as an autonomous actor and when it does so as a proxy non-state actor.

Despite the constant political support from Iran, Hezbollah proved its autonomy in dealing with Lebanese conflicts since its creation. Devore examines Iran's indirect influence over the party's decision-making, suggesting that financial support, military training and organizational tactics were beneficial and useful for Hezbollah's decision-makers (2012). Moreover, Scott Stewart examines how Hezbollah's attacks have changed, and how the party has matured (2010). Hezbollah's autonomy recently appeared in January 2015 when it killed two Israeli soldiers in a swift response to the attack on Hezbollah's fighters in Quneitra near the Israeli borders (Rudoren and Barnard, 2015). The quick decision to respond proves that the decision-making process on such important matters takes place in Lebanon not in Iran.

“Understanding the impact of state sponsorship on the decision-making of non-state armed actors is among the most important issues to scholars of security studies”

(DeVore, 2012). Iran's political agenda succeeded in regards to Hezbollah. For Iran, Hezbollah is a proxy in any future confrontations or deals in the region. For Hezbollah, Iran is an ally that backed the party to liberate Lebanese soil. Qassem (2005) argues that Hezbollah detected an opportunity to strengthen its ties with Iran upon its foundation in order to gain support and achieve its purpose and aspiration (p.235). However, the Lebanese party played the role of a proxy on many occasions. Hezbollah's decision-making was directly and indirectly shaped by Iran due to the sponsorship of the latter (DeVore, 2012). Iran threatens Israel continuously with Hezbollah's military capabilities in case of war. Jordan Schachtel (2015) argues that if Israel attacks Iran, "Hezbollah has 80000 missiles" that it could unleash against them.

The geopolitical battle in the region between the two major camps, led by Iran on one side and Saudi Arabia on the other, began before the Arab Spring. Iraq was the arena for this battle after 2003, which has then spread to Syria after the 2010 uprisings. Nevertheless, it increased in 2012 with Iran sending its proxies to protect the regime from collapse, and the Revolutionary Guard assumed a new role in Syria (Salloukh, 2014). Hezbollah claims that they intervened in Syria for what they called a "pre-emptive war" on Islamists groups that will later reach Lebanon. Hezbollah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, argued that "Hezbollah's activities in Syria are meant to ensure that Islamic State's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi will not repeat in Lebanon the group's conquests in Iraq"². Clearly, Iran could not afford losing Syria to its political rivals. Although Nasrallah's argument is valid, the interference in Syria is also meant to protect Iran's geopolitical interests in the region. Hezbollah's combatants first headed to Sayyidah

² "Nasrallah: Hezbollah Fighting in Syria to Prevent Zionist, US Hegemony", *The Jerusalem Post*, 11 March 2014.

Zaynab shrine, claiming to protect Shi'a religious shrines, and to the borders to protect Lebanese Shi'a villages. Later on, Nasrallah stated that “wherever we need to be, we will be”³. This shift in the discourse of Nasrallah’s speech had a clear effect in the battlefield. Hezbollah’s fighters are now spread all over Syria, fighting alongside the Syrian army. However, had Hezbollah’s fighters limited their military intervention to regions close to the Lebanese borders, the Secretary-general’s argument would have been vindicated. But Hezbollah sent its fighters all over Syria, from Quneitra to Deir ez-Zor, and played a role in Iraq, sending advisors to train and plan attacks with Shi'a military groups. Kagan also argues that Lebanon’s Hezbollah has assisted the Iranian Quds Force in its effort to train and organize Shi'a resistance groups in Iraq since 2003 (2007). They also sent advisors to Yemen. All this undermines Nasrallah’s logic (Devore, 2012), and suggests that Hezbollah was acting as a proxy for Tehran’s geopolitical interests in many theaters of operation.

Consequently, Hezbollah’s loyalty to Lebanon has been questioned since the 1989 Taif agreement. Proxies receive aids, funds and training to serve directly and indirectly the plan of the country who is offering them favors. Mike Devore argues that “governments seek to have foreign policy interests through their relationships with armed non-state actors” (DeVore, 2012). The Iranian strategy is to use Hezbollah as a proxy: “they convinced the party to include high value targets on the hit list and attack the enemies” (Devore, 2012). Mikaelian and Salloukh (2015) argue that Iran was balancing against the United States and Israel’s threat by using its proxies which included Hezbollah.

³ Al-Jazeera. (2013) Hezbollah leader vows to continue Syria fight. Retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/20136141719617527.html>

In many countries, authorities arrested people connected to Hezbollah. Stewart argues that Iran used Hezbollah and its other proxies in Latin America to threaten the United States (Stewart, 2010). “On 17 March 1992, Hezbollah operatives supported by the Iranian Embassy in Buenos Aires attacked the Israeli Embassy in that city with a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device killing 29 people and injuring hundreds more” (Stewart, 2010). “Hezbollah’s outside branched is accused of staging a number of attacks against Jewish targets, most recently against Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria on 18 July 2012” (Mikaelian & Salloukh, 2015). Hezbollah, in coordination with the Revolutionary Guard, would attack targets when needed in any country. The United State department claims that Hezbollah directs cells in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America (Masters & Jachary, 2014).

1.4 Methodology

A qualitative research approach will be conducted to elucidate whether Hezbollah is an autonomous or proxy non-state actor. Usually, qualitative methods aim to answer questions about the “what”, “how,” or “why” of a research phenomenon rather than “how many” or “how much” (Brikci & Green, 2007). This research will use case studies and secondary literature to explain when does Hezbollah act as an autonomous actor and, alternatively, when it acts as a proxy to Iran. As a key player in the events of the region, Hezbollah’s political and military strengths will be at the core of this thesis.

This thesis examines two main spheres of operation: Hezbollah’s political and military role in Lebanon, and its involvements outside Lebanon, but especially in Syria, Iraq, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and more recently in Yemen. Examining

Hezbollah's role in Lebanon allows us to establish its autonomy on Lebanese soil. Hezbollah's decision to fight on Syrian territory has two different explanations. Fighting in the regions close to the Lebanese borders such as Al-Qusayr shows the autonomy of Hezbollah's decision-making because it considers these regions as its own security backyard: they are crucial for its military supply lines all the way from Iran. However, Hezbollah acted as a proxy in the rest of Syria, in Iraq and Yemen. Hezbollah fighters were sent to Latakia and to Aleppo to liberate these regions. Hezbollah's commanders headed to Iraq to train the Shi'a militias and to Yemen to train the Houthis. Assessing Hezbollah's military interventions in these theaters allows us to prove that Hezbollah also acts as a proxy for Iran in different theaters.

1.5 Map of Thesis

The next chapter surveys the literature on Hezbollah to determine what kind of a non-state actor it is. The third chapter examines Hezbollah's operations, both political and military, in Lebanon. This is done to establish its identity in this theatre of operation as an autonomous non-state actor. Chapter four examines Hezbollah's actions in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Palestine. This is done to establish its role as a proxy non-state actor acting to defend Iran's geopolitical interests. Chapter five closes the thesis by spelling out the theoretical implications of the argument: namely, that Hezbollah is an autonomous non-state actor in Lebanon and in the Syrian areas that are close to the Lebanese borders, and a proxy actor to Iran in other theaters of operation.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROLES OF HEZBOLLAH: BEYOND THE BINARY DEBATE

2.1 Introduction

Few international relations scholars currently deny the important role of non-state actors. The Middle East has been a primary ground for the emergence of a variety of non-state actors, yet realists have generally ignored their efficiency. Realists consider that states are the most important actors in the international system. By contrast, this thesis argues that non-state actors play an important role in the geopolitics of the Middle East. Transnational actors like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Hezbollah and others are currently playing a major part in reshaping the politics of the Middle East.

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21th marked the founding, existence, evolution and spread of Hezbollah. Key events, such as the intervention in Syria, underscore Hezbollah's capabilities on both local and regional levels. Labelling Hezbollah has been a debate among scholars since its emergence. However, this chapter assesses whether Hezbollah is an autonomous or a proxy non-state actor. It starts with a discussion of realism's shortcomings with respect to non-state actors. It then discusses the origins of Hezbollah, followed by its connection to Iran. Finally, the chapter examines how Hezbollah can be considered an autonomous party while at the same time acting as a proxy actor, depending on the specific geopolitical site.

2.2 Realism and Non-State Actors

Realism is the most dominant theory in the study of international relations. It focuses on peace and war, the security dilemma, deterrence, and alliances. The primary assumption of realism is that conflict, war, competition, and struggle for survival are at the core of a chaotic international state system. Realists view international relations as a struggle for power among self-interested states (Walt, 1998).

Realism evolved after the Cold War to many sub-theories. Classical realism argues that international politics is the result of human nature. Hans Morgenthau focused on the will to conquer, the balance of power between states, and the bipolarity between the United States and the Soviet Union at the peak of the Cold War. On the other hand, neorealists such as Kenneth Waltz focused on the anarchic international system and considered states as unitary actors seeking survival. He considered that this system leads weak states to balance against more powerful states.

Offensive and defensive realism also explains state behavior. The former assumes that states seek to advance their interests whenever the opportunity emerges; the latter that states seek to defend their interests by balancing against the power or threats of other states. Scholars defending this theory such as Stephen Walt, Robert Jervis and George Quester explain the concept of balancing and bandwagoning between states. World politics is defined by realists based on three characteristics: sovereignty, recognition of statehood, and the control of territory and population (Hocking & Smith, 1990, p.80). Non-state actors are consequently far away from the core of realist theory, and are not seen as key players in world politics. Realists consider international organizations as extensions of states with less power and influence. “Non-state actors, be they

multinational corporations or transnationally organized groups such as professional, cultural and terrorist associations, are hardly considered at all” (Archer, 1992, p. 85). The following section will debate the identity of Hezbollah further, starting from its origins until its intervention in Syria.

2.3 Debating Hezbollah

Hezbollah has certainly been Iran’s most successful geopolitical investment. With the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, a group of Lebanese clerics inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic revolution founded Hezbollah for the purpose of resisting Israel. The relation between Hezbollah and Iran was obvious from the beginning. Judith Palmer Harik (2005) suggests that a group of Shi’as who split from the then dominant Amal Movement were focused on the struggle against Israel. These men, according to Harik, fitted Iran’s foreign policy agenda. Some of these men had already demonstrated their willingness to fight in previous operations sponsored by Iran. They shared the same goals of the Islamic revolution, and were consequently assisted by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to form an organization with a local leadership that would fight against Israel (Harik 2005, p.39). Iran sent 1000 Revolutionary Guards to Baalbek in the Beqaa Valley to train a group of former Amal members who embraced the Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurisconsult) doctrine (Mikaelian and Salloukh, 2016). Furthermore, some scholars emphasize Shi’a marginalization and its influence in the emergence of Hezbollah. In his book *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah’s Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel*, Nicolas Blanford explains the origins as well as the Shi’a roots of Hezbollah, emphasizing the importance of faith, marginalization in the Lebanese domestic political system, and the

weakness of the exiting Shi'a Amal Movement to face the increasingly oppressive Israeli operations in Lebanon during the early 1980s (2011, p.21-23).

Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general, Sheikh Naim Qassem, traces the relation between Hezbollah and Iran back to the demonstrations that took place in Lebanon after the success of the Islamic Revolution: "Prior to this development, there had been no connection with the Iranian Revolution, as such matters were in the realm of clerical issues" (2005, p.18). When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Iran and Syria sought to defend their geopolitical interests. Harik (2005) argues that a deal was made between Tehran and Damascus each for its own geopolitical advantages: Syria sought to defend its own interests in Lebanon; on the other hand, Iran wanted to create a bridge with a wider Arab and Islamic community (p. 39). Hezbollah was hence born, and in the following years, it evolved into a powerful military organization. Indeed, Hezbollah was able to conduct a variety of successful suicide operations and launch many attacks on Israeli targets. Furthermore, the party was able to survive numerous challenges: the assassination of its Secretary-General Abbas al-Moussawi on 16 February 1992, the 1993 Operation Accountability, and 1996 Grapes of Wrath wars against Israel.

Nor is Hezbollah's religious connection with Iran a secret. In its open letter of 16 February 1985, Hezbollah declares: "We abide by the orders of a single, wise and just command represented by the guardianship of the jurisprudent (*Waliyy al-Faqih*), currently embodied in the supreme Ayatollah Ruhollah al-Musawi al-Khomeini" (Hizbullah's documents, 2011, p.40). Saad-Ghorayeb (2012) claims that the organizational status of Hezbollah and its existence as a Shi'a Islamic party derives from the Faqih. Qassem (2005) states three main objectives since the creation of Hezbollah. The third objective states: "The legitimate leadership is designated to the Jurist-Theologian who is considered

to be the successor to the Prophet and the Imams. The Jurist-Theologian draws the general guiding direction for the nation of Islam. His commands and proscriptions are enforceable” (p.19).

