

# Hezbollah's War on Terror

*An Analysis of Discourse and Social  
Relations in the Lebanese Shia Community  
during the Syrian Conflict*

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# Abstract

When Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged in May 2013 his party's military involvement in the Syrian conflict, it marked a watershed moment for an organization that previously had promoted itself as a champion of the downtrodden and the pan-Arab cause. In siding with an autocrat at war with his own people, the party became liable to accusations of ideological corruption from both within and without the Lebanese Shia community—its core constituency. To fix this unfavorable perception, the party has initiated a broad-based communicative effort that reframes the Syrian conflict through a narrative of threat and fear. This thesis sheds light on Hezbollah's use of fear as a political tool as both a textual and a social phenomenon: textual in that the fear is transmitted through a particular discourse, and social in that the discourse shapes social relations. Specifically, the thesis answers two interrelated questions: How is Hezbollah discursively constructing its involvement in the Syrian conflict? And to what extent is that discourse conducive to a culture of fear in the Lebanese Shia community? I give a detailed analysis of Hezbollah's rhetoric about the Syrian civil war by subjecting a number of speeches by Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah to a directed content analysis. I identify three overarching themes that permeate the discourse: Manichaeism, the idea of a new "super threat", and hawkishness. I then offer a social analysis of the Lebanese Shia community undergirded by interviews conducted with key informants that possess personal and general knowledge about the subject. By examining this particular social phenomenon, I contribute to the knowledge about how perception is crafted into reality through discursive processes, and how discourse dictates social relations. The resulting paper yields an analysis of meaningful, underlying trends in the Lebanese Shia community. I conclude that Hezbollah uses political fear as a vehicle for social control: Fear disciplines domestic dissent, makes the perceived strength of the in-group vital to personal safety, and polarizes intersectorian relations.



# Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my thesis supervisor professor Brynjar Lia. His astute comments and thoughtful observations helped my work progress and significantly improved the final product. He allowed this paper to be my own work, but steered me in the right the direction whenever he saw that I needed it. I must also acknowledge the invaluable help I have received from individuals associated with the Institute for Culture and Oriental Studies. Several heard out and commented on my ideas in the initial stages of the project, and made much-appreciated comments as regards the writing process and operational feasibility. Writing this thesis would have been an exercise in drudgery without their input.

I would like to direct a special thanks to the interviewees that took time out of their busy lives to discuss the contemporary politics of Lebanon with me. Their insights into the goings-on of the Middle East afforded me a deeper and clearer understanding of the Lebanese Shia community. During our conversations, I was frequently impressed by their sincere optimism and quiet fortitude in the face of adversity, qualities that are too often lacking in the Lebanese political life. In addition, I would like to recognize the good work of my translator, who helped me reach people that my regrettably lacking Arabic speaking skills could not.

Finally, I would like to thank family and friends for their moral support, numerous words of encouragement, and the genuine interest they have taken in my work. By every now and then having me summarize my project in layman's terms, they forced me to articulate the project simply and clearly—an exercise that frequently revealed weak points in the text. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Strange Times for the Party of God

In May 2013, Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged publicly that his party was intervening militarily in favor of the Assad-regime in Syria. The announcement represented the culmination of a protracted process in which the party had steadily escalated its support for the Syrian regime. It also reaffirmed that Hezbollah’s vocal support of the Arab Spring protests that were engulfing the region did not extend to Syria, where unlike Mubarak’s Egypt and Gadhafi’s Libya, Hezbollah had cultivated a mutually beneficial relationship with the ruling family. At the outset of the demonstrations in 2011, party officials remained circumspect in their statements about the Syrian regime. While they voiced moral commitments to Damascus, they also acknowledged that the demonstrators had legitimate grievances. When demonstrations turned violent, the party claimed the right to protect areas of special interest in Syria—meaning Shia border villages and shrines. Meanwhile, Hezbollah warned Lebanese factions against meddling in the conflict next-door. However, as rebel forces gained ground in late 2012 and threatened Damascus, a strategic shift became necessary. The party departed from the policy of non-interference and committed forces to fight alongside those of the Syrian Arab Army.

The Syrian civil war was another political trial for Hezbollah’s ideology, which critics claimed that the Israeli withdrawal in 2000 had left directionless—or even obsolete. The unilateral withdrawal had been a significant victory for the *resistance*. Yet it was in many respects a loss for the *resistors* themselves, who had to find another way to justify the party’s special status as the only armed militia in post-civil war Lebanon. The idea of defending an ideological ‘axis of resistance’ grew in prominence in party rhetoric, albeit slowly.<sup>1</sup> As opposed to the liberation of South Lebanon—a mission that resonated well with the locals and whose justification few could deny—the more abstract mission of supporting an ‘axis of resistance’ against U.S. hegemony lacked a tangible project. Even when the Syrian conflict assumed that role in 2013, one could draw scant comparisons between the enthusiasm engendered by fighting the “Zionist entity” and the lackluster support for combatting the Syrian opposition. Aleppo and Homs did not occupy the same space in the Shia consciousness

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<sup>1</sup> The Libyan daily al-Zahf al-Akhdar coined the term in response to President George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” speech. Hezbollah subsequently adopted the term into their discourse (in Arabic: *miḥwar al-muqāwama*).

as did Bint Jbeil and Nabatieh, and the Free Syrian Army lacked the imposing presence of the Israeli Defense Forces. In other words, the party found it difficult to sell the Syrian campaign to its core constituency, the Lebanese Shia community.

Paradoxically, the emergence of extremist jihadi groups on the Syrian scene—referred to as *takfiri*<sup>2</sup> (*takfīrī*)<sup>3</sup> in party language—proved a boon to Hezbollah’s rhetorical efforts. The presence of an enemy that proclaimed holy war on the Shia and used methods whose ruthlessness lacked historical precedent made Hezbollah’s narrative of defensive warfare credible. The conduct of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria convinced the Lebanese Shia community of, if not the sensibility of the intervention, then at least the necessity of it. In party rhetoric, *takfiri* groups have come to represent an existential, unprecedented danger. At the same time, the party has argued that only preemptive action in Syria can curb the threat. Expending great rhetorical effort to reframe an issue is typical of the party since early 2000. Scholars contend that the concerted efforts of Hezbollah elites as regards political communication explains the party’s massive popular mobilization, and that a solid communication strategy forms the bedrock of the party’s political appeal and organizational endurance.<sup>4</sup>

While resistance to Hezbollah taking action beyond its original operational remit has largely dissipated within the Lebanese Shia community, pockets of dissension remain. Critics have questioned not only the moral justification of backing the Syrian regime, but also the utility of fighting extremists in Syria, pointing to the fact that taking the fight there has invited calamity to Lebanon. Moreover, as more and more resistance fighters lose their lives on the Syrian battlefields, the Shia community grows war-weary. To answer internal criticism and to counter the loss of constituency support, the party has resorted to the political expediency of fear mongering to convince its supporters.