Hezbollah stated in its 1985 foundational statement its determination to create an Islamic State. With time, however, the party started adapting to the Lebanese context. Saad-Ghorayeb (2012) argues that Hezbollah’s devotion to the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih* mainly comes in a religious context and it does not mean an unquestionable loyalty to Iran. Qassem (2005) puts the relation with the Iranian state in the context of an alliance between the two. He mentions that they both believed in the jurisdiction of the Jurist-Theologian, they hold the same Islamic principles, and share the same political view with respect to the hegemony of world superpowers and the confrontation with Israel (p.236). Qassem claims that both sides benefit from this relation with total independence in the work field (p.237). Qassem contends that all Lebanese parties have built relations with foreign states, however Hezbollah’s relation with Iran is not a leader-follower relationship. It is a beneficial alliance for Lebanon because Iran supports Hezbollah in its battle against Israel and US hegemony, in addition to its backing of other resistance movements in the Muslim world such as the Palestinian resistance (p.238). Hezbollah’s alliance with Iran is thus strategic and beneficial for both sides.

Iran not only created Hezbollah, it has backed the party with money, arms and training. This has made some scholars argue that Iran controls the party, while others suggest a more complicated relation. Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) quotes the party’s secretary-general when talking about Iran’s role. In Nasrallah’s words, the decision-making of the party emerges directly from the Lebanese leadership, and that the territory that Hezbollah is aiming to liberate is Lebanese not Iranian. Nasrallah states that even if Iran or other

countries benefit from the results of Hezbollah's wars, this "does not detract of its nationalism or Lebanonism" (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002, p.83). Party decisions are made independently and in accordance with the views of Hezbollah regarding Lebanon as well as the interests of the Party within the Lebanese politics (Deeb, 2006).

Hezbollah's national interest does not clash with its allegiance to *Wilayat al-Faqih*. Saad-Ghorayeb underscores Nasrallah's claim that between Lebanese and Iranian interests, Hezbollah will not hesitate to choose Lebanon's interest (2002, p.83). On the other hand, Daniel L. Byman and Bilal Y. Saab (2014) contend that Hezbollah looks for strategical and religious guidance from Ayatollah Khamenei (p.4). Yet what both views do not recognize is that Hezbollah can be both: an autonomous Lebanese non-state actor and a proxy non-state actor serving Iran's geopolitical interests, depending on the geographical arena that it is operating in.

2.3.1 Wilayat al-Faqih

The Wilayat al-Faqih theory according to Qassem is as follows: The Prophet is the Messenger of God, who introduced the holy principle of Shari'a. After the Prophet come the infallible Imams, from Imam Ali Ibn Abi Taleb to Imam al-Mahdi. In the absence of the infallible Imam, the public needs to acquire guidance to apply the Shari'a in society (2005, p.51). Khomeini considered that it is illogical that God has limited his holy message of Islam to Prophet Muhammad and his successors. Based on this view, he considers that there must be what he called "Wilaya" to guide Muslims until the appearance of al-Mahdi. The Jurist-Theologian's authority is thus a continuation of the rule of the Prophet and the infallible Imams. *Waliyy al-Faqih* is considered the arbitrator who shapes jurisprudence while waiting for the appearance of Imam Al-Mahdi. His

geographic and spiritual authority is not limited to a territory. “The degree of authority awarded to the Jurist-Theologian is obviously high, for he is entrusted with implementing Islamic jurisprudence, guarding the Islamic structure, undertaking political decisions of considerable weight and bearing on the nation’s overall interest” (Qassem, 2005, p.54). Everyone who’s under the umbrella of the *Wilaya* is committed to the custodianship of the Jurist-Theologian. Moreover, issues of war and peace are in the hands of the Jurist-Theologian. (Qassem, 2005, p.53). But what about labelling Hezbollah.

2.4 Labeling Hezbollah

There is no common definition for terrorism. Alex Schmid (2011) emphasizes that there are hundreds of definitions, but the main focus is on civilians and non-combatant targets and casualties. Hezbollah is charged for a number of terrorist attacks: the 1983 bombings of the US embassy, the Marine barracks and the French-led multinational force headquarters in Beirut. “In October of the same year, 243 marines were killed when a truck loaded with explosives crashed into their barracks when a truck loaded with explosives crushed near the international airport” (Harik, 2005, p.36). The party is also accused of kidnapping Westerners in Lebanon, launching suicide attacks, hijacking a civilian flight, and bombing Israeli targets in foreign countries in coordination with Iran. Harik (2005) argues that between 1982 and 1992, many individuals were kidnapped including Terry Waite, the representative of the British Archbishop of Canterbury. According to Deeb (2006), these are the reasons why Hezbollah is on the list of terrorist organizations of the US State Department. Hezbollah is on the American Foreign Terrorist Organizations list since 1997 (US Department of State). Not only the United States, many

Western countries also label Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Of course, the strong alliance between Israel and the United States plays a big role in labeling the party a terrorist organization.

Deeb (2006) denies these accusations arguing that after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah's strategies shifted and it started being more Lebanonized and less radical. Moreover, Harik (2005) highlighted the deal made between Hezbollah and the Lebanese authorities, with the intervention of a third party, Syria. She explained how Hezbollah had to abandon its radical ideology so it could enter the political arena. In return, "The Party of God's jihad activities against the Israelis would receive official authorization to continue by virtue of the government's recognition of the armed struggle as a national resistance." (Harik, 2005, p.47). This shift did not change the image of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in the eyes of the United States. Condoleezza Rice, former US Secretary of State, argued during an interview with the Lebanese Broadcasting Company that "We have a saying in the United States that a leopard can't change its spots".⁴

Yet, despite its international terrorist label, Hezbollah started abiding by the domestic rules of the game after the civil war. The party participated in the parliamentary elections in 1992 and won 12 seats. This step was a message that it was changing its radical image. Furthermore, this act made Hezbollah a legitimate Lebanese political party with a resistance wing (Harik, 2005, p.53). The Israeli invasion of Lebanon as well as its successive attacks on its soil, had led to the creation of many resistant activities. Over time, Hezbollah emerged as the dominant force among all Lebanese actors. Harik (2005)

⁴ "Condoleezza Rice renew call on Lebanon to disarm Hezbollah". Lebanese Broadcasting Company. 11 January 2002.

claims that for Arabs and Muslims, Hezbollah was a legitimate resistance (p.7). The support among Arabs and Lebanese for Hezbollah increased during the 1990s. “This was especially true after Israel bombed a UN bunker where civilians had taken refuge in Qana on April 18, 1996, killing 106 people” (Deeb, 2006). If anything, Israeli attacks on civilians and massacres during these years increased national support for the resistance. Harik stresses that a poll lead by a local newspaper was published before the 1992 elections, came out with a conclusion that most of the respondents distinguished between wartime militias and Hezbollah, considering the latter a resistance (2005, p.50).

2.4.1 Autonomous or Proxy Non-State Actor?

The scholarly debate whether Hezbollah is a terrorist group or a resistance is not the main concern of this paper. Rather, it focuses on Hezbollah as an autonomous or proxy non-state actor. Hezbollah’s ties with Iran produced a false binary about the nature of the party. This section will evaluate the theoretical debate whether Hezbollah is an autonomous or a proxy non-state actor.

2.4.1.1 Hezbollah as an Autonomous Party

Hezbollah started as a resistance to the Israeli occupation. Iran’s military and financial help to the party does not mean it controls Hezbollah’s decision-making. In Lebanon, Hezbollah acts as an autonomous non-state actor. The party’s involvement in political life started with the parliamentary elections in 1992. Hezbollah’s political acts concerning Lebanon are like any other party. In 2005, Hezbollah participated in the national government. It has assumed for itself the right to reject any decision taken by the government that is considered against its vision, whether on the local or international

level. Hezbollah has repeatedly argued that Iran does not interfere in Lebanese affairs. Nasrallah claims that Iran does not intervene in Lebanese matters and will not even when asked to do so by foreign countries.⁵ Even Iranian officials, but especially Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, repeatedly suggested that Iran regards the presidential vacuum a Lebanese matter, yet “Tehran is ready to stand by Lebanon”.⁶

Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) stresses that from Hezbollah’s view, its martyrs and fighters who are putting their lives at risk to liberate national soil is proof of the party’s loyalty to Lebanon and its autonomy. Hezbollah’s discourse insists on the Lebanonisation of its military arsenal and that it is used to protect Lebanon from Israeli invasion. This discourse is meant to contradict the idea that considers Hezbollah as a proxy for Iran. Mikaelian and Salloukh stress that Hezbollah insists that its military arsenal is to deter any future Israeli attack (2014, p.137). Bloom (2012) maintains that Hezbollah’s support from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards does not mean that the party is not acting on behalf of Lebanon since the state is aware that Hezbollah is receiving training in Iran and its weapons are from Tehran.

Whether on the southern Lebanese borders or in Syria, Hezbollah’s battles expose its different roles. In its battle against Israel, Hezbollah defends Lebanese territory, but when it intervened in Syria in 2012, it demonstrated its proxy role on behalf of Iran’s geopolitical interests. Consequently, Hezbollah first declared its intervention in Syria as a measure to guard the Eastern Lebanese borders from Salafi-Jihadists. Fighting on the

⁵ Youtube: Nasrallah reveals the difference between Iran and Saudi Arabia, interview with Imad Marmal, Published on 16 October 2015.

⁶ “Iran Praises Lebanon’s Resistance, pledges support”. Press TV. On 11 August 2015. Retrieved from: <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2015/08/12/424354/Iranian-Foreign-Minister-Mohammad-Javad-Zarif-Lebanese-Prime-Minister-Tammam-Salam-Beirut->

Syrian-Lebanese borders was to defend Lebanese villages from terrorist invasion. This was an autonomous decision and a normal act to protect its Lebanese backyard. Mikaelian and Salloukh explain the causes behind Hezbollah's intervention in Syria as follows: the collapse of the Syrian regime will affect Hezbollah's route to Iran; the 'axis of resistance' turned the geopolitical battle into a sectarian confrontation in order to mobilize fighters against the Syrian regime; finally, Salafi-Jihadists might attack Hezbollah in its own backyard and along the Lebanese-Syrian border (2014). These reasons led the party to intervene in Syria to contain the geopolitical fallouts of the battle for Syria.

Hezbollah's intervention along the Syrian-Lebanese borders shows that the party's decision-making process is rational and autonomous. As such, Hezbollah was fighting to protect its geopolitical interests and Iran's. After all, as Byman and Saab (2014) argue, the relation between Iran and Hezbollah is a profound partnership based on trust and common interest. But what explains Hezbollah's intervention in Syria beyond the border area, and in Iraq and Yemen? It is in this latter capacity that Hezbollah becomes a proxy non-state actor acting on behalf of Iran's geopolitical interests.

2.4.1.2 Hezbollah as a Proxy Non-State Actor

Aram Nerguizian contends that "Iran has had 25 years to build Hezbollah" (2013, p.5). He argues that military assistance to Lebanon became the latest edition to the US-Iranian proxy war in the region. The party speaks publicly about receiving money and sophisticated weapons from Iran. Iran also gives Hezbollah training on these arms. Hezbollah's ability to target a missile against an Israeli warship during 2006 war was an example of the impact of Iranian military training on its cadres. Devore (2012) also notes that states use proxies to threaten their rivals and to execute attacks whenever they want

to send indirect messages, allowing them to deny any responsibility in case of capture. Sponsorship and support from states improve their control over non-state actors. Such financial and military aid lead to direct and indirect impact from the state over non-state actors. Hezbollah's attacks in many countries, from Buenos Aires to Burgas, are examples of these attacks. Levitt (2013) maintains that the Quds Force and its proxy, Hezbollah, shifted to a new level of terrorist attack (p.1). He accused the Quds Forces and Hezbollah of conducting many operations against Israeli, US and Saudi targets; he also considered the operation in Bulgaria a response to Imad Mughniyeh's assassination (Levitt 2013, p.9).

"Hezbollah's sophisticated military capabilities are part of a grander Iranian network of proxies aimed at balancing against Washington and Israel's threats to the regime in Tehran" (Nerguzian, 2013). Byman and Saab suggest that Hezbollah offers many benefits to Iran, the most important is its military arsenal on the Israeli borders that can be used in case of war between Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran (2014, p.5). They argue that Hezbollah is ready to act if Iran is under any attack or is facing any military strike. Mikaelian and Salloukh stress (2014) that Hezbollah represents Iran's strategic depth, and it keeps threatening Israel through Hezbollah's arsenal. However, any real threat to Iran will test if the Lebanese party responds by launching a war on behalf of Tehran.

Fighting in Syria all along the Lebanese border to protect its security backyard in the Beqaa Valley does not make of Hezbollah a proxy to Tehran. However, Hezbollah acts as a proxy to Iran by sending its fighters to fight deep into Syrian soil. After all, Hezbollah's intervention all over Syria to defend the Syrian regime from collapse cannot be considered tantamount to protecting Lebanon and the Lebanese borders. Rather, it falls under the proxy relation with Iran. Hezbollah conducted major battles in the Damascus

suburb of Al-Ghouta, but also in Idlib, Homs, Aleppo, and in Qunaitra. Moreover, Byman and Saab (2014) argue that Iran can always “instruct Hezbollah” to keep fighting in Syria and build relations with new factions on the ground in case of the regime’s collapse (p.5). These factions appear in numerous geographical regions. Hezbollah has built a Shi'a military group in Nubl and Al-Zahra, and armed them to protect their villages. Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'a were sent to the pro-Assad villages Nubl and al-Zahra and worked on building military groups to fight with the regime.⁷ In Homs, the ground was fertile to create Shi'a armed forces. Quwat al-Ridha is one of the most effective Syrian Hezbollah clones fighting under the command of the party.⁸ Furthermore, the party has developed a resistance group in Qunaitra on the Israeli borders.

As Mikaelian and Salloukh (2014) argue, Hezbollah also executes Iran's geopolitical agenda in Yemen, the Gaza Strip, and Iraq (p.138). Moreover, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) accused Hezbollah of conducting aggressive acts in their countries and engaging in terrorist campaigns in Syria, Iraq and Yemen (Logrenzi and Lawson, 2016). Hezbollah's intervention in Iraq helped the Iraqi Shi'a build a number of non-state actors answerable to Iran. This was part of Tehran's strategy to organize new proxies to fight under its command.

The United States has always accused Iran of training Iraqi militias. After the 2003 American invasion of, Iran's Revolutionary Guard found an opportunity to fill the political vacuum created by the collapse of Saddam's regime. They consequently assigned Hezbollah the job of training and advising other Iranian proxies in the country. Iran rejected these accusations, until four captured Shi'a militia members confessed about the

⁷ “How Iran is building its Syrian Hezbollah”, by Phillip Smyth, The Washington Institute, 8 March 2016.

⁸ Ibid.

presence of Hezbollah experts in Iraq.⁹ Indeed, Nasrallah has stressed that Hezbollah is “ready to sacrifice five times more in Iraq than in Syria to protect our shrines because they are more important than the ones in Damascus.”¹⁰ Nasrallah even announced publicly the party’s intervention in Iraq, stating that the “Iraqi brothers” asked Hezbollah to send leaders and experts to help in advising, training, and “increase the fighters’ spirits.”¹¹

Iran’s modest support to the Houthis in Yemen is considered another example of geopolitical expansion in the Saudi backyard. Hezbollah made public its political support to the “oppressed Yemeni people.” Many Hezbollah fighters entered Yemen through neighboring countries. Gerald Feuerstein, the United States ambassador in Yemen, has argued that the Houthis are present in Beirut and this shows the involvement of Hezbollah and Iran in the Yemeni conflict.¹² Moreover, countries backing the Yemeni government accused Hezbollah of training and fighting alongside the Houthis on the Saudi borders.¹³

Last but not least, Hezbollah focuses on the Palestinian cause, its most symbolic theatre as it tries to defend its image as a resistance movement. The party’s leaders continuously stress that Arabs and especially Muslims should not forget their main cause, Palestine. They consider that everything that happens in the region is an Israeli plan to divide the Arab states from Palestine. On the military level, Hezbollah has been the main party involved in smuggling arms to the Gaza Strip. Harik argues that Israel accused Hezbollah of arms smuggling during the 2002 *Intifada* (2005, p.175). Hezbollah’s involvement was also palpable during the Palestinian uprising, “when Imad Mugniyah

⁹ “Hezbollah trains Iraqis in Iran, Officials says”, by Michael Gordon, The New York Times, 5 May 2008.

¹⁰ “Nasrallah: we are willing to defend Iraq Shrines”, NOW Media, Published on 17 June 2014.

¹¹ Youtube: “Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Iraq and Hezbollah”, Published on 24 January 2016.

¹² “Hamas, Hezbollah helping Iran in Yemen”, The Jerusalem Post, 25 March 2012.

¹³ “Yemen government says Hezbollah is fighting alongside Houthis”, Reuters, 24 February 2016.

was linked to a shipload of arms on the Karine A., supposedly originating from Iran” (Harik 2005, p.186). Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Sudan are all used to smuggle weapons to the Gaza Strip. These weapons begin their journey in Syrian or Iranian ports. From there, they head to Sudan and are transported after that to Sinai in Egypt and end up in Gaza.¹⁴

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter opened by highlighting the shortcomings of realism with respect to the increasing role of non-state actors. It used this limitation to stress the major role that Hezbollah – a non-state actor – plays in the geopolitics of Middle East today. The chapter shed light on Hezbollah’s relation with Iran and its religious connection to *Wilayat al-Faqih*. Yet, this explanation does not exonerate Hezbollah from being a proxy to Iran. It rather considers it a proxy depending on the geographical arena. In fact, this chapter labeled Hezbollah as both a proxy and an autonomous non-state actor based on the geographical theatre they are operating in. In Lebanon and on the Lebanese-Syrian border, Hezbollah can be considered an autonomous non-state actor, and the decision-making process goes back to its Lebanese leaders. In other Syrian regions, and in Iraq, Yemen and Palestine, the party acts as a proxy defending Iran’s geopolitical interests. The next chapter examines Hezbollah’s activities in the Lebanese theatre.

¹⁴ “How Hamas gets its weapons”, by Hassan Illeik, Al-Akhbar newspaper, Published on 19 November 2012.

CHAPTER THREE

HEZBOLLAH IN LEBANON: AN AUTONOMOUS NON-STATE ACTOR

3.1 Introduction

Hezbollah emerged as a Lebanese resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon. It resisted Israel's furious attacks and wars, but especially the 1993, 1996, and 2006 ones. With Iran's support, Hezbollah improved and imposed itself as a key player in Lebanon. Albeit the party originally announced its loyalty to the *Wilayat al-Faqih* doctrine, with time, Hezbollah accepted Lebanon's diversity and realized the difficulty of creating an Islamic State in the country. Its adaption to the Lebanese system and its changing face allowed the party to integrate strongly into what is otherwise a sectarian political system. The party won 12 seats in the 1992 parliamentary elections, and built a complex array of welfare institutions sustaining its political military machine.

This chapter surveys some significant events in Hezbollah's political and military evolution in Lebanon to demonstrate that, at least inside and around the border area of the country, the party acts as an autonomous non-state actor. It opens with a discussion of the political factors that drove Hezbollah to participate in electoral politics despite its original qualms against the sectarian system. Then it traces Hezbollah's gradual integration into the decision-making process after the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. This is followed by an explication, successively, of the party's autonomous decision-making to

kidnap Israeli soldiers that led to the 2006 war, invade West Beirut in 2008, contain the spillover effects of the Syrian war in the Beqaa and the border area, and finally, insist on the election of Aoun. All these cases help make the argument that at least in the context of Lebanese theatre of operations, Hezbollah acts as an autonomous non-state actor.

3.2 Hezbollah's Integration into the Lebanese System

Initially, Hezbollah refused to participate in domestic Lebanese politics, considering the Lebanese government corrupt, and despairing of any attempts to reform it (Norton 2007, p.38). It was thus a major shift for the party when it decided to join political life by contesting the 1992 parliamentary elections. According to Norton, this move followed a suggestion by the late Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, who was the first to recognize the impossibility of creating an Islamic State due to Lebanon's diverse society (2007, p.99). The party won 12 seats and entered parliament for the first time. Norton (2007) argues that Hezbollah participated along cross-ideological and cross-sectarian electoral alliances (p.99-100). Out of 27 Shi'a seats in parliament, Hezbollah was able to win 8 seats (Mikaelian and Salloukh 2016, p.29).

Naim Qassem argues that the party's decision to run for elections was not clear and it was agreed that the decision-making will pass through a twelve-member committee gathering major Hezbollah representatives for debate before any decision was made (2005, p.187). Opposing the system wouldn't be beneficial since outsiders lack knowledge about it and their involvement would be a tool for achieving change (Qassem, 2005, p.189). According to Qassem, 10 out of 12 members voted for participation in the parliamentary elections, both as a necessity but also because it was in the party's best

interest (2005, p.194). Nor did Hezbollah's electoral platform include any religious themes. It rather called for battling economic underdevelopment, inequality, creating job opportunities, and securing the country's defenses, a major theme given its identity as a resistance movement (Alagha, 2011, p.64).

The lack of social services due to the government's neglect of poor rural areas and Beirut's southern suburbs was a starting point in Hezbollah's strategy (Norton, 2007, p.107). Gradually, Hezbollah started building a chain of institutions responsible for providing social services in the Shi'a areas, Dahieh neighborhood, South and Beqaa. Indeed, Hezbollah has been proving health services since 1983 (Harik, 2005). In 1988, al-Rassoul al-Aazam Hospital and mosque complex opened its doors under the umbrella of an Islamic institutional network. Another institution is the Martyrs Foundation "which pays all of the medical expenses for Hezbollah's wounded fighters and 70% of the wounded for civilians injured in fighting." Hezbollah's hospitals in the South and the Beqaa contain a high level of professionals and high standards of employees. Jihad al-Binaa, a construction company created by the party, is responsible for infrastructural projects, and undertook the "installation of drinking fountains and decent toilets at public schools in the Dahieh". Emergency water delivery was another problem resolved by Jihad al-Binaa with Iranian support. Many projects targeted the families of the martyrs, such as schools for their daughters and the distribution of books every year with discounted prices (Harik, 2005, p.83-86).

Hezbollah developed a strong relation with its community by creating a complex institutional ensemble in the Shi'a areas. Salloukh and Mikaelian (2013) stressed that the party created a network of institutions ranging "from the reconstruction of houses destroyed by Israel, the provision of financial support and social services to the families

of the injured and martyred Hezbollah fighters, and the provision of health services to the public, to the production of nonmaterial symbolic capital targeted at the party's constituency" (p.523). Iran supported Hezbollah with large amounts of money and expertise to create this chain of institutions to entrench itself among the residents of the Shi'a regions. This assistance exposed the party to accusations of being a tool for Tehran in the Lebanon.

3.3 Hezbollah after the Syrian Withdrawal: Into the Government

Since the Ta'if Agreement, Syria had the upper hand in the manipulation of Lebanese politics in association with many Lebanese figures such as Rafic el Hariri, Walid Jumblat, Nabih Berry and many others. The clash between the Syrian regime and Hariri started when France and the United States passed the 1559 UNSC resolution asking indirectly for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon and the disarmament of Hezbollah (Julia Choukair, 2005). The tension increased with Bashar al-Assad's decision to extend the presidency of Emile Lahoud, Syria's ally, for another three years. Hariri opposed Lahoud's extension and made no secret of his disenchantment; moreover, Assad informed Hariri that opposing the extension meant opposing Syria's president. For Hezbollah, Lahoud was an ally and a guarantor that the resistance will not be disarmed during his presidency (Norton, 2007, p.125).

The withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in the aftermath of the Hariri assassination and UNSCR 1559 left a gap in Lebanese politics. Hariri's assassination and the subsequent overlapping domestic and geopolitical struggle over Lebanon convinced the party of the need to participate directly in Fouad Seniora's cabinet formed in 2005

(Krista E. Wiegand, 2009; Salloukh and Mikaelian, 2013). Hezbollah consequently struck a deal with 14 March coalition during the 2006 elections forming the “Forth coalition” shaped by 4 major parties: Hezbollah, Amal Movement, the Future Movement, and the Progressive Socialist Party.

Nevertheless, Hezbollah’s participation in Seniora’s cabinet could not remedy the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian divide created after Hariri’s assassination. Hezbollah felt besieged in the next four years by domestic and external conflicts: the 2006 war, the United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon, decisions by the Seniora government and its international backers designed to isolate the party, and, finally, the threat of a Sunni-Shi'a war, Hezbollah’s worst nightmare (Salloukh and Mikaelian, 2013, p.525). Nasrallah’s main objective, however, was to neutralize external pressures on the party in a bid to force it to abandon its weapons arsenal.¹⁵

3.4 July 2006: 33 Days of War

On 12 July 2006, Hezbollah attacked an IDF convoy on the Israeli side of the borders, killing three and capturing two soldiers. Soon after the kidnapping, Nasrallah issued a public statement claiming that his party is ready for a prisoners’ exchange, but also to respond to any attack and defend Lebanese territories from Israeli attacks. The operation was labelled “Truthful Promise” (*al-Wa‘d al-Sadeq*), in reference to Nasrallah’s earlier pledge to liberate all Lebanese prisoners in Israeli prisons. To be sure, Hezbollah did not expect Israel to launch a war. Nasrallah argued that the decision to capture soldiers rather than civilians was taken months before it was executed, and by the Shura Council,

¹⁵ “Syria supporters rally in Lebanon”, by Scott Wilson, on 9 March 2005. The Washington Post.

and was later sent to the Jihadi Council for execution.¹⁶ Nasrallah claimed that fighters crossed many times into the Palestinian territories but the operation was not conducted because the target was not a military one.

However, Israel responded by launching a devastating military campaign against the party and its strongholds. Many ceasefires were attempted during the war, but all failed. Nevertheless, international intervention increased when Israel realized the difficulty of destroying Hezbollah. The negotiations were held indirectly between Hezbollah and the Israeli government through the United Nations and the Lebanese government. On 12 August, the Lebanese government and Hezbollah approved UNSCR 1701 to end hostilities; it was accepted by Israel the next day.