Why did fear come to loom such a large part in Hezbollah’s rhetoric? In answering that question one needs to recognize that public support is essential to the successful execution of party policy. That is particularly true for policy that entails risk. Jack Holland, drawing on the

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<sup>2</sup> The term derives from the word *kāfir* (unbeliever). A *takfīrī* is a Muslim who denounces other Muslims as unbelievers. Hezbollah’s discourse affixes the term to groups such as ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra.

<sup>3</sup> A note on Arabic words and translation: I adhere to the guidelines of the International Journal of Middle East Studies. Arabic words will be transliterated according to those guidelines. However, if there exists a widely-used English substitute—for example Bekaa as opposed to *biqāʿ*—I use that word to maintain readability.

<sup>4</sup> Khatib, Lina, Dina Matar and Atef Alshaer, *The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

work of Richard Jackson, notes that, “the act of going to war is so costly [that it warrants] extraordinary discursive effort to persuade audiences of its necessity, virtue and practicality.”<sup>5</sup> The process of forming consensus and normalizing the practice of the war requires the construction of a completely new public discourse that seeks to engender approval while simultaneously suppressing individual doubts and wider political protest. To this end, communicators fabricate a culture of fear and threat. This thesis argues that to keep control over the Shia community, the Party of God uses such political fear as a vehicle for social control.

## 1.2 Research Questions, Definitions, and Assumptions

The goal of this thesis is to understand Hezbollah’s use of fear as a political tool as both a textual and a social phenomenon: textual in that the fear is transmitted through a particular discourse, and social in that the discourse shapes social relations (i.e. the way one perceives oneself in relation to fellow members of the community and the world in general). Accordingly, the thesis is guided by the following research questions:

- *How is Hezbollah discursively constructing its involvement in the Syrian conflict? And to what extent is that discourse conducive to a culture of fear in the Lebanese Shia community?*

A label that recurs frequently in this thesis, and which also forms the principal object of study, is that of the *Lebanese Shia community*. But what does that label represent? In concrete terms, it is a community of adherents to Twelver Shia Islam that make up somewhere around 27 per cent of Lebanon's population, though the precise percentage is unknown.<sup>6</sup> The community is concentrated in Southern Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburbs, in addition to parts of the Bekaa Valley. The establishment of a sizeable Shia community in the area that today constitutes modern Lebanon is thought to have been in the early medieval period. Shia Lebanese were associated with a number of political currents throughout the twentieth century—pan-Arab, socialist, communist—but is today predominantly split between two somewhat imbricated political actors, Amal and Hezbollah.

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<sup>5</sup> Holland, Jack, *Selling the War on Terror: Foreign Policy Discourses after 9/11*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 34-35.

<sup>6</sup> The CIA World Factbook maintains that 27 % of the population is Shia Muslim, but censuses are rarely carried out for political reasons.

Besides being a demographic category, the Lebanese Shia community is also a fluid concept. Throughout this thesis, I treat the Lebanese Shia community not as a coherent, unified association of individuals, but as a *collective identity*. Polletta and James define a collective identity as "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connections with a broader community [...]". Identity is a perception of shared status or relation, and individuals express their collective identity through cultural materials, meaning narratives, symbols, rituals and concrete accessories.<sup>7</sup> My understanding of a unified Shia community then, is as Benedict Anderson puts it in his path breaking 1993 book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, namely of an imagined social construct.<sup>8</sup> Certain individuals will belong to that construct more intimately than others will, and the saliency of the concept will fluctuate over time. But more importantly, as a complex construction of intertwined social relations, the concept of a Lebanese Shia community is liable to alterations through public discourse.

Fear culture is a social phenomenon mediated by words. Hence, the study of fear culture calls for adopting an approach that treats language, rhetoric and social practice as inextricably linked. With that in mind, I use critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a theoretical basis. CDA theorizes discourse as essentially a "way of speaking which gives meaning to experiences from a particular perspective", and that it is a particular way of communicating an issue that uses recurring words and statements. CDA holds that discourse is a social practice that reflects existing social structures—i.e. social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and meaning.<sup>9</sup> The language that rhetoricians choose to employ to further their ends is rooted in local context and community history. Accordingly, ideas are not like migratory birds that can fly unchanged from one moment in time to the next—the only way to understand the purpose of a message is to recover the context out of which it emerged. While any kind of rhetoric may be formulated freely, shrewd politicians know that in promoting a cause—be it an issue of foreign policy, as in this case, or other contentious acts—requires a consideration of the representations found within the wider public sphere to be effective.

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<sup>7</sup> Polletta, Francesca, and James M. Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 283-305, 285.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 2006), 5-6. Benedict wrote primarily of political nations, but his ideas are just as easily applied to sectarian communities.

<sup>9</sup> Jørgensen, Marianne W. and Louise Phillips, *Discourse analysis as theory and method*, (London: Sage, 2002), 67.

Additionally, CDA holds that discourse is in a dialectical relationship with other social dimensions.<sup>10</sup> In other words, rhetoric and discourse are not only an effort shaped by local social practice and institutions, but also a practice that changes and shapes social identity and relations to further the interests of particular social groups (the *critical* part of CDA). This assumption allows the researcher to move beyond a textual analysis of a particular discourse of fear to add a social analysis of that discourse's creation of a culture of fear in the audience. CDA assumes that discursive practices are rarely neutral, but often employed in the service of maintaining power relations. As such, a part of this approach seeks to understand the means by which language is deployed to maintain power.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.3 Outline of Thesis

The following chapter concerns method and ethics. I first outline the approach that forms the foundation of my survey of Hezbollah's rhetoric—content analysis—and discuss the sources used to capture overarching themes in the conflict narrative. Moreover, I detail the gathering of data through key informant interviews, which forms the foundation of my social analysis. I end the chapter with a brief discussion of ethical concerns related to the use of data gathered from informants. The third chapter presents a contextual background for the research question. The aim is to provide an understanding of the Lebanese political scene and Hezbollah and the Shia community's role in it. It also provides a history of Hezbollah's use of discourse during crucial historical moments. It concludes by answering two key questions: Why is Hezbollah interfering in the Syrian civil war? And why is there a need to reframe that participation? In the fourth chapter, I conduct an analysis of Hezbollah's rhetoric vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war. The main goal is to delineate overarching themes and categories that frequent regularly in the rhetoric of the party elite, with particular attention given to the speeches of Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. The sixth chapter discusses the findings of the previous chapter as conducive to the politics of fear. With reference to data gathered during fieldwork in Beirut, I argue that the Party of God is willfully using fear as a political tool to shore up support in the Lebanese Shia community. I illustrate how the resulting culture of fear disciplines domestic criticism and engenders—whether intentionally or unintentionally—sectarian polarization. The thesis ends with a conclusion where I sum up my findings, discuss their impact, and suggest future avenues of research.

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<sup>10</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse analysis*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse analysis*, 63.