The 33 days war led to some 1200-1300 Lebanese death, and another 121 on the Israeli side, plus substantial infrastructural damages. Hezbollah managed to survive this war, and declared its victory because it was able to stand its grounds against a far more powerful army; it was also able to surprise the IDF with its underground bunkers and sophisticated missile systems. More importantly, however, Hezbollah proved itself a professional and autonomous negotiator throughout the period leading up to the promulgation of UNSCR 1701. The conditions of a ceasefire were submitted to the party's leadership for approval not Tehran's. Moreover, UNSCR 1701 conditioned that Hezbollah release the kidnapped soldiers and desist from deploying militarily south of the Litani River, but it also guaranteed Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon and the restoration of the old rules of the game between the party and Israel: namely, avoiding the targeting of civilian populations. In sum, the decision-making process regarding the operation

¹⁶ "Hezbollah Leader reveals secrets of the July 2006 War, by Ibrahim al-Amine; Wafic Kanso; Hassan Illaik; & Maha Zureikat, 14 August 2014, Al-Akhbar Newspaper.

demonstrates Hezbollah's autonomy in relation to matters pertaining to the Lebanese theatre of operations.

3.5 The 7 May Crisis and the Doha Agreement

Tensions between the 8 March and 14 March coalitions did not end by the July 2006 war. During a cabinet meeting discussing the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, a dispute between the Shi'a ministers and Prime-Minister Fouad Seniora lead to the resignation of the former ministers. They accused the government of using the STL to ostracize Hezbollah. They also insisted that given that a major sect was absent from the state's highest executive bodies, cabinet decisions were consequently null and void. Seniora refused to resign, however. Hezbollah would later organize massive demonstrations and a sit-in in downtown Beirut, insisting that the government resign because it was lacking representation from a major sect in the country.

On the 5 May 2008, cabinet took a tremendous decision to shut down Hezbollah's internal telecommunication network and to remove Beirut's airport security chief, General Wafic Shkeir, from his position. Yet, the decision was fatal for the country. On 7 May, Hezbollah's Secretary-general stated that the government's action is tantamount to a declaration of war, and demanded that it be reversed immediately.¹⁷ Soon enough, Hezbollah led a lightening invasion of West Beirut. Moreover, they blocked the road leading to the airport, and occupied the port of Beirut. The fighting spread to Mount Lebanon and the north of the country.

¹⁷ Youtube: Nasrallah's speech on 8 May 2008.

For an entire week, it looked like Lebanon was going back to a new civil war. But external intervention led to a cessation of hostilities and the beginning of negotiations between both camps. Negotiated in Doha under Arab and international auspices, the Doha agreement settled the conflict. Qatar's mediation succeeded in resolving the first Lebanese military conflict since the civil war. It led to a number of decisions: Michel Suleiman, who was then army Chief, would be elected president within 24 hours; forming a national government composed of 30 ministers, 11 of them would be from the opposition; adopting the Qada as an electoral district in the 2009 elections according to the 1960's law; all weapons are not to be used for political gains in any future internal political conflict.

The Doha agreement was the result of an eighteen-months' conflict. It created a new political order in Lebanon drawing a new redline from Hezbollah not to be crossed in the foreseeable future. Hezbollah's actions underscore its autonomous nature in matters pertaining its Lebanese theater of operation. Its decisions were quickly taken and executed. Hezbollah resigned from the cabinet based on the disagreement with the 14 March coalition. The decision to protest against Seniora's cabinet was discussed with other allies such as the Amal Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement, and was taken based on the party's domestic interest not Iran's geopolitical interests. The 7 May clashes were thus a domestic consequence of the decisions pertaining to Hezbollah's telecommunication network essential for its deterrence posture against Israel.

3.6 Hezbollah's Biggest Battles: From Qusair to Qalamoun

The Syrian uprising began in 2011 and quickly deteriorated into a bloody conflict between the rebels and the regime. It was a turning point in the region's politics. Syria

turned into a battlefield between regional states fighting for geopolitical gains. Soon two camps were formed: the first supporting the Syrian regime, and includes Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, *al-Hashd el-Sha'bi* and the Afghani militias; the second supporting the opposition, and includes the United States, France, Britain, Turkey, the Gulf countries, and a host of salafi and salafi-jihadi armed non-state actors. Sectarian tensions peaked during the Syrian Civil War. Massacres by both sides showed the atrocities created as a result of sectarian agitation. Saudi Arabia used sectarianism for geopolitical ends to motivate fighters to head to Syria and fight the regime. As Gregory Gause has noted, “The Saudis have made a conscious decision to increase the salience of the Sunni-Shi'a divide since the beginning of the Arab upheavals, to increase support for their allies, and to isolate Iran and its allies in the Arab world” (2011, p.21). He also argues that sectarianism is not new in the politics of the Middle East, but Saudi Arabia tried to stoke it after the popular upheavals (Gause 2011, p.21). Consequently, Hezbollah’s intervention turned the Arab peoples against the party, accusing it of fighting Sunnis. In the eyes of many Arabs, Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria transformed the party into a terrorist militia fighting against Sunnis. Similarly, Iran used sectarianism to rally its allies, including Hezbollah, to defend the regime in Syria.

Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria’s war started gradually. In 2012, its fighters headed to Syria to protect a Shi'a Shrine, that of al-Sayyidah Zaynab, the daughter of Imam Ali, in Damascus’ suburbs, then under rebel attacks. Later, Hezbollah sent some of its military commanders to train the Syrian army in street fighting and guerilla warfare. In the aftermath of attacks on the Shi'a villages on the Syrian-Lebanese borders, the party’s fighters moved in to support the villagers protect their villages in the Beqaa.

Rebels from different factions, such as “Kataeb Al-Farouq”, “Liwa’ a al-Qusair” and “Jabhat al-Nusra” after that, were settling in Qusayr and Qalamoun, the strategic mountains and villages near the Lebanese borders. Tension increased between Sunni and Shi’a neighbors in Qusayr, where many Lebanese Shi’a were living and built good relations with their Sunni neighbors including businesses and marriages (Mohsen, 2017, p.52). Kidnapping and killing became a daily fear for the residents in the area and forced a majority of them to leave their homes. However, this escalation of events was a translation of sectarian clashes in the whole region.

From their strongholds in these areas, armed groups started attacking the Lebanese villages such as Al-Tufail and Al-Qasr in the Beqaa, accusing Hezbollah of assisting the Syrian regime. Moreover, they launched missiles and rockets against villages in the Beqaa Valley. Hezbollah fighters, in association with families and inhabitants of these areas, started protecting these zones. This would set the party on a slippery slope toward military intervention in Syria.

March 2013 marked the first battle for Hezbollah in Syria. Along with the Syrian army, the party launched a battle to regain an important hill, “Tall Mando” (Mando Hill), on the Syrian-Lebanese borders controlled by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Jabhat al-Nusra (Mohsen, 2017, 87). Mohsen (2017) claims that it took Hezbollah, the Syrian army, and their allied militias three days to control the Western side of Qusayr’s villages (p.102). Hezbollah continued its involvement in the Syrian war by conducting the second battle in the Southern and Eastern countryside of Qusayr.

On 19 May 2013 began Hezbollah’s most important battle since its intervention in Syria’s war. Hezbollah fighters and commanders were guiding the ground assault with the Syrian army to liberate al-Qusayr and its surroundings. The city of Qusayr was a major

center for the rebel forces, with fortified defenses and tunnels all over the town. The battle was transmitted on media and was seen by all the world. The Israeli media followed the course of the battles, especially given the strategic nature of the area. "Plenty of adjectives and some clichés are being bandied about from Washington to Beirut to describe the al-Qusayr battle results and significance. Among them are "game-changer," "mother of all battles," "altered balance of power," critical "turning point in the civil war".¹⁸ On 5 June 2013, the FSA and Al-Nusra forces retreated from the last part of Qusayr after having sustained huge losses. Mohsen (2017) reports that according to an important Hezbollah commander in Qusair, almost 1700 Hezbollah fighters participated in the battle, forming 14 divisions, covering all specialties, such as snipers, rocket launchers and many others (p.191).

Al-Qusayr's victory marked a turning point in the Syrian struggle. Chulov (2013) argues that the strategic victory in the Qusair battle was a defining battle in the Syrian war.¹⁹ The battle allowed Hezbollah and the regime control over rebel-held areas in this strategical zone along a line that extends from Damascus to Latakia; it also enhanced the efficiency of pro-regime forces. Following Qusayr, Hezbollah launched a campaign to regain control of the Qalamoun area, one that stretched from November 2014 until the beginnings of 2015. This operation overlapped with a series of attacks against Shi'a strongholds in the Hermel area and Beirut's southern suburbs. These included bomb ambushes with around 70 cross-border rocket barrages, in addition to suicide car bombings against pro-Hezbollah areas, leading to some 60 dead and 500 injuries by June

¹⁸ US and Israel Lobby Reels from Hezbollah al-Qusair Victory", taken from Franklin Lamb, Archive of Al-Manar, retrieved from: <http://archive.almanar.com.lb/english/article.php?id=96749>

¹⁹ "Syrian town of Qusair falls to Hezbollah in breakthrough for Assad", by Martin Chulov, 5 June 2013, The Guardian.

2014.²⁰ The bombs were fabricated in the Qalamoun area and sent to Lebanon through Arsal, a Sunni village on the Syrian borders with a population of some 40,000. Hezbollah's offensive in the Qalamoun area insulated its strongholds from these suicide attacks.

The Beqaa and Hermel form the backyard of Hezbollah. The two Shi'a regions have always been a 'reservoir' for the resistance in its battles against Israel, providing it with a continuous stream of fighters. It is used as a shelter for the party in any urgent scenario, a supply route for weapons of all kinds from Syria, and to stockpile its military arsenal. Additionally, Hezbollah's training camps have always been centered in the high mountains of these regions. Consequently, Hezbollah decided to protect its strongholds in these areas and insulate them from terrorist attacks. However, all these precautions and fortifications were not able to stop terrorist attacks on the country because a big number of Al-Nusra and Islamic State fighters remained inside the mountains of Arsal.

Hezbollah's gradual and slow intervention in Syria, and the causes that lead to its involvement, demonstrate its autonomy as a non-state actor when it comes to the Lebanese theatre and its environs. After all, the decision to move into the Syrian-Lebanese borders to protect its constituency but also its supply lines from Iran via Syria reflects core Hezbollah concerns. "Hezbollah sought to safeguard its own direct interests: fighting in the Qusayr and Qalamoun areas along the border to create a buffer zone against attacks by Syrian jihadists inside Lebanon, preserving its vital Iranian supply line and protecting

²⁰ "Bombings in Lebanon", 18 June 2014, The daily Star Newspaper.

two Shiite shrines in Syria.”²¹ Another concern involved the suspended presidential election.

3.7 Ending the Presidential Vacuum

According to the Lebanese constitution, an elected president for the country needs at least 2/3 of the votes in the parliament. Yet, even after 45 attempts, disagreement between the 8 and 14 March coalitions prevented the election of a president and Lebanon was without a head of state for two years and a half. Nonetheless, on 31 October, 2016, Michel Aoun was elected president by a majority of 83 votes.

On 6 February 2006, Nasrallah and Aoun had signed a memorandum of understanding. This alliance afforded domestic protection to the party from the then strongest Christian leader in Lebanon. Even when Hezbollah faced the biggest war of elimination in July 2006, Aoun remained loyal to this understanding. On the understanding’s 10th anniversary, Aoun argued that “Everybody must understand that Lebanon is built upon balance and participation and the agreement between us was built upon our word and there are ethics in our relationship.”²² Aoun willingness to sacrifice a big part of his Christian popularity in exchange of retaining the alliance with Hezbollah endeared him in the latter’s eyes.

Since the beginning, Hezbollah insisted on boycotting any parliamentary election unless it guarantees Michel Aoun’s selection. Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese forces,

²¹ “Hezbollah’s Syria Conundrum”, on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hezbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

²² “Aoun Upon Tenth Anniversary of agreement with Hezbollah only renews commitment”, 4 February 2016, NNA. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/56296/Aoun-upon-tenth-anniversary-of-agreement-wi>

was running against Aoun backed by 14 March coalition. Nevertheless, Saad el-Hariri's nomination of Suleiman Frangieh to run for the presidency pushed Geagea to accept Aoun's nomination. The dead end that was reached forced Hariri to announce in a press conference his approval to elect Michel Aoun in one last trial to save the country because Hezbollah had insisted that the only choices were between a presidential vacuum and Aoun's election.

Aoun's election was a turning point in the politics of the region. It took place when military victories by Hezbollah, the Syrian regime, and Iran were causing a shift in the regional balance of power. Hariri's decision to elect Aoun occurred when Syria and its allies achieved a military victory in Aleppo. The timing of the election was considered a win to Hezbollah and Iran. Benedetta Berti suggests that Aoun's election was a political win for Hezbollah.²³ Regardless of the media statements and political analysis, however, whether the election was a win for Hezbollah and Iran, the choice of electing Aoun was a decision taken by Hezbollah soon after the end of President Michel Suleiman period.