## 2 Method and Ethics

The arguments in this thesis builds on qualitative data that comprises public speeches, news articles, written documents, and informant interviews. I rely on secondary sources to provide a contextual background to the analysis. I judge the qualitative approach to be the best to uncover underlying trends in the Lebanese Shia community. The subject requires in-depth exploration of issues that at the outset remain unclear and ambiguous. In instances such as these, the researcher starts with barely more than a topical boundary and a guiding proposition—a *case* in other words. Gerring defines a case study as the “intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units.” In this context, a unit signifies a phenomenon with both temporal and spatial limitations, such as a political revolution or a civil war.<sup>12</sup>

As applied to this thesis the case has a spatial boundary—the Shia community in Lebanon—as well as a temporal boundary, namely the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. The Syrian civil war is ongoing and so is Hezbollah's involvement in it. For the sake of finality and clarity, I decided to not extend my study of Hezbollah's rhetoric and social aspects of the Lebanese Shia community beyond December 2015. Otherwise, this project would be a continuous exercise in data collection and of little analytical value.

### 2.1 Using Data to Designate Themes

To analyze Hezbollah's discursive construction of a politics of fear, I rely principally on public speeches, but also media interviews and official statements. In total, I reviewed 18 speeches by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah between May 25, 2011 and October 24, 2015. Most of these speeches were held on occasions of special importance to the Party of God, such as Resistance and Liberation Day (May 25) or the last days of the Muharram observances. Others, such as the Qalamoun Victory Speech, came as a specific response to a recent event. In some cases, English subtitles or transcripts of the speeches are available, but quotes used in this text are nevertheless always direct translations made by the author from the original Arabic-language source material.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gerring, John, "What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good for?" *American Political Science Review*, 98 (2004): 341-354, 342.

<sup>13</sup> See appendix A for links to full videos/transcripts and additional information relating to the speeches reviewed for this text.

Nasrallah's speeches lend themselves particularly well to analysis. They carry a logical structure and tackle issues thematically. Since the thesis' main concern is Hezbollah's rhetoric about the Syrian civil war, the predictable division of the speeches allowed me to sift quickly through irrelevant information. I used news articles that cite lower-ranking party members, as well as official party statements, to corroborate and elaborate upon the content of the speeches.

Nasrallah's speeches are more than mere rhetoric. Due to his central role in the party's communication strategy (discussed below), they represent "the compass" of Hezbollah's political discourse.<sup>14</sup> The party's strategic decisions in the realms of politics and warfare might appear enigmatic, but his speeches form a verbal translation that explains and justifies its actions to the constituency. The speeches reach a large audience. Hezbollah TV-channel Al Manar, for example, always broadcast his speeches, as does other Arab and Lebanese channels.<sup>15</sup> The centrality of Nasrallah in the policy formulation of the party justifies this thesis' use of primarily his utterances to discern Hezbollah's rhetoric.

The methodological tool I employ to analyze Hezbollah's rhetoric on the Syrian civil war is what academic literature describes as *directed content analysis*. Inherent to this method is the mining of documents—i.e. oral speeches, personal diaries, medical records, etc.—to discover recurring concepts that represent the ideas and words contained within the data. These concepts vary in range, but the goal of such analysis is to discover "higher-level concepts under which analysts group lower-level concepts according to shared properties."<sup>16</sup> Doing so allows the researcher to reduce and combine large chunks of data that in the end yields information about underlying trends in the text. For example, one such concept that my coding methodology yielded was "Zionist scheme", which I catalogued whenever someone spoke of the Syrian civil war as a continuation of the Israeli wars. This concept was subordinate to another concept of higher analytical level called "enemy", which again was subordinate to the super-category "Manichaeism". As I argue below, the party's discursive construction of a "Zionist scheme" in Syria is one of many manifestations of the party's binary, Manichean worldview.

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<sup>14</sup> Houri, Walid, "The Meaning of Resistance: Hezbollah's Media Strategies and the Articulation of a People," PhD diss., Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, 2012, 78.

<sup>15</sup> Houri, "The Meaning of Resistance," 98-99.

<sup>16</sup> Corbin, Juliet M. and Anselm L. Strauss, *Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008), 159.

Directed content analysis is a mixed approach, in that it is both exploratory and theoretical. It relies on existing theory (detailed in chapter 4) as a guide to predict rhetorical categories, but also incorporates new, relevant concepts not accounted for in previous studies. Hence, it is a convenient tool whenever the goal is to describe a phenomenon whose properties, causes, and consequences are not entirely clear at the outset of the study.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.2 Finding Informants and Conducting Interviews

Knowing that I wanted interviewees that could furnish depth, context and historical record to the analysis of Hezbollah's rhetoric, I set out to identify *key informants*. Andersen defines key informants (or elite informants) as individuals that presumably possess both specific and general knowledge about the research questions.<sup>18</sup> In other words, they one, possess recollections of personal and private experiences that without their communication would otherwise be inaccessible. If their subjective experiences are of interest—which they happen to be in this case—they also become units of research in their own right. Second, key informants are usually embedded in the local cultural context. As such, their understanding of the phenomenon benefits from both intimacy and long-time observation.<sup>19</sup> Key informants provide the researcher with “[...] a means to probe beyond official accounts and narratives and ask theoretically guided questions about issues that are highly specific to the research objectives.”<sup>20</sup> Informants are valuable to exploratory research in particular because they are a vehicle for developing explanations for inevitably superficial preliminary observations. They are able to “confirm, disconfirm, or transform” the hypotheses formulated based on the rhetoric survey that the content analysis yield.<sup>21</sup>

Key informant sampling is deliberate, not random. The aim is not to gain a sample that represents the population, but to find individuals who have been involved with and exposed to the process of interest. The researcher initially identifies relevant actors according to criteria based on position, and then based on reputation—i.e. the snowball method of sampling.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang and Sarah E. Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," *Qualitative Health Research*, 15:9 (2005): 1277-1288, 1279.

<sup>18</sup> Andersen, Svein S., "Aktiv informantintervjuing," *Norsk Statsvitenskapelig Tidsskrift*, 22 (2006): 278-298, 279.

<sup>19</sup> Andersen, "Aktiv informantintervjuing," 281.

<sup>20</sup> Tansey, Oisín, "Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing: A Case for Non-probability Sampling," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 40:4 (2007): 765-772, 767.

<sup>21</sup> Hochschild Jennifer L., "Conducting Intensive Interviews and Elite Interviews," Workshop on Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research, 2009, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Tansey, "Elite Interviewing," 771.

“Snowballing” to secure key informant interviews is sometimes necessary—some relevant actors are virtually inaccessible to outsiders. Snowball sampling does have a disadvantage that can be significant: respondents tend to suggest people that will reaffirm their views.<sup>23</sup> This propensity can be deliberate in that respondents willfully try to shape the sample. Otherwise, it can be a manifestation of the old adage “birds of a feather flock together” – likeminded individuals tend to associate with each other. I remained aware of this and approached informants positioned in different though overlapping circles. I did not get the impression that any of my informants were trying to skew my sample; in fact, I sometimes found respondents to be quite critical of the person who referred me to them.

Once I had identified relevant informants, I contacted several by e-mail before travelling to Lebanon, but found that the most effective way to secure interviews was through direct (and sometimes repeated) phone calls. I conducted eight interviews in Beirut over the course of three weeks in October 2015.<sup>24</sup> Sessions lasted from 45 minutes at the shorter end to over two hours at the longest. Knowing that I wanted to investigate matters related to dissent and sectarianism in contemporary Shiite Lebanon, I contacted individuals able to offer such insight. One common denominator that I thought important was that they were Shiite, or hailed from a Shiite background. Sharing a fundamental characteristic with the community ensured that they had authentic and personal observations relevant to my research questions. Second, and in line with the sampling guide for key informants, they all had long-time experience with the Shia community through media, charity work, civil society organizations, and politics. Finally, in Lebanese nomenclature they all qualify as “independent”, “non-partisan”, or “moderate” Shiites. These labels are affixed to public Shiites that do not affiliate themselves with Hezbollah, Amal, or the March 14-alliance. Their “neutrality” made them interesting in two ways: One, while ostensibly community members, they have an “outsider” perspective. Second, as independent—and sometimes critical—of Hezbollah, they would have personal experiences related to dissent and censorship—topics central to this thesis.

My few attempts to get in contact with figures affiliated with Hezbollah were not successful. It is general knowledge in Beirut that Hezbollah has refrained from discussing its intervention in Syria with foreign press or scholarly institutes. The design of my study, however, does not necessitate contact with the party itself—the focus is on its constituency, and not internal

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<sup>23</sup> Tansey, "Elite Interviewing," 770.

<sup>24</sup> See appendix B for detailed presentations of all interviewees.

group dynamics. That is not to say that party members could not have offered unique perspectives, but the scope of this thesis and my ability and position as a researcher prohibited me from extending the research in that direction.

All of my interviews were semi-structured in that the questions were open-ended, flexibly worded, and did not follow a preset sequence.<sup>25</sup> I entered every interview session with an outline of topics that I wished to cover, but was open to discarding or including other topics as the interview progressed. An attribute of semi-structured interviews is that they are *active*; the researcher continuously takes advantage of the evolving interview situation to challenge the preconceived notion of both interviewer and interviewee.<sup>26</sup> By using the dynamic of free flowing conversation, I was able to move freely from topics at the personal level to Shiite issues in general; challenge statements by referring to other sources of information; and playing incredulous or ignorant to spur further explanation. The result was that many of the interviewees grew comfortable with the situation and exhibited more frankness than I initially had expected.

I tape-recorded and then transcribed the interviews. All of my respondents have a public persona—some more than others—and had no objections to committing their words to tape. Tape-recording is advantageous: In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer needs to be present in the conversation and prepared to offer follow-up questions and probes when the opportunity arises. Relying on copious note taking might deprive the interviewer of the attention required to maintain a natural conversation. Second, by using exact transcripts during my analysis I removed some of the ambiguity of understanding my respondent's intentions and actions correctly. Third, I knew that I wanted to use direct quotes from the respondents in the thesis. By quoting directly from the primary data, I not only maintain transparency and increase reliability, but the text becomes less of a clinical read. I supplemented the tape recordings with reports that I made after each interview session wherein I reflected upon the mood and interesting details.

All interviews save for two were conducted in English. While I can read and understand Arabic well, I did not trust that my command of Levantine Arabic was sufficient for long conversations on intricate topics. Fortunately, several of the subjects I had identified as

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<sup>25</sup> Merriam, Sharan B., *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 90.

<sup>26</sup> Andersen, "Aktiv informantintervjuing," 280.

relevant for my study spoke English fluently. I engaged a translator for two Arabic-only speaking subjects that several interviewees recommended as valuable sources. Employing a translator had benefits and disadvantages. The subjects seemed more at ease speaking their native tongue, but the interview naturally lacked the free flow of back and forth conversation.

### 2.3 Methodological Challenges

Informant interviewing is associated with a few drawbacks. For one, Berry notes that the lack of structure results in a paradox, contending that, “the valuable flexibility of openended questioning exacerbates the validity and reliability issues that are part and parcel of this approach.”<sup>27</sup> The ensuing conversation is too much a product shaped by the respondent and the interviewer to be open for replication in another setting. A second drawback is that the subject has no obligation to tell the objective truth. In fact, it is sometimes in the respondent’s interest to misrepresent events to serve his or her agenda.<sup>28</sup> This concern is particularly critical when the point of interest goes beyond the subject’s point of view to concrete recollections about events and people. In some cases, it might benefit the interviewee to exaggerate, understate, omit, or distort facts. Moreover, the subject might be *unintentionally* supplying “bad” data. Using interviews means relying on human memory, which can be unreliable in cases where the phenomenon of study is far back in time. An obvious solution to this problem is to assess critically the motivations that an informant might harbor and analyze the data in light of that assessment. If the researcher choose to use unreliable data, it is important that it is communicated to the reader that the argument is based on questionable information.

I have sought to *triangulate* the empirical material that forms the basis of this thesis. Triangulation entails the utilization of different sources to illuminate the research question.<sup>29</sup> The purpose of using multiple sources of data—besides gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of study—is to create confidence that the observations made are not personal to me. If I were to base my research on the Shiite Lebanese community solely on the empirical data yielded from the interviews, I would risk ending up with a product severely biased. Instead, I have relied on reports from non-governmental organizations and news articles from various agencies to corroborate the findings from my content analysis and interviews.

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<sup>27</sup> Berry, Jeffrey M., "Validity and Reliability Issues In Elite Interviewing," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, December (2002): 679-682, 679.

<sup>28</sup> Berry, "Validity and Reliability," 680; Andersen, "Aktiv informantintervjuing," 288.

<sup>29</sup> Flick, Uwe, "Triangulation in Qualitative Research," In *A Companion to Qualitative Research*, edited by Uwe Flick, Ernest von Kardorff and Ines Steinkes, 178-188. (London: Sage, 2004), 178.

Moreover, I aired the conclusions I drew from the content analysis with my interview subjects to see whether they agreed or disagreed with my observations. This back and forth has allowed me to present conclusions that are more robust than would otherwise be the case.

## **2.4 Ethical Considerations**

I have taken care to maintain transparency throughout the interview process. At initial contact, I always made sure to state my background, my intentions, and the purpose of the study. Moreover, almost every interview session commenced with me outlining my personal motivations for conducting research on the Lebanese Shia community. I gave each contact the option to review a list of suggested topics and some sample questions before the interview. Regardless of whether the contact took me up on that offer or not, I made it clear that we would be discussing topics related to Hezbollah, the Syrian civil war, and the Shia community in Lebanon—topics that many would find sensitive, and maybe uncomfortable. Lastly, I made it clear to the interviewees that they had the option to be anonymous.

During the course of the interviews, several respondents divulged information that I deemed sensitive. The decision to use such data in the thesis was taken on a case-by-case basis. I have not used data that, while analytically valuable, could potentially be harmful to the interview subject or a third party. Moreover, I have taken care to respect my respondents' wishes not to report statements or information that they wanted to remain confidential. In prolonged interview situations, the risk of the subject saying something that he or she regrets increases and it is my responsibility as a researcher to respect retractions, regardless of the analytical utility they might have served.