Iran had been accused of hampering the presidential elections and preventing Hezbollah from attending to the parliament. Hezbollah's rivals accused the party of intentionally obstructing the vote. Future Movement MP, Jamal al Jarrah, argued that there was a clear Iranian decision to block the election of a president.²⁴ But Nasrallah insists that Hezbollah's decision for Lebanese Presidency issues in Lebanon and Iran "has stated that the election is a Lebanese matter that is decided by Lebanese only".²⁵ Hezbollah

²³ "Lebanon's new Pro-Hezbollah President vows to retake 'Israeli-occupied' Land", by Yasser Okbi and Maariv Hashavua, 31 October 2017.

²⁴ "Iran is blocking the Lebanese Election", 25 September 2016, YaLibnan "Interview on LBC".

²⁵ Youtube: Nasrallah talks about Presidency. On 29 January 2016.

considered the election a payback to Aoun for standing alongside the party during the July 2006 war, but also because Aoun's regional choices intersects with the party's.

Hezbollah's decision was to vote for Aoun since the beginning of the presidential race. This choice did not change at any moment. Salloukh (2017) argues that Syria's Civil War produced a presidential vacuum as political protagonists and their sponsors waited for the Syrian conflict to settle. Even though Hariri nominated Frangieh, the historical Christian ally for Hezbollah, their decision remained the same. One can claim that Aoun's election occurred by a political consensus between Iran, the United States and indirectly Saudi Arab. Yet, political factions such as the Future Movement and the Lebanese forces are the ones who changed their choice rather than Hezbollah. Consequently, the latter's decision to elect Aoun proves that the decision making-process was issued from Hezbollah's Lebanese leadership and the party acted as an autonomous non-state actor in this regard as well.

3.8 Conclusion

Hezbollah's ties with Iran have always exposed it to the charge that it is no more than a proxy agent of Iran. Tehran's need for strategic depth in Lebanon to prevent any future attack on Iran shaped Hezbollah as a military instrument of its foreign policy.²⁶ Additionally, Judith Palmer Harik (2005) argues that the clerics who founded Hezbollah embrace the principal of the Supreme Leader, and they consider their organization to be under his leadership. Nevertheless, this chapter has argued that regardless of Iran's

²⁶ "Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum", on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hezbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

cardinal role in the foundation of Hezbollah, on matters Lebanese the party's decisions seem to be rooted in domestic rather than geopolitical calculations.²⁷ Whether it was the decision to abduct Israeli soldiers leading to the 2006 war, the invasion of West Beirut in May 2008, the military intervention in Qusayr and Qalamoun, and the election of Aoun president, all these episodes demonstrate Hezbollah's autonomy as a non-state actor. The next chapter tackles other arenas where Hezbollah operates as a proxy non-state actor serving Iran's geopolitical interests, namely Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

²⁷ Nasrallah's speech, March 1997, Orbit TV.

CHAPTER FOUR

HEZBOLLAH OUTSIDE LEBANON: A PROXY

NON-STATE ACTOR

4.1 Introduction

Since its creation, Hezbollah has been accused of conducting multiple operations in Lebanon and foreign countries in coordination with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. On 21 October, 1983, two truck bombs exploded in separate buildings for Multinational Force in Beirut, specifically against the United States and French troops, killing more than 220 marines and 58 French peacemakers. Travis Fry (2012) argues that Hezbollah was behind both assaults with Iran's help. Robert Baer, previous CIA officer who served in the Middle East, cited the kidnapping of the American journalist Charles Glass and the death of the CIA station Chief Bill Buckley when asked about Iran's influence on Hezbollah.²⁸ Augustus Richard Norton (2007) argues that freeing hostages requested a sequence of negotiations which couldn't have succeeded were it not for the Iranian government's determination to end the crisis; the conditions of the negotiation, however, included the release of Iranian assets frozen by the United States.

Furthermore, on 17 March 1992, a truck driven by a suicide bomber loaded with explosives crashed into the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The explosion killed 29 civilians including 2 Israeli women. Islamic Jihad, an allegedly covert name for

²⁸ "Interview Robert Baer", by Neil Docherty, 22 March 2002. Retrieved from: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/interviews/baer.html>

Hezbollah, claimed responsibility of the attack and released a video of the embassy taken before the bombing.²⁹ Two years later, on 18 July 1994, another explosion targeted the AMIA Jewish Community Center in the city. Argentine accused Hezbollah and the Quds Force of executing both bombings.³⁰ The 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia killed 17 Americans. Hezbollah and Iran were also accused of this terrorist act. The United States District Judge Royce Lamberth argued that Iran and Hezbollah financed and conducted the bombing of the Towers. However, Iran insisted that it has no connection with the attack.³¹ Moreover, on 18 July 2012, a bomb destroyed a bus in Burgas, Bulgaria killing 5 Israeli tourists and the driver and wounding 35 others. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak insisted on “the responsibility of Hezbollah for the operation.”³² Nasrallah refused these accusations considering that it is shameful to assume that Hezbollah would respond with this operation for Imad Moughniyeh’s assassination.³³

From being chiefly concerned with resisting Israel’s occupation of Lebanon, Hezbollah’s role evolved into a regional player far beyond the Lebanese borders. Iran helped create Hezbollah and assisted it with money, training and weapons, including short and long-range missiles, anti-ship and anti-tank missiles. Daniel Byman (2015) argues that Iran gave the party 100 million dollars per year in addition to advanced weaponry and thousands of rockets and missiles (p.4). Judith Palmer Harik (2005) maintains that part of the reason why Iran supported the group is to defend its own geopolitical interests in the

²⁹ “Patterns of Global Terrorism 1992: The Year in Review”. Retrieved from: https://fas.org/irp/threat/terror_92/review.html

³⁰ “Before Deadly Bulgaria Bombing, Tracks of a Resurgent Iran-Hezbollah Threat”, by Sebastian Rotella, 30 July 2012, Foreign Policy

³¹ “Iran Held Liable in Khobar Attack”, by Carol Leonig, 23 December 2006, The Washington Post.

³² “Interview with Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak”, by Wolf Blitzer, 30 July 2012, CNN. Retrieved from: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1207/30/sitroom.02.html>

³³ “Youtube: Nasrallah’s speech on Imad Moughnieh’s memory”, 18 July 2012.

region: namely, to confront Israel through a proxy. However, the major proxy roles played by the party have been far beyond Lebanon's borders, especially in Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, and more recently Syria after the popular uprisings. This chapter assesses Hezbollah's activity in these later theaters of operation to underscore its alternative role as a proxy non-state actor serving Iran's geopolitical agenda in the region.

4.2. Hezbollah's First Proxy Role: The Occupied Palestinian Territories

On 19 February 1985, Hezbollah announced its Open Letter to the world. Their number 1 objective contained: "To expel Israel (IDF) for good from Lebanon, as a prelude to its total annihilation, and the liberation of Jerusalem and its holy cities from the occupation" (Joseph Alagha, 2011, p.43). From the beginning, Hezbollah framed its identity in terms of resisting Israel, not only in Lebanon, but also in Palestine. From the 1985 Open Letter to the 2009 manifesto, the party's ideas concerning the Palestinian-Israeli struggle did not change. "We invite and call upon Arabs and Muslims at both the official and popular levels, and on all countries that are devoted to world peace and stability, to coordinate their efforts and resources for the liberation of Jerusalem from Zionist occupation, and to work on maintaining Jerusalem's true identity, and Islamic and Christian sacred site" (Alagha. 2011, p.134).

Yet Hezbollah did not support the Palestinians with speeches only, but with weapons too. It provided arms and trainings to numerous Palestinian factions, including Hamas, Fatah, and the Islamic Jihad. "Through Hezbollah, Iran also provides a tremendous amount of funding and logistical support to Hamas, in addition to funding

Fatah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.”³⁴ Furthermore, Rafael Frankel (2006) argues that documents seized in raids on Palestinian offices and interrogations of many captured over the years, reveals the connection between Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as Fatah and the Islamic Jihad.³⁵ He also stresses that the relationship between Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad grew during the years of the Oslo Accords in an attempt to pressure the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. For example, two of the organizers of the failed 1994 attempt to bomb the Israeli embassy in Thailand were captured in Jordan for smuggling arms to Palestinians in 2001 (Matthew Levitt, 2003). Rola El-Hussaini (2010) claims that Hezbollah has been blamed of assisting the Palestinians with massive arms shipments from Iran. Moreover, 80% of the attacks in the West Bank carry Hezbollah’s fingerprints and imprisoned Fatah operatives confess that the Lebanese party is financing all operations.³⁶

Frankel (2012) argues that Hamas has connections to Hezbollah, and by extension to Iran (p.59). Through Sinai, in Egypt, Iran send artillery weapons through its Lebanese surrogate. The party played a proxy role by smuggling weapons, including short and mid-range missiles to Hamas’s Jihadi wing, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades. Augustus Richard Norton (2007) argues that on April 2009, Egyptian authorities arrested 25 people including Sami Shehab (real name Muhammad Mansour), whom Nasrallah confessed of sending to Egypt to smuggle weapons for Hamas in Gaza. Egypt sentenced 21 of them to prison accusing them of espionage and holding weapons (187). Sami Shehab is one of

³⁴ “Assessing Hezbollah’s West Bank Foothold”, by Zohar Plaetti & Mathew Levitt, 18 June 2004. The Washington Institute. Retrieved from: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/assessing-hezbollahs-west-bank-foothold>

³⁵ “Israel Troubled that war in Lebanon drove its enemies closer”, by Rafael Frankel, 22 September 2006. The Christian Science Source. Retrieved from: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0922/p01s04-wome.html>

³⁶ “Assessing Hezbollah’s West Bank Foothold”, by Zohar Plaetti & Mathew Levitt, 18 June 2004. The Washington Institute.

many Hezbollah members who works on the smuggling route from Egypt to Gaza. Tunnels linking the Strip to Sinai pass under the Israeli Defense Forces border security, and Hamas fighters have acquired these capabilities from Hezbollah who uses the same strategy in South Lebanon to fight the Israelis. In 2006, Hamas executed an operation using tunnels to infiltrate into Israeli territories killing 2 Israeli soldiers and capturing one, Gilad Shalit.³⁷ Michal and Sela (2006) argued that tactical techniques used by Hamas were learned by their fighters who developed relations with Hezbollah after being expelled to Lebanon in the 1990s and returning to Gaza through Egypt. The tunnel-digging strategy was useful in the Syrian war. Hamas transmitted this tactic to Jabhat al-Nusra who used it with sophisticated machines under the regime's security buildings, filling the tunnels with bombs and exploding army sanctuaries. Frankel (2012) argues that Iran's financial support decreased after Hamas broke away from its alliance with Bashar al-Assad after the popular uprisings.

Hamas's shift away from Iran pushed the latter to form a new organization under its control with the help of Hezbollah. Since 2015, the Quds Forces and Hezbollah have financed and provided media support for a new group called "Al-Sabireen" (The Patient Ones) in the Gaza Strip.³⁸ The logo and the flag of the organization suggests the existence of a new Hezbollah in the Gaza Strip.³⁹ Nevertheless, Israeli media takes advantage of the sectarian clash between Sunni and Shi'a to link the new organization to Hezbollah and Iran and detach it from its Sunni context. Al-Sabireen spokesperson, Abou Youssef,

³⁷ "Gaza: How Hamas Tunnel Grew", by Eado Hecht, 22 July 2014. BBC News.

³⁸ "Replacing Hamas: Iran's New Proxy Militia in Gaza", by Ehud Yaari, 28 September 2015. Foreign Affairs. Retrieved from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/palestinian-authority/2015-09-28/replacing-hamas>

³⁹ "Al Sabirin: A New Resistance Movement in Gaza", by Hani Ibrahim, May 31 2014, Al-Akhbar English.

denied any connection to Hezbollah, mainly to insist on the new group's Sunni identity, but was open to cooperation with the party and to learning from its long experience in the battle with Israel.⁴⁰

For Hezbollah, helping Palestinians is a cardinal objective, and with all available resources. As Qassem argues, "Jihad" calls for armed struggle across the region as the only solution to keep the Palestinian national identity" (2005, p.171). The party operates in the occupied territories under a unit specialized in Palestinian affairs. Khalil Harb, leader of that unit in 2010, planned for attacks on Israeli targets to avenge Imad Moughniyah's assassination.⁴¹ Moreover, Nasrallah admits that Sami Shehab is a member of Hezbollah and he worked to smuggle weapons on the Palestinian-Egyptian borders for the resistance in Palestine.⁴² Hezbollah's complexion makes it easier for its members to operate in Arab countries with fewer possibility of being noticed. Iran takes advantage of this situation and uses Hezbollah's members to smuggle weapons into Palestine. There, Hezbollah functions as proxy for Tehran and helps Iran implement its agenda in the region and apply its expansionist policy which makes it a key player in the politics of the Levant. Hezbollah has played a similar proxy role in Iraq.

4.3. Hezbollah in Post-Invasion Iraq

The war on Iraq was an opportunity that Iran had been waiting for, but at the same time a hard test. Saddam was a direct threat to Iran; in addition to the 8 years of war between both countries, the Iraqi President was an impediment to Tehran's geopolitical

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "Treasury Sanctions Hezbollah Leadership", on 22 August 2013. US Departement of Treasury. Retrieved from: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2147.aspx>

⁴² "Youtube: Responding to Egyptian accusation of Hezbollah", on 4 October 2009.

ambitions. In 1991, Saddam lead an assault against the Shi'a who received help from Iran to overthrow the Iraqi regime. Imad Salamey (2017) argues that “the power vacuum left by the collapse of the Iraqi regime brought the rivalry between Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia for regional control to its climax” (p.23). Saddam’s downfall was the best opportunity for Iran to implement its agenda by expanding its influence in Iraq through local proxies. Hezbollah played an instrumental role after the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq to help Iran entrench its influence in post-Saddam Iraq.