Although none of my informants refrained from having their names mentioned, I still had some reservations about publicizing them. The political circumstances of Lebanon are liable to rapid and unpredictable change. Views my informants might have been comfortable airing in October might be considered sensitive a year later. After careful deliberation, I decided not to anonymize my informants. I judge the viewpoints and opinions expressed in this thesis to be of little controversy. My informants are public figures, they issue public statements, and they are known for their critical stances. Moreover, by allowing the reader to know the identity of my key informants, I am better able to justify their utility for this thesis.

## 3 Context and Background

This chapter details briefly the historical evolution of Hezbollah and its role in Lebanon. I account for seminal moments in party history—the civil war, political transition, and post-withdrawal challenges—to establish the ideological foundation of the party. Subsequently, I discuss the communicative shift the party underwent around the turn of the millennium, with particular priority given to the concept of resistance. Finally, I briefly outline the possible motivations behind Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria, and sketch a concise timeline.

### 3.1 A Brief History of Hezbollah in Lebanon

Hezbollah—the Party of God—is a consequence of the alignment of a series of socio-historical and political junctures, three of which are of particular importance: the politicization of the Lebanese Shia community, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

The Lebanese republic was founded in 1945 on the principle of power sharing between the country’s three largest sects: the Sunnis, the Maronites, and the Shiites. While Christians and Sunnis bickered over state power, the Shiites of the Bekaa Valley and the South remained disenfranchised. An entrenched patronage network that placed power in the hands of a select few political bosses, *zu‘amā’*, prohibited development and identity formation.<sup>30</sup> However, the dual processes of urbanization and ideological awakening weakened the *zu‘amā’*-structure in the 1960s and 1970s. And as secular currents failed to empower the Shias,<sup>31</sup> the 1980s gave rise to a new generation of activists that sought to revive Shiite collective consciousness in religious terms.<sup>32</sup> Key in this respect was Iranian-born Imam Musa al-Sadr, who encouraged community activism over political quietism.<sup>33</sup> A man of many initiatives, his longest lasting legacy is the foundation of the Movement of the Disinherited (Harakat al-Maḥrumin) in 1974. When civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975, the organization gave way to an armed branch, Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya, with the contextually appropriate acronym Amal. A revolutionary core of Amal later broke out to form Hezbollah.

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<sup>30</sup> Norton, Augustus Richard, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 14.

<sup>31</sup> Nasr, Vali, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, (New York: Norton, 2006), 110.

<sup>32</sup> Avon, Dominique and Anaïs Khatchadourian, *Hezbollah: A History of the “Party of God,”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 14.

<sup>33</sup> Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, 18.



Hezbollah came into being partly as a byproduct of local political activism. However, the party's emergence is as much an extension of regional developments. Most important is the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which brought about a revival in political Shiism in the Middle East. The Iranian regime sought to export its revolutionary ideology and Hezbollah was a means to that end. Under the tutelage of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, irregular Lebanese Shiites were fashioned into a lethal and effective force that fought for the Iranian cause. Hezbollah's first political charter, the Open Letter of 1985, confirmed as much by acknowledging the supremacy of Ayatollah Khomeini's teachings. In it, the party states that "[we] abide by the orders of a single, wise and just command represented by the guardianship of the jurispudent (*wilāyat al-faqīh*), currently embodied in the supreme Ayatullah Ruhallah al-Musawi al-Khumayni".<sup>34</sup> The charter reiterates the call made by Ayatollah Khomeini for pan-Islamic unity in the face of external aggressors.

The third contextual factor that shaped Hezbollah's emergence is the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. While history has seen Hezbollah downplay its Shia origins and downgrade the objective of an Islamic State to that of an abstract ideal, jihad against Israel remains a fixture in party ideology and practice—and, as some would argue, its *raison d'être*.<sup>35</sup> The continued presence of the IDF in South Lebanon radicalized the Shia community. Hezbollah, along with other paramilitary organizations, engaged in guerilla warfare against the occupiers. The militia's relative success on the battlefield consolidated its popularity among the people of the south, and allowed for the development of a homegrown organization dedicated to armed resistance.

Hezbollah did not lack for adversaries in 1980's Lebanon. The Open Letter of 1985 identifies the occupying forces of the U.S., France, and Israel as the enemies against which Hezbollah sought to defend the *umma* (i.e. the Muslim nation). Hezbollah came to international prominence when it was linked to a series of attacks against Western targets in Lebanon—the most infamous of which resulted in the death of 300 American and French marines in 1983. Meanwhile, Hezbollah was in a political rivalry with the Amal movement. Both vied for the support of the Shiites of Lebanon. Hezbollah-expert Richard Norton notes that, "Hezbollah,

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<sup>34</sup> Alagha, Joseph, *Hizbullah's Documents: From the 1985 Open Letter to the 2009 Manifesto*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 40.

<sup>35</sup> Pioppi, Daniela, "Anatomy of a Political Party: Hezbollah - Sectarian Upshot or Actor of Change?" In *Islamist Mass Movements, External Actors and Political Change in the Arab World*. (Stockholm: IDEA, 2010), 75.

from its first moments, had always defined itself in contrast to Amal”.<sup>36</sup> Whereas the former identified itself as an enemy of the West and Lebanon’s sectarian system, the latter proved comfortable with foreign interference and navigated the clientelism of the Lebanese political system deftly. In 1985, the two movements found themselves at opposing sides in “the war of the camps”—a military campaign undertaken by Syrian-backed Amal to eliminate Palestinian power in the refugee camps surrounding Beirut. Hezbollah sided with the Palestinians on principle, and garnered approval from the Shias for its commitment to the Palestinian cause. Intermittent clashes continued well into the 1990s. But while both parties suffered heavy losses, Hezbollah ultimately gained the upper hand, and consolidated its grip on the Shiite suburbs of Beirut and the South.

The Taif accord of 1989 ended the Lebanese civil war. Foreign interference, however, remained a constant in domestic politics. The accord permitted Syria to have a strong, armed presence in Lebanon. The West acknowledged Syria’s heavy hand in Lebanon as a requisite for preserving intersectarian harmony. Although Syria and Hezbollah at times had been at opposing sides in the civil war—the former supporting Amal and working for a secular Lebanon, the latter hostile towards Syrian domination and a propagator of radical Islamism—the two parties realized the mutual utility of working together. Raymond Hinnebusch observes that Hezbollah “struck a working alliance with Damascus which would be remarkably enduring”.<sup>37</sup> Syrian guardianship permitted Hezbollah to retain its armed status while other militias disarmed. Meanwhile, Hezbollah acted in Syrian interests in the Israeli conflict.

Parliamentary elections resumed after the end of the civil war, and as a consequence the party found itself in a quandary. Prominent party clerics such as Ayatollah Fadlallah, argued in favor of participating in the political system. He reasoned that the realization of an Islamic state by force would be impossible in a multi-sectarian society; political participation allowed for gradual, incremental reform. In addition, Hezbollah’s exclusion from the realm of politics would make resistance operations vulnerable to state interference. Others, such as erstwhile Secretary-General Subhi al-Tufayli, argued against participation in the electoral process. He cautioned that accommodation to a dysfunctional system would lead to Hezbollah’s taming.<sup>38</sup> The rift this debate created ultimately led to al-Tufayli’s defection from Hezbollah in 1997.

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<sup>36</sup> Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Hinnebusch, Raymond, "Pax- Syriana? The Origins, Causes and Consequences of Syria's Role in Lebanon," *Mediterranean Politics*, 3:1 (1998): 137-160, 148.

<sup>38</sup> Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, 99-100.

The group eventually deferred the decision to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Khomeini's successor, who sanctioned Fadlallah's (and Hassan Nasrallah's) view. Thus, Hezbollah participated in the 1992 parliamentary elections, and won ten out of 128 seats in the National Assembly.

With domestic politics no longer a threat to the operational capacity of the party, it turned its full attention to the fight against Israel.<sup>39</sup> Neither the Taif agreement nor the 1992 parliamentary elections hindered Hezbollah from waging war. Violent confrontation continued between the resistance and Israel, supported by their proxy, the South Lebanon Army (SLA). The frequent back and forth brought about "rules of the game" that regulated combat operations. Israel would not attack civilians in Lebanon, and Hezbollah would in turn contain its military operations to the Security Zone—the land south of the Litani River that Israel kept under occupation. Still, deviations from the established norms occurred—often at the expense of noncombatants. One such incident came during Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996, with the IDF bombing of Qana in 1996 that resulted in the death of 106 civilians.

Despite the material and human destruction, Hezbollah enjoyed local and regional popular support for the battle. The converse applied for Israel. With uncontested military superiority, the IDF drew criticism for disproportionate retaliation. The conflict grew increasingly unpopular both within Israel and in the international community, and Israeli leaders sought a way out. The end came in the wake of Ehud Barak's assumption of power in 2000. When Israel withdrew its forces from South Lebanon, Hezbollah became the first Arab army to defeat the IDF in war.

### **3.2 Communicating Resistance**

In September 1997, Lebanese television watchers were treated to footage that on the face of it represented nothing new: a row of bodies in a dimly lit room, solemn men dressed in religious garb, and Hassan Nasrallah walking slowly along the dead young men—stopping regularly to bless each martyr. Videos like these were often disseminated in Lebanese media to display the Israeli occupation's human toll. What made this particular scene remarkable was that among the bodies lay Nasrallah's eighteen-year-old son, Muhammad Hadi Nasrallah, killed in combat in South Lebanon. Nasrallah's stoic and dignified bearing in the face of loss cemented

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<sup>39</sup> Abdul-Hussain, Hussain, "Hezbollah: A State within a State," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, (8 2009: 68-81), 71.

his image as a man of the people. He refrained from shedding tears publicly, and did not linger by the body of his son more than he did by the other martyrs. Just as hundreds of Lebanese families had ‘sacrificed’ their children to the resistance, so had the Sayyid sacrificed his.

Hassan Nasrallah became Secretary-General of Hezbollah at age 31, following the assassination of his predecessor, Abbas al-Musawi, by the IDF in February 1992. He had been a religious student in Najaf and Qom. On his return to Lebanon, he got involved with Amal before joining the executive council of its rival, Hezbollah. The death of Hadi marked a watershed moment for Nasrallah’s public image. He went from being the leader of a clandestine militia to become a charismatic man of the people. It heralded the starting point of a development that made the Secretary-General the central medium of Hezbollah’s rhetoric, and a symbol of the war against Israel—a resistance incarnate of sorts.<sup>40</sup> Aurélie Daher terms this development in the party as the "Nasrallah phenomenon". She claims that, "It is possible to say that before September 1997 Nasrallah was the leader of Hezbollah; after 1997, Hezbollah become the organization of Nasrallah".<sup>41</sup> However hyperbolic Daher’s observation may be, it does indicate how important Nasrallah had become in communicating the party to the people.

Indeed, under Nasrallah’s leadership the party’s external communication had evolved into a core strategic concern. Several media platforms connected to Hezbollah emerged. Al Manar, the Hezbollah-affiliated TV-channel, started broadcasting programs that promoted the party’s worldview in 1992, as did the Al Nour radio station in 1988, in addition to several magazines and web sites. The party used these channels of communication instrumentally. Zahera Harb’s study of Lebanese media outlets during the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon identifies the emergence of “liberation propaganda”. With particular focus on Al Manar, she describes a context-specific rhetorical process that sought to engender internal loyalty in the face of external confrontation.<sup>42</sup> Communication was in other words an instrument to promote cohesiveness.

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<sup>40</sup> Khatib, Matar and Alshaer, *The Hizbullah Phenomenon*, 154.

<sup>41</sup> Daher, Aurélie, *Le Hezbollah: Mobilisation et pouvoir*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014), 248. Translation from French is my own.

<sup>42</sup> Harb, Zahera, *Channels of Resistance in Lebanon: Liberation Propaganda, Hezbollah and the Media*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 21-22.

The end of the Lebanese civil war ushered in the start of Hezbollah's ideological 'pragmatization'. Alterations in the local, regional, and international context compelled Hezbollah to maintain a flexible and adaptable worldview.<sup>43</sup> Nowhere is that more evident in the concept of resistance. Resistance is not a coherent set of ideas and values, but an 'empty signifier'—the term's representation varies depending on time, context, and person. An empty signifier is not void of content—Sadiki, who prefers the term 'organic signifier', contends the opposite. He argues that resistance has been constructed into "an ethos, a way of thinking, being, and acting, and ever-widening site of holistic struggle in which the AK-47 is not, in the scheme of the resistance, more important than piety, charity, schooling, propaganda or music."<sup>44</sup> Still, resistance also refers to tropes that are more or less consistent, such as Western hegemony, the liberation of Palestine, the corruption of Arab states, and people empowerment.

Houri agrees with the holistic view of resistance. But he maintains that the Israeli withdrawal in 2000 was the seminal moment for resistance as an 'empty signifier'. The withdrawal had two implications: One, resistance became less about warfare and more about culture, i.e. it tackled economic, cultural, and social demands. Resistance became, in other words, just as much a social act as a military and political act. Second, the understanding of 'self' expanded from Hezbollah's partisans and their families to include the Lebanese public as a whole.<sup>45</sup> The process of *'infītāh* (opening up) that the party undertook slowly towards the end of the 1990s saw Hezbollah starting to voice the grievances of the subaltern classes, regardless of whether they were Shia or not.<sup>46</sup>

Rearticulating the 'self' was evident in speeches after 2000, particularly as regards the IDF withdrawal. Far from framing it as a victory by a Shiite militia to liberate the predominately Shia South, Hezbollah portrayed it as a victory for the Lebanese and the liberation of all of Lebanon. This communicative shift is emblematic of Nasrallah's Hezbollah's attempt to present itself as being at the core of Lebanese and Arab identity.<sup>47</sup> The articulation of the latter was helped in large part by new communication channels. Al Manar—which had

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<sup>43</sup> Karagiannis, Emmanuel, "Hizballah as a Social Movement Organization: A Framing Approach," *Mediterranean Politics*, 14:3 (2009): 365-383, 380.