From 2003 onwards, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards have been arming, training and funding Shi'a groups in Iraq. The Quds Force and Hezbollah played a role in shaping and training these units. Whether in Lebanon or Iraq, thousands of Shiite Iraqi fighters have been trained by Hezbollah. After ISIS occupied large parts of Iraq, Hezbollah increased its interference with “Al-Hashd al-Shaabi”, the Iraqi Shiite militia that operates under Iranian orders. Hezbollah also assisted in the creation of other militias under its and Iran’s total control later on.

After the invasion of Iraq, two major Shiite parties operated in collaboration with Iran: Badr Organization and the Mahdi Army. Through a special division, Unit 3800, specialized in external operations to train and assist Shiite militias, Hezbollah operated in Iraq to serve Iran’s geopolitical interest.⁴³ A small number of Hezbollah fighters headed to Iraq for assistance and hundreds of Iraqis received training in Hezbollah’s camps in Lebanon. Unit 3800 fighters and consultants headed to Shi'a regions to train and back the Badr Organization that was previously working for Iran against Saddam Hussein and

⁴³ “Hezbollah fighters train Iraqi Shiite militants near Mosul”, by David Daoud, on 5 November 2016. FDD’s Long War Journal. Retrieved from: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/hezbollah-fighters-train-iraqi-shiite-militants-near-mosul.php>

played a role in the 1991 revolution against him. It also supported the Mahdi Army that was created in 2003 and was banned in 2008 under the leadership of Muqtada Al-Sadr. Asai'b Ahl al-Haq is also an Iranian-backed group that split from Muqtada Al-Sadr's party after 2004 in addition to Kata'ib Hezbollah. Imad Moughniyah also travelled to Iraq during 2006, however, Ali Mousa Daqdouq was the main figure who applied Hezbollah's plan in the country. He went to Iran in 2006 and trained Iraqi militias on carrying out operations, launching rockets and missiles, collecting intelligence and kidnapping. Daqdouq was arrested in 2007 and Muhammad Kawtharani succeeded him in running Hezbollah's plan in Iraq.⁴⁴ Captured in 2007, Daqdouq assumed responsibility for Hezbollah in the operation that caused the death of four Americans.⁴⁵ Shi'a militias conducted numerous attacks against American and Coalition Force troops after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Matthew Levitt and Nadav Pollak (2014) argued that in 2003 the Quds Force asked for Hezbollah's service to increase Tehran's influence in Iraq. The creation of Unit 3800 was to help Shi'a Iraqi militias targeting multinational forces.⁴⁶

A turning event in the region's politics was the Mosul offensive by ISIS in June 2014, when ISIS was able to conquer vast lands in Iraq in a short period. However, this raid was the perfect opportunity for Iran to gather all Shi'a factions under one union, Al Hashd Al Sha'bi. This coalition included Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and many other Shi'a militias in addition to some Sunni tribes. Under the cover of the Ministry of Interior affairs, Al Hashd al Sha'bi became a legal entity fighting for Iran's interest

⁴⁴ "Hezbollah fighters train Iraqi Shiite militants near Mosul", by David Daoud, on 5 November 2016. FDD's Long War Journal.

⁴⁵ "Hezbollah in Iraq: A little Help Can Go a Long Way", by Matthew Levitt and Nadav Pollak, on 25 June 2014. The Washington Institute.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

together with the Iraqi Army. “For months prior to the offensive, Iran, and its Iraqi proxies pressured the Iraqi government to accept the militias’ role in the Mosul offensive, a move that could give them a share of victory and provide them with a pretext to justify their activities long after the defeat of ISIS.”⁴⁷ Hezbollah, in coordination with the Quds Force and General Qassem Sulaimani, participated in training, organizing and funding Al Hashd al Sha’bi. Akram al Ka’bi, the leader of Harakat al Noujaba, an Iranian proxy, stated that Hezbollah trained Al Hashd under Suleimani guidance.⁴⁸ The Lebanese party played an important role in directing operations since the Mosul offensive and the counter-attack by Al Hashd al Sha’bi on ISIS.

Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah has made public the party’s role in Iraq. He called upon his followers to head to Iraq to fight ISIS and hence terrorism.⁴⁹ Albeit the party claims that its role in Iraq is limited, it is clear that it operates there as a proxy for Iran’s larger geopolitical designs. Since 2003, it has trained militia fighters, transmitted its experience to them, and taught them to use mortars, anti-tank missiles and sophisticated weapons. The party played the role of directing and managing battles rather than fighting on the ground, however. The invasions and atrocities of the Islamic State strengthened Hezbollah’s commitments in Iraq. Hezbollah acts in Baghdad as a proxy for Tehran and Iran will keep using Hezbollah’s experience to train its proxies in Iraq and elsewhere as we will see in the next section.

⁴⁷ “Is this the Beginning of ‘Hezbollah-ization’ of Iraq?”, by Hassan Dai, on 10 November 2016. Al-Arabiyya. Retrieved from: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/2016/11/10/Mosul-offensive-and-Shiite-militias-Is-this-the-beginning-of-Hezbollah-ization-of-Iraq-.html>

⁴⁸ “Is this the Beginning of ‘Hezbollah-ization’ of Iraq?”, by Hassan Dai, on 10 November 2016. Al-Arabiyya.

⁴⁹ Youtube: “Let Us go Together to Syria and Iraq and Fight ISIS”. On 17 February 2015.

4.4 Hezbollah and the Battle for Syria

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria evolved gradually, from the protection of its security backyard in the Beqaa and across the Lebanese-Syrian border, to the protection of Shi'a religious shrines in Damascus, and then to a major military involvement in a bid to protect the regime from collapse. In this respect, Hezbollah's intervention in Syria can only be explained in terms of its proxy role on behalf of Iran's regional interests. Two strategic objectives were served by Hezbollah's intervention in Syria. As Thomas Juneau (2016) argues, the Syrian territory plays a critical role in allowing Iran to funnel military support to Hezbollah, by air and then overland to Lebanon. The second objective is the survival of the Syrian regime, without which the regional balance of power would tip drastically against Iran. Hezbollah had no option but to serve in Syria Iran's geopolitical regional interests.

Hezbollah played a decisive role in averting the collapse of the Syrian regime. It assisted Syrian forces in crushing rebel groups, preserving the regime's hold on Damascus, and retaking key territory essential for regime survival.⁵⁰ Hezbollah – along with the Syrian army, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Russian special forces, and a host of local and transnational sectarian non-state actors – participated in battles from the south of Syria all the way to the north. In fact, Hezbollah was perhaps the only non-state actor that participated in the regime's battles across much of the Syrian territory.⁵¹ The party was involved in the siege of Homos, which lasted until 2014. It also fought in Damascus

⁵⁰ "Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum", on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hezbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

⁵¹ "Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum", on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hezbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

and its suburbs, such as Douma and Daraya. Moreover, Hezbollah intervened in Dara'a, As-Suwayda, Deir ez-Zor, Idlib, and Aleppo. The biggest, most strategic, and most costly in terms of casualties of all Hezbollah's battles was that of Aleppo. Hezbollah's military role changed depending on the battlefield. According to a Hezbollah fighter, who led military operations depended on the nature of the terrain: in some battles, the party fought with other militias or alongside the Syrian army; in others, it handled the entire battle, "from reconnaissance to clean-up."⁵²

In the southern Governorates, and in addition to Hezbollah's assistance to pro-regime local populations, its fighters lead battles in some villages in As-Suwayda and the Dara'a governorate. After all, the Syrian uprising had started in Dara'a. When clashes erupted there, the regime did not retreat from all the city. Rather, it held its positions. Small rebels groups formed by citizens began the fighting against the regime, then followed by the FSA. Jabhat al-Nusra entered the battle only much later. Hezbollah participated in different military confrontations in the rural villages, such as Al-Shaykh Maskin and Izra'.⁵³ Given its strategic position on the Damascus-Daraa road, the battle for Al-Shaykh Maskin was very fierce for all involved. After one month of confrontations, on January 2016, the village was liberated by the Syrian army with the help of Hezbollah from the FSA and Jabhat Al-Nusra. Ahmad Abu Al-Shaim, a rebel leader, claims that Hezbollah's commander known as Al-Shabah was killed in this battle.⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Hezbollah fighters seen in Dara'a", by Ahmad Kweider, on 14 June 2013. Syria Direct. Retrieved from: <http://syriadirect.org/news/hezbollah-fighters-seen-in-daraa-province/>

⁵⁴ "Forces fight for Strategic Syrian Gateway to South", by Khaled Atallah, Translated by Sami Joe-Abboud, on 8 January 2016. Al-Monitor. Retrieved from: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/syria-regime-advances-al-shaykh-maskin.html#>

Not only did Hezbollah fighters play a major role in the liberation of Al-Shaikh Miskeen, they also reinforced Izra' city by protecting it from rebel attacks due to its strategic importance as it straddles the road towards Dara'a. Izra' formed a military challenge for FSA forces; all its villagers were evacuated except high ranking officers and their families who remained to fight.⁵⁵ Hezbollah helped the regime by assisting Sunni citizens in the village with weapons and training; they also fought alongside them. All this gave Hezbollah fighters credibility in the battlefield and consolidated their presence in the area.

In the neighboring city of As-Suwayda, the Druze minority citizens have remained pro-regime. They are fighting with the regime under different labels, such as the People's Committees, SSNP Forces, in addition to those enrolled in the army. Here again Hezbollah played an effective role in arming and training locals to protect their towns from ISIS or Al-Nusra attacks from the city's eastern and western flanks. Moreover, Hezbollah commanders managed directly forces on the ground in Busra Al-Sham, a small village on the borders of As-Suwayda and Dara'a, one that contains a small Shi'a population. Overpowered by the attackers, Hezbollah and its allies ultimately retreated from the village in March 2015 and the FSA consequently took control of Busra. Some reports even suggest that Hezbollah has trained some Druze communities in Syria in self-defense.⁵⁶

Hezbollah fighters also participated with the Syrian army in its confrontations in Damascus and its suburbs, especially in Douma, Darayya, Al-Ghouta, Ma'loula and

⁵⁵ "Hezbollah fighters seen in Dara'a", by Ahmad Kweider, on 14 June 2013. Syria Direct. Retrieved from: <http://syriadirect.org/news/hezbollah-fighters-seen-in-daraa-province/>

⁵⁶ "Following Killing of Hezbollah Operative Jihad Mughniyeh, New Information Comes to Light Regarding Hezbollah". On 28 January 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.memri.org/reports/following-killing-hizbullah-operative-jihad-mughniyah-new-information-comes-light-regarding>

Zabadani. The decision was obvious to secure the areas near Damascus to draw a line around the regime's strongholds in the capital. In Douma, a large neighborhood in Damascus, Hezbollah conducted the assault alongside the 4th army division, one of the strongest and well-equipped divisions in the Syrian army led by Maher Al-Assad.⁵⁷ In the suburbs close to Damascus, Hezbollah participated in most of the battles. Darayya was seized by rebels for more than three years, yet the Syrian army, Hezbollah and their allies were able to liberate the area after months of fighting and attacks by Ajnad Al-Sham, an Islamist faction that failed to recover lost territories in the town.⁵⁸ Winning the battle of Darayya was considered strategic for both sides since it is situated on the edge of the Mazzeh military airport, used to conduct airstrikes against rebel strongholds.

Hezbollah fighters were also active in Darayya and Al-Ghouta, altering the balance of power in the battlefield in favor of the Syrian army.⁵⁹ The party deployed field commanders to plan, alongside the regime, the assault; Hezbollah fighters clashed with Jaish Al-Islam fighters in hand-to-hand fighting. They achieved quick victories over rebel units.⁶⁰

In Ma'loula, a Christian town in the north-east of Damascus, Hezbollah intervened in a short battle on September 2013 that lasted for a couple of days and fought alongside the Syrian army to liberate the town from Islamist fighters. Pictures of Hezbollah with

⁵⁷ "From Qusayr to Aleppo: the Syrian Army's 4th Division and Hezbollah Remain Undefeated", by Leith Fadel, on 18 December 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/hezbollah-syrian-army-advance-to-abu-rayal-in-southern-aleppo-as-more-iraqi-paramilitary-arrive/>

⁵⁸ "Syrian Army captures over 25 Farms in Southern Darayya", by Leith Fadel, on 24 June 2016. Al Masdar. Retrieved from: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-army-captures-25-farms-southern-darayya-map/>

⁵⁹ "From Qusayr to Aleppo: the Syrian Army's 4th Division and Hezbollah Remain Undefeated", by Leith Fadel, on 18 December 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/hezbollah-syrian-army-advance-to-abu-rayal-in-southern-aleppo-as-more-iraqi-paramilitary-arrive/>

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Statues of Jesus and Christian Crosses were spread through the media, social media in specific, during those days trying to send a message that the party is protecting Christians and minorities in Syria. The battles in Zabadani commenced in 2012, but peaked in 2015, when large numbers of Hezbollah fighters along with the Syrian army attacked the area and set siege to it to reduce pressure on two Shi'a villages, Kefriya and Fu'ah, in Idlib. Iran used Hezbollah to ensure that these two predominantly Shi'a villages were not overrun by rebel forces.⁶¹ The party suffered daily losses among its militants during the Zabadani battles. On 2 August, four fighters were killed while capturing a new position in the village called Hay Al-Himah neighborhood.⁶² While the confrontation was ferocious on both sides, a deal was reached between Iran and Turkey to transfer populations between rebel and regime-held areas, and a ceasefire was announced on 24 September. The deal included the evacuation of civilians from Kifriya and Fu'ah and the withdrawal of rebel fighters besieged in Zabadani. Iran and Turkey engineered the agreement through their proxies in Syria.⁶³ This Iranian intervention in altering the demography of the Syrian geography underscores the just how much it relies upon its Lebanese proxy in the Syrian battle. Moreover, battle decisions are taken by Iranian commanders rather than by Hezbollah's military corps.