<sup>44</sup> Houri, "The Meaning of Resistance," 58.

<sup>45</sup> Houri, "The Meaning of Resistance," 94.

<sup>46</sup> Alagha, Joseph, "Hezbollah and the Arab Spring," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 1:2 (2014): 189-206, 192.

<sup>47</sup> Khatib, Matar and Alshaer, *The Hizbullah Phenomenon*, 73.

launched satellite broadcasting in 2000—covered the Palestinian intifada of 2000 extensively. The channel sought to discursively construct Hezbollah as not only the most credible resistor against Israel, but also the main supporter of the Palestinian people.<sup>48</sup> In the early 2000s, television more than anything was an opportunity structure the party availed itself of to spread its narrative across the region.

However, the party struggled to maintain the mantle of champion of the Arab cause as post-withdrawal enthusiasm waned. Participation in Lebanon's sectarian political system tarnished Hezbollah's intersectarian appeal. So did the new reality that saw the group engage in limited and inconsequential military operations against Israel under the pretext of liberating the Sheb'a farms.<sup>49</sup> Resistance became less about active warfare and more about deterrence and protecting 'the resistance axis'—a diluted form of jihad.

The mass protests against Syrian interference that followed the assassination of the popular former PM Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005 compounded Hezbollah's problems. The party's exceptional position in Lebanon relied largely on the Syrian presence. In a much publicized protest on March 8, groups sympathetic to Syria—foremost of which Hezbollah—converged on the central square in Beirut to demonstrate that there were countervailing opinions in the country. The show of support elicited a counterdemonstration on March 14—this time from groups that opposed Syria. The protests divided Lebanon into two political camps: pro- and anti-Syrian. The latter ultimately achieved their aims. The Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon in June 2005. The Cedar Revolution—a Western-coined term—brought Hezbollah's intimate relationship with 'the resistance axis' under scrutiny and its loyalty to the Lebanese under question.

The changing context forced Hezbollah to adapt. Initially, without its Syrian guardian to guarantee its political power, it doubled down on its Shiite base. But the outbreak of the 2006 July War—caused by a cross-border raid that resulted in the death of three IDF soldiers—reaffirmed Hezbollah's position as a national entity. As Israeli warplanes subjected the south to intensive bombardment, the party once again emerged as the focal point of popular support of the resistance—not in Lebanon alone but in the Middle East as a whole. Even Saudi

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<sup>48</sup> Khatib, Matar and Alshaer, *The Hizbullah Phenomenon*, 76.

<sup>49</sup> Avon and Khatchadourian, *A History of the "Party of God,"* 57-58. The Sheb'a farms straddle the border between Lebanon and the occupied Golan Heights in Syria. The party has been able to dispute Syria's sovereignty over the area due to poor border demarcation during the mandate period. A U.N. review found no credible evidence that indicated the area to be Lebanese.

officials had to express their begrudging support for the party.<sup>50</sup> The war was catastrophic for the resistance in terms of personnel and military hardware. The IDF bombardment undid the infrastructural reconstruction the party had undertaken in the south in the intervening years. Western observers predicted the party's downfall. Yet, as fighting subsided and eventually halted all together in August—without the IDF achieving its goals—the power of discourse was proven. Nasrallah claimed the 2006 War a 'Divine victory' for the resistance. The war emphasized Hezbollah's image as an Arab paramilitary force as opposed to a Shiite militia and Hassan Nasrallah became something akin to Gamal Abdel Nasser, all the while remaining a man that could appeal to the Lebanese audience. Bseiso, through a study of the Al Manar television station after the July 2006 War, argues that the war allowed the channel more than before to create a "cultural discourse" that projected Hezbollah as the vanguard of Lebanese sovereignty.<sup>51</sup>

The ideological spoils of war gave Hezbollah confidence to act decisively in Lebanese politics. The same year saw Hezbollah participate in the cabinet for the first time. However, as the political situation deteriorated throughout 2007 and 2008, the party became increasingly aggressive to government interference in resistance matters. For example, when the government announced in 2008 a series of security measures—the sacking of the Hezbollah sympathetic head of security at Beirut International Airport and the attempt to disable the party's clandestine communications network—the party responded by seizing control of West Beirut and Druze strongholds in Mount Lebanon. The show of force compelled the parliament to rescind the directives.

The political crisis ended in the Qatari-sponsored Doha Agreement in May 2008. The agreement gave Hezbollah and its allies a sufficient number of seats in parliament to wield veto power. Meanwhile, the legacy of 2008 political crisis had deeper implications for the party's reputation among Lebanese: It became clear that Hezbollah was not above turning its weapons against fellow citizens to protect what was deemed essential military strategic assets. Moreover, the party started to frame its actions as defensive and the 'victimization' of the resistance became a recurring theme in party discourse. The party more readily ascribed initiatives it deemed hostile, such as the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), to conspiratorial

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<sup>50</sup> Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, 149.

<sup>51</sup> Bseiso, Rounwah A. R., "Al Manar: Cultural Discourse and Representation of Resistance," in *Narrating Conflict in the Middle East: Discourse, Image and Communications*, edited by Dina Matar and Zahera Harb, 133-163, (London: Tauris, 2013), 156-158.

plots aimed at hurting the resistance. Such rhetoric would resurface regularly as the Arab spring progressed.

### **3.3 The Why of Hezbollah's Syrian Intervention**

Why did Hezbollah set out to rescue the Assad-regime, a power whose sway over Lebanon had waned drastically since the 2005-withdrawal? A cursory glance reveals several reasons for why Hezbollah should *not* have viewed it as beneficial to intervene in Syria. For one, siding with Assad meant eroding the last vestiges of Hezbollah's pan-Arab support base. Its decision to enter the sectarian war environment in Syria has seen support from the Sunni community plummet, at great cost to Hezbollah's role as a political party. Abbas Samii concludes his assessment of the Hezbollah-Syria-Iran relationship in 2008 by predicting that Hezbollah probably would not react to a potential military attack on Iran, as this would be detrimental to its role in Lebanese politics. Moreover—and as posterity has proven erroneous—Samii predicts that Hezbollah is even less likely to intervene on behalf of the secular Syrian regime. He judges the political fallout from such an action as too devastating.<sup>52</sup>

Second, engaging in another front in the west was bound to shift focus away from the always-volatile Israeli border to the south. Detracting attention from the traditional enemy not only weakens the movement if conflict were to break out again, but also damages its ideological credentials. Hezbollah is first and foremost about resistance against Israel, as detailed above, and it has had a hard time to frame the Syrian conflict as belonging to that same battle (more on this below). Finally, and simply put, warfare is costly. A martyr's death does not only entail the loss of manpower, but also a recurring expenditure as the relatives left behind are entitled to lifelong stipends. Conflict is in the long run an economic liability to the party.