Homs was another city where Hezbollah was operational. It joined the battle in the city, and conducted assaults on rebel groups alongside the Syrian army and National

⁶¹ "Iran Repopulates Syria with Shi'a Muslims to help tighten regime's control", by Martin Chulov, 14 January 2017. The Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence>

⁶² "Hezbollah pushes on in Zabadani, loses 4 fighters", on 2 August 2015. The Daily Star. Retrieved from: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Aug-02/309323-three-hezbollah-fighters-killed-in-zabadani.ashx>

⁶³ "Syria Army, Rebels reach Deal on Zabadani, Idlib Villages: Source", on 25 September 2017. The Daily Star. Retrieved from: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Sep-24/316543-hezbollah-syria-army-reach-deal-with-rebels-on-fate-of-zabadani-idlib-towns-sources.ashx>

Defense militia. Hezbollah's role was effective in regaining the Baba Amr neighborhood. Later on, rebels were able to penetrate the area and conduct a counter-attack killing Syrian army soldiers and reclaiming positions before receiving a devastating blow by Hezbollah and the regime. Isabel Nassief (2014) argues that Hezbollah played an instrumental role in regime control over Homs. Its fighters pushed toward Khaled Ibn al-Walid mosque to separate Khalidiya from the rest of the Old city. This strategy led to the domino downfall of the city's districts after which Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies, namely Badr Organization and Quwat al-Ridha, participated in the control of Homs on May 2014.

In fact, Alexander Corbeil (2017) argues that Hezbollah are fighting as far as Deir ez-Zor. Since the beginning of 2016, Hezbollah formed Zain al-Abidin Brigade in the Eastern city. The Lebanese party started appearing in Deir ez-Zor and formed a militia of almost 120 fighter and regime Helicopters have been moving them to the city.⁶⁴ More recently, alongside the Syrian Army and other Shi'a militias, Hezbollah made a significant push towards Deir ez-Zor from Palmyra.⁶⁵ In Idlib, and in addition to its aforementioned role in protecting the twin Shi'a villages of al-Fu'ah and Kafriya, the party was involved in the battle for the city, especially in its Eastern entrance and in the Industrial District. Hassan Hussein Al-Hajj, the head of operations of Hezbollah inside Idlib, was reportedly killed on October 2015.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ "Hezbollah forms Zein al-Abideen Brigade Militia in Deir el Zor", on 20 June 2016. Retrieved from: http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/31210/Hezbollah_Forms_Abedeen_Brigade_Militia_Deir_Zor_Activist

⁶⁵ "Syrian Army, Hezbollah make push towards Deir ez-Zor from Palmyra", by Leith Fadel, on 6 April 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-army-hezbollah-make-significant-push-towards-deir-ezzor-palmyra/>

⁶⁶ "Hezbollah berries Commander Killed in Syria", on 12 October 2015. Retrieved from: <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/191843>

The second major battle and the turning point in the Syrian war after Qusayr was Aleppo. Various countries have been directly and indirectly involved in the battle of Aleppo, such as Russia, Turkey and Iran. In the northwest of the town, Hezbollah intervened in the offensive to lift the siege of two Shi'a villages, Nubl and al-Zahraa. After the fall of Qusair, almost 3000 fighters of Hezbollah were in Aleppo, including the Military Academy and Nubl and al-Zahraa⁶⁷. Hezbollah used both villages as bases for its operations in the area before retreating under rebels' attacks. Meanwhile, Hezbollah helped create, train and fund a militia called Imam Al-Hijja regiment created to protect both towns (Phillip Smyth, 2016). On February 2016, the Lebanese party joined the Syrian army in the fighting in North Aleppo, and helped lift the blockade of the two villages that suffered for more than 3 years.

In 2016, the Syrian regime, Iran, Hezbollah, various pro-regime militias, and Russian forces conducted the offensive for the liberation of Aleppo that continued for almost one year. They started by cutting the supply route from Turkey to the rebels, surrounded the city from all sides and resisted counter-attacks from the opposing fighters. The rebels failed to end the siege and were left vulnerable. Corbeil (2017) claims that Hezbollah participated in the attack to recapture lost villages during the failed attack of rebels on Eastern Aleppo and the party lost between 28 and 35 fighters. In fact, Hezbollah and the Russians built good relations during Aleppo's offensive. The battle for Aleppo ended on December 2016 and rebels left the city towards Idlib with their families. Mohammed Nuruzzaman (2016) argues that the victory in Aleppo is the greatest victory

⁶⁷ "Hezbollah's Deeper Involvement in the Battle for Syria", Nicholas Heras, on 28 June 2013. Retrieved from: https://www.fairoserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/hezbollahs-deeper-involvement-syrian-civil-war/

for the government in the bloody civil war. Hezbollah played a major role in this battle, in close cooperation with Iran's National Guard and the Russian Air Force.⁶⁸

Regime collapse in Syria was no option for both Hezbollah and Iran. With the escalation of the confrontations in the country, the attacks on Shi'a Shrines and on Shi'a villages on the Lebanese-Syrian borders, Hezbollah decided to intervene. As mentioned in the previous chapter, its intervention on the Lebanese borders was considered an autonomous decision for various reasons. However, fighting all over the Syrian soil was Iran's decision to protect its and Hezbollah's strategic interests. The party, backed by Iran, was determined to protect its supply lines to Iran, ones that depended on access to Syrian land routes. From Quneitra, Daraa and As-Suwayda in the South, to Deir ez-Zor and Idlib in the North, Hezbollah fighters participated in multiple battles along with the Syrian army and pro-regime militias. Christopher Kozak (2017) argues that Iran leads a coalition of 30,000 fighters including IRGC and Hezbollah fighters, and the Lebanese party functions under its orders with around 7,000 fighters operating in Syria. "The Lebanese Shi'a militia and Iranian proxy currently fields between 6,000 and 8,000 fighters in that country's civil war, with some estimates as high as 10,000. Having suffered roughly 2,000 deaths and over 5,000 injured since their involvement in the conflict" (Corbeil, 2017).

It is clear, that Iran's first priority is to protect its own interests in Syria: namely, the survival of an allied regime in Damascus, and the land routes to Lebanon.⁶⁹ Hezbollah fought in the major and most significant battles in Syria and in towns that are considered

⁶⁸"Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum", on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hezbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

⁶⁹"Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum", on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hezbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

strategically important. Yet its aim was to also protect Shi'a villages wherever they may be located, such as Al Shaykh Maskin, Kafriya, al-Fu'ah, Nubl and Al Zahraa. Hezbollah armed and trained local Shi'a and formed local Shi'a militias and assisted them directly during their battles. “While the conflict deepened Hezbollah’s reliance on Iran, it also established the party as the axis’s most effective military partner.”⁷⁰ Syria’s human and financial costs underscored the importance of the Syrian battle for Hezbollah and Iran. Hezbollah involvement in the Syrian conflict as described above demonstrates the party’s proxy role on behalf of Tehran’s geopolitical regional interests. The next section examines this role in Yemen.

4.5 Hezbollah in the Saudi Backyard: Yemen

The geopolitical battle in the region between Iran and Saudi Arabia reached its peak during the war in Saudi Arabia’s backyard, Yemen. After the popular uprisings associated with the Arab Spring, Yemen went through a stillborn transition led to a new President, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. However, this led to a wave of battles when the Houthis, a Zaidi Shi'a sect in the north of the country, staged an armed rebellion along with the previous President Ali Abdullah Saleh against the new pro-Saudi regime. Houthis had tried more than once since 2004 to fight for their socioeconomic rights. Iran found in assisting them the perfect opportunity to reach the strategic Gulf of Eden and to challenge Saudi Arabia on its borders. In March 2015, the Houthis, backed by Iran and supported by Ali Abdullah Saleh’s forces, took control of big parts of the country and of the presidential palace, forcing Hadi to flee. This step, erupted the war in the country and lead

⁷⁰ Ibid.

to a direct Saudi intervention in Yemen. Salamey (2017) contends that Iran's expansion into Riyadh's security backyard was behind Saudi's military intervention in Yemen to face the Iranian-backed Houthis (p.23). Even in Yemen, alongside Iranian Revolutionary Guard and under its command, Hezbollah's hands were present.

Hezbollah, operating as an Iranian proxy in this context, headed to Yemen to support and organize Houthi fighters in their battle. Though Houthis might be fighting for their own agenda and rights, Hezbollah executed Iran's geopolitical interest by extending Tehran's influence to the Saudi borders in a strategic country in the Gulf. Sometime before the clashes of March 2015, Hezbollah's Unit 3800, then operating in Iraq, headed to Sana'a, just after the American withdrawal from Baghdad. The Lebanese party, alongside the Quds Force, shipped weapons to Yemen and trained Houthis to fight the government. Khalil Harb, a Hezbollah leader and close adviser of Nasrallah, was appointed to lead the Unit.⁷¹ He was sanctioned by the US Department of Treasury that held him responsible for Hezbollah's Yemen activities and accused him of being involved in Hezbollah's political portfolio in Yemen.⁷² Harb has visited Iran many times to cooperate with them concerning terrorist activities, and he is known for his close relations with Tehran. Saudi Arabia accused him of performing terrorist activities and commanding Hezbollah's operating Unit in Yemen.⁷³

⁷¹ "Hezbollah in Iraq: A Little Help Can Go a Long Way", by Matthew Levitt and Nadav Pollak, on 25 June 2014. The Washington Institute. Retrieved from: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-in-iraq-a-little-help-can-go-a-long-way>

⁷² "Treasury Sanctions Hezbollah Leadership", on 22 August 2013. US Department of Treasury. Retrieved from: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2147.aspx>

⁷³ "Why the Saudis Just Blacklisted Two Lebanese Militants", by Matthew Levitt, on 29 May 2015. Retrieved from: <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/defense/243408-why-the-saudis-just-blacklisted-two-lebanese-militants>

Hezbollah's intervention in Yemen is, for now at least, limited to advisors and trainers. The party did not intervene in direct clashes with government forces, or Saudi forces on the Saudi-Yemeni borders. Speaking to the *Financial Times*, a Hezbollah commander speaking of his experience training the Houthis in Iran, Lebanon, and Yemen, opines that "they are intelligent and fierce fighters."⁷⁴ In fact, Houthi officials have been spotted in Beirut's hotels and hosted by Hezbollah.⁷⁵ Yemeni officials argue that Yemeni armed forces arrested Iranian experts and Hezbollah members in Al Jawf Governorate.⁷⁶ Moreover, in 2016, a Saudi military official accused Hezbollah of sending mercenaries to Yemen.⁷⁷

Iran and Hezbollah have not officially declared their intervention in the Yemeni war; however, Hezbollah has loudly supported Houthis in its media and by official statements. Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah attacked Saudi Arabia on many occasions since the beginning of the conflict. On the 10th of Ashura, October 2016, Nasrallah repeated with thousands of Shi'a celebrating the Ashura rituals, "Al-Mawt li al-Saoud" (Death for Al Saud). He claimed that Saudi Arabia is attacking Yemenis because they want to deprive them of their own socioeconomic rights and political demands. He continued that thousands of brave, courageous Yemeni fighters will achieve victory by "putting Al Saud's nose in the sand and make them loose the battle."⁷⁸

⁷⁴ "Lebanon's Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthis open up Links", by Erika Solomon, on 8 June 2015. Financial Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/e1e6f750-f49b-11e4-9a58-00144feab7de>

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ "Iran and Hezbollah Prisoners Captured by Yemeni Army", on 16 December 2016. Al Arabiya Englsih. Retrieved from: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/12/16/Iran-and-Hezbollah-prisoners-captured-by-Yemeni-army.html>

⁷⁷ "Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum", on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hezbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

⁷⁸ Youtube: Nasrallah during Ashura Final Day. 14 October 2016.

Hezbollah's expanded regional role in Yemen confirms its proxy role on behalf of Iran's regional geopolitical agenda. Operationally, the Quds Force and Hezbollah were tasked with execute the plans: Hezbollah trained Houthis in Lebanon and headed to Yemen to transfer its experience to the fighters, training, financing and arming them. Even though Houthi rebels conducted attacks and rebelled against the Yemeni government in a bid to achieve their own rights rather than in pursuit of Tehran's geopolitical interest, Iran saw an opportunity in this conflict to set its foot on the shores of the Red Sea and on the Saudi borders, no matter how limited its assistance to the Houthis. As Juneau (2016) argues, Yemen represents Saudi Arabia's soft underbelly, and Iran found an opportunity in the Houthis to play a limited role in the country. Hezbollah's decision to train and assist the Houthi rebels in Yemen is not autonomous. The party's involvement in Yemen's civil war was part of an Iranian plan undertaken by Hezbollah who acted in this case as a proxy for Iran in the Saudi backyard, and in what is invariably a larger regional geopolitical confrontation.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined Hezbollah's military intervention on behalf of Iran's geopolitical objectives in a multiple of theatres of operation. Undoubtedly, Hezbollah's proxy role on behalf of Iran's geopolitical agenda has raised against it the ire of Sunni public opinion. The chapter traced Hezbollah's involvement in Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, making ample use of personal interviews conducted in Syria and Lebanon.

Away from the Lebanese borders, Hezbollah operated not as an autonomous actor, but more so as a proxy non-state actor, working closely with the Iranian Revolutionary

Guards in the service of Tehran's geopolitical interests. To be sure, and since its founding, Hezbollah served Tehran's agenda in foreign countries, but especially in Argentine and Europe. However, from the time when the Arab Spring exploded and then reached Syria, Iran turned to Hezbollah to defend its geopolitical interests. Aside from its proxy role that was played in assisting the Palestinians in Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and in supporting Shi'a militias in Iraq to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of Saddam regime, the party intervened in Syria to support a regime on the verge of collapse. The previous chapter explained the reasons behind Hezbollah's intervention in Syria and its autonomous decision to fight in Qusayr and Qalamoun to protect its security backyard, the Beqaa valley. This chapter, by contrast, examined the proxy role Hezbollah assumed on behalf of Iran in a number of countries. In this sense, Hezbollah has indeed emerged as Iran's most effective geopolitical instrument, one that other non-state actors are modelled on (Corbeil, 2017). Iran's geopolitical agenda to expend its influence in the region and defend its interests has kept Hezbollah busy, from Iraq, Syria, and all the way to Yemen. These interventions on Tehran's behalf has caused the party substantial losses, however, but has also proved that it is a reliable proxy for Iran, one that can operate effectively and with agility.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

5.1 Summing up the Argument

Since its emergence on the morrow of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah has mutated into a highly-institutionalized organization with a central role in Lebanese politics, an autonomous and well-developed governance network, and a sophisticated military apparatus (Benedatti Berti, 2016). Turmoil in the Arab world, particularly after the Arab Spring, transformed Hezbollah to a “mobile military entity” operating from the Mediterranean Sea to the Gulf of Aden. In other words, Hezbollah developed to a transnational non-state actor. Whether acting as an autonomous or proxy non-state actor, the party is playing a major role in the region’s politics, intervening decisively in military battles from Baghdad to Damascus and then Sana'a. This role as a proxy non-state actor serving Iran’s regional geopolitical interests transformed Hezbollah from a resistance in Lebanon to a regional game changer. In this framework of operations extending from Beirut to Yemen, the party became an effective transregional actor doing more than resisting Israel. Yet this does not mean that Hezbollah’s decision-making is relegated to Iran on all matters. As Thomas Juneau (2016) argues, and thanks in great measure to Iran’s assistance, the party has gradually become an elite fighting force. But this also serves Tehran’s own strategy: “Iran’s ties to non-state actors in a country also allow it to position itself as an indispensable player with a say in major decisions. To this end, it often hedges its bets by developing ties to many actors, providing

them with shifting combinations of political, military and financial support. It tries to identify future winners, supporting a range of small groups with the expectation that at least some of them will eventually emerge as important players” (Juneau 2016, p.9).

This thesis was preoccupied by assessing what kind of label as a non-state actor does Hezbollah fit. Can it be described as an autonomous non-state actor or, alternatively, a proxy one? To examine this puzzle, the thesis focused on specific theatres of operation: namely, the Lebanese context and its environs along the border area with Syria, and the larger geopolitical context in which Hezbollah operates as a proxy for Iran’s geopolitical ambitions, from Syria all the way to Yemen. The more Hezbollah operates in the former context the more it approaches the status of an autonomous non-state actor, while its extensive activities in the latter turn it into a proxy non-state actor.

This thesis examined Hezbollah’s political activity in Lebanon as an example of the workings of an autonomous non-state actor. In this theatre of operations, Hezbollah need not turn to its patron Iran for political direction. The chapter covered many examples of Hezbollah’s political operations in Lebanon to demonstrate its status as an autonomous non-state actor. Consequently, it examined Hezbollah’s emergence and, in the post-war period, entry into parliamentary politics in 1992. The 1559 UNSC resolution targeting Syria and Hezbollah, in addition to Hariri’s assassination and the changing political winds in the region triggered by Iraq’s invasion in 2003 pushed Syria to retreat from Lebanon. Hezbollah then decided to enter cabinet and involve itself directly in managing the country’s domestic politics to fill the political vacuum in the post-Syrian era. This marked a shift in Hezbollah’s strategy towards domestic politics and marked the beginning of a new era in Lebanon. Yet it would be wrong to suggest that this came as a result of an Iranian decision. It was rather an autonomous decision by the party, imposed by domestic

and regional exigencies. Of course, this greater involvement in domestic politics led Hezbollah to a number of political confrontations, culminating in the 2006 war with Israel and the 7 May 2008 military invasion of West Beirut. All this led to a spike Sunni-Shi'a sectarian relations, whether in Lebanon or the region.

With the explosion of the popular uprisings, the geopolitical contest in the region reached Syria. Hezbollah rushed to protect its Lebanese backyard in the Beqaa Valley. Its direct military involvement started from the Lebanese Syrian borders. This involvement marked the beginning of Hezbollah's biggest and costliest battle, the Qusayr and Qalamoun offensives. In Lebanon and on the Lebanese Syrian borders, Hezbollah's political and military decision-making process is issued by its Lebanese leadership. The process of taking a decision is based, as shown in chapter 3, on the study of the party's benefits of each action it takes rather than Iran's. Depending on the geographical arena it is performing in, Hezbollah's autonomy is defined. Outside Lebanon, Hezbollah acts as a proxy for Iran. In Palestine, Iraq, Syria and more recently, in Yemen, the Lebanese party executed Tehran's foreign policy plans.

Hezbollah's role as a proxy non-state actor was surveyed in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. From the Buenos Aires 1992 explosions to the Burgas bus attack in 2012, Hezbollah conducted several attacks on Israeli targets. Along with the Quds Force, the party planned and executed these attacks depending on Iran's foreign policy strategy. In Palestine, Iran used Hezbollah as a tool to train, support and assist Palestinian factions. Hezbollah built close relations with Hamas by training its fighters and smuggling weapons to it through the Egyptian Sinai and into the Gaza Strip. The party also has connection with Fatah and the Islamic Jihad and is accused of directing many assaults on Israelis into the West Bank. Additionally, it built new ties with factions under Iran's direct control

such as “Al Sabireenn”, especially after the deteriorating of Tehran’s relations with Hamas after the Syrian civil war.

After the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Tehran found the perfect opportunity to spread its geopolitical dominance and apply its foreign policy agenda. Hezbollah’s fighters headed to Baghdad to create Shi’a militias that operate under the Revolutionary Guards’ orders. The Lebanese party is accused of orchestrating attacks on American troops in the country in coordination with Iran’s Revolutionary Guards. Iran and Hezbollah benefited from ISIS’s big offensive on June 2014, and its conquest of vast lands to increase their presence through Shi’a militias and to appear as protecting Iraqis from terrorism.

The participation of Hezbollah in the Syrian war was far from being an autonomous decision. Its intervention prevented the regime’s collapse, an objective shared with Tehran. Hezbollah fighters joined the Syrian army and other sectarian militias loyal to the regime in their battles against rebels from the southern governorates of Daraa and As-Suwayda to the Northern Governorates of Idlib and Aleppo. It also fought major battles in Damascus, Reef Dimashq and Homs, in addition to the Western governorates of Deir ez-Zor. While fighting in Syria, Hezbollah defended Shi’a villages such as Al Sheikh Miskeen in Daraa and Kafriya and Al fu’ah in Idlib, in addition to training and supporting Shi’a fighters and forming organized militias that fought in many battles such Homs and Aleppo. One such example mentioned earlier in this thesis is Quwat al-Ridah. Hezbollah’s losses since its intervention in Syria proves the party’s determination to protect its interests and Iran’s at any cost. The regime’s collapse and the rise of a new, pro-Saudi one, would prove a major geopolitical risk for both Iran and Hezbollah. This would undoubtedly threaten Hezbollah’s supply routes from Tehran to Beirut. Weapons delivery will be

harder and perilous if it shifted from ground to water and will render Hezbollah, Iran's strongest proxy in the region, vulnerable in any future confrontation with Israel, thus jeopardizing Iran's geopolitical influence in the region. In sum, Hezbollah "may yet parlay its vital military assistance into a political role in any future negotiations, either directly or through Iran. In blocking a regime change backed by the US, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia that would have shifted the regional power balance, it has cemented its own position and reinforced that of its patron, Iran, but it has also triggered daunting long-run challenges."⁷⁹

The proxy role that Hezbollah adopted outside the Lebanese theatre of operations evolved with its intervention in Yemen. In Lebanon, Houthi fighters received training in the party's camps before the eruption of the Yemeni civil war. Nasrallah's claim of fighting Takfiris in Syria to prevent them from attacking Lebanon later on are not valid in Yemen. Sana'a is neither a supply route for Hezbollah, nor a close country where Islamists can threaten Lebanon. Its decision to assist Houthis can only be justified by applying Iranian decision-makers plans in the Gulf of Aden to improve Tehran's military reach in the region. Thus, political and military intervention in Yemen is nothing more than implementing Iran's geopolitical agenda. Extending Iran's influence all the way to the Saudi borders and along the strategic Gulf of Aden is a major feat for Iranian foreign policy. In this regard, Hezbollah's intervention in Yemen on Iran's behalf is a tactical geopolitical move.

⁷⁹ "Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum", on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hezbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

In sum, all of Hezbollah's activities beyond the Lebanese theatre of operation are orchestrated or at least coordinated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and the decision-making process for these military interventions are issued in Tehran, rather than Beirut. Depending on the geographical arena of its operation, Hezbollah acts either as an autonomous or proxy non-state actor. In Lebanon and on the Syrian-Lebanese borders, the party acted autonomously, yet elsewhere, it acted as a proxy for Iran's geopolitical interests.

5.2 Theoretical Implications of the Argument

Realism and its sub-theories focus on states as unitary and pivotal actors in world politics. Yet as this thesis has shown, in some contexts, non-state actors are as important as state actors. Evan Laksmana (2013) argues that most scholars working in the realism camp do not place non-state actors at the heart of their theoretical propositions. However, classical realism and neoclassical realism provides more analytical space for non-state actors than other strands. Furthermore, John Mearsheimer (2004) stresses that realism is a theory that adopts states as the initial actor in the international system and there is no higher authority above it. Thus, there is no space for theories about non-state actors because adding theories about terrorist groups to it would make it lose its analytical value. He admits that there is no theory that can cover all aspects of international politics. Mearsheimer argues that there is no room for non-state actors in classical realism and that even Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda act within state frameworks.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ John Mearsheimer's interview with Professor Ken Booth, Professor Nickolas Wheeler and Professor Michael Williams, 14 October 2004, (Part 2). University of Wales.

While non-state actors lack the capacity of mobilizing and playing the role of states, James Rosenau (2001) argues that powerful non-state armed actors created strong systems of governance that are independent from states, and in some cases challenged them. Michael Gunter (2015) contends that non-state actors such as the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, and IS, are playing a major role in changing the political map in the Middle East. Nonetheless, Seeberg (2016) stressed that Hezbollah, IS and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (previously Jabhat al Nusra) are taking part in the fighting in the security subcomplexes of the Mashreq, Gulf and the Maghreb. To analyze recent changes and endurance in the Mashreq and the Gulf, non-Arab state actors and non-state actors are central (Seeberg, 2016).

This thesis contributes to this literature. In June 2017, Nasrallah warned Israel that thousands of Muslim fighters will fight alongside Hezbollah in any future confrontation.⁸¹ He threatened escalating the rivalry between Hezbollah and the Israeli state to a new level, one that includes not only Hezbollah but other transnational regional actors, but namely other Iranian sectarian proxies. Hezbollah's interventions in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen on behalf of Iran's geopolitical agenda underscore the growing importance of armed non-state actors in Middle East international relations. These non-state actors are bound to play a pivotal role in determining the future geopolitics of the region. Any future research agenda has to come to terms with the growing roles of non-state actors in the Middle East.

⁸¹ "Massive response if Israel attacks, Nasrallah warns". By Hussein Dakroub, On 24 June 2017. The Daily Star.

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