While the real reasons behind Hezbollah's approach to the Syrian civil may never be completely clear, historical and geo-strategic factors go a long way of explaining the decision. During Lebanon's tenure as a Syrian 'client state' in the 1990s, the Assad-regime and the Party of God operated in tandem. While the former safeguarded party interest in domestic politics, the latter kept pressure on Israel, which was occupying the Syrian Golan Heights. Syria was the dominant partner as it—by virtue of its geography—could withhold or stop the Iranian weapons and provisions the resistance needed to remain a force of power in

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<sup>52</sup> Samii, Abbas William, "A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands: Assessing the Hizbullah-Iran-Syria Relationship," *Middle East Journal*, 62:1 (2008): 32-53, 53.



Lebanon.<sup>53</sup> The turn of the millennium, however, reversed the balance. Events such as Israel's withdrawal in 2000, Syria's withdrawal in 2005, and the 2006 July War allowed the party to amass enough political power and constituency support to act independently of Syrian concerns.<sup>54</sup> This newfound autonomy did not spell the end to the working alliance with Damascus. Years of cooperation had resulted in a historical friendship that, as Amal Saad-Ghorayeb cautions, is not limited to the realm of logistics. The Syrian regime remains the only Arab country that continues to "resist" Israel, making it a symbol of immense value for the resistance axis.<sup>55</sup>

The Syrian regime has proved its mettle as a valuable supporter of the resistance. Yet, the party might appreciate the al-Assads less for what they are and more for what they are not. It is not a given that Syria, whose overwhelming majority is Sunni, should be friendly to the Lebanese Shiite militia. Regime change across the border would probably see the Alawite elite jettisoned in favor of a Sunni-dominated state that might not look favorably upon the Party of God. One Hezbollah official confirms in an interview with the ICG the problem of uncertainty in Syria, stating that the heavy influence wielded by Gulf kingdoms over the Syrian opposition "[would] have guaranteed that any future Syrian regime would have been under the influence of forces fundamentally hostile to the resistance axis".<sup>56</sup> Supporting this observation is that some rebel groups at the outset of the civil war promised that the fall of Nasrallah would follow the fall of Bashar al-Assad. Hence, Hezbollah's interests in Syria are at least to some extent guided by the logic of preferring a known entity to an unknown one.

### **3.4 Dissonant Perceptions: Hezbollah's Need to Reframe the Conflict**

Persuasive rhetoric comes into play whenever an organization seeks to focus saliency on some parts of a process, problem, or issue, at the expense of others. This need arises whenever there is a disjuncture between two separate sets of interpretation of an event: the one held by the persuaders, and the one held by those who are to be persuaded. As noted above, Hezbollah has frequently encountered such instances of dissonance between party practice and public

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<sup>53</sup> Samii, "A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands," 37-38.

<sup>54</sup> Hokayem, Emilie, "Hizballah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship," *The Washington Quarterly*, 30:2 (2007): 35-52, 36. The relative power shift means that Hassan Nasrallah's endorsement of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad probably outweighs the importance of the inverse.

<sup>55</sup> Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal, "li-mādhā yusānid hizb allāh niẓām al-asad?" *Al Akhbar*, November 15, 2011. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/25758>. Accessed April 27, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> International Crisis Group, "Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria," Middle East Report No. 153, 2014, 6.

opinion. These junctures have demanded the concerted effort of the party's communication apparatus to realign public perception of an issue to the party's advantage.

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria demanded such realignment. Criticism against the party started as early as 2011 but intensified from April 2013 when Hezbollah admitted its direct involvement in the conflict. An outcry followed from close to all walks of Lebanese society, as individuals from disparate confessions and political parties levied criticism of the movement's covert and overt support for the Syrian regime. Lebanese politician Ahmed El-Assad sums up the main argument used in the press to criticize Hezbollah's intervention in Syria:

[...] people feel that Hezbollah, by doing this, is jeopardizing more and more of the security of Lebanon; that we are creating nightmares for ourselves, for our borders, and inviting the likes of ISIS and Nusra to take revenge and to do whatever they can in order to score against Hezbollah. Lebanese people feel that Hezbollah is really walking on thin ice here and exposing the security of Lebanon even more.

Critics contend that Hezbollah, which maintains that fighting in Syria safeguards Lebanon from extremists, is actually achieving the opposite by getting involved. Whereas the party frames the intervention as an act of self-defense, critics see it as another expression of party adventurism—akin to the ill-fated war with Israel in 2006—that risks inciting sectarian discord in Lebanon. With memories of the civil war fresh in mind, any action with the propensity to fuel inter-sectarian disharmony is widely unpopular.

However much opposition forms against it, the party remains safe as long as it is able to fall back on its “Shiite shield”. Consequently, signs of incipient cracks in that shield worried the militia. Prominent Shiites started to speak out in opposition, citing the potential for conflict in Lebanon and the disaster that would spell for the Shia community. On another level, the intervention in Syria exacts sacrifices from the Lebanese Shia community that go beyond the loss of life and security. The Arab kingdoms lining the Persian Gulf—home to a sizeable community of Lebanese expatriates—are not above punishing whom they suspect to be sympathizers of the “axis of resistance”. For instance, in March 2015, the United Arab

Emirates expelled 70 Lebanese workers, most of them Shiites.<sup>57</sup> Such retaliatory actions have escalated after the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) terror listed the party in February 2016. Several of my respondents identified backlash from the Gulf as one of the points of contention between the Party of God and its constituency.<sup>58</sup>

Criticism also originates from somewhere deeper than material grievances. Ahmed El-Assaad thinks that Hezbollah's interference in Syria has demonstrated the resistance movement's ideological corruption to its Shiite supporters. The militia has not been engaged in active warfare with Israel—save for intermittent and inconsequential skirmishes—since the 2006 July War, and consequently,

[...] the mask has fallen rapidly after they invaded Syria to help Assad. So in Shia public opinion, people know the truth, people know the facts. [...] Hezbollah knows that its image among the people is not what it used to be. A lot of people in the Shia community see them [for what they really are].

El-Assaad's view of Hezbollah mirrors that of several critics who view the militia's commitment to the resistance as a front that justifies its armed status. In their opinion, the Syrian civil war is a watershed moment that has torn down the façade and deprived the party of its ideological legitimacy.

Besides the apparent ideological incongruity, Hezbollah's intervention in Syria has given cause for existential concerns among Lebanese Shiites. The relationship between the party and its people is intimate, and outside observers frequently conflate the two. According to civil activist and social entrepreneur Lokman Slim,

[...] starting from 2011, very important questions started to put them in kind of an uneasy situation, the Shia community. Suddenly came the fact: Is it a feasible war? You know, are we leading a feasible war in Syria, and on the behest of the Iranians and in defense of the Syrian regime? To the more, I think, complicated questions, which are the moral ones: Are we as Shia at the height of the values, which we uphold, when we support the dictator? So you see, it ranges from the very feasibility to the question of morality.

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<sup>57</sup> Al-Amine, Wissam, "al-imārāt tantaqīm min 'irān 'abr ṭard shī'at lubnāniyyīn," Al Janoubia, March 13, 2015. <http://janoubia.com/2015/03/13/-shia-lebanese-wissam-alamine>. Accessed April 27, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Slim, Ghaddar, Hafs, El-Assaad. Some cited personal experiences of having to turn down job offers in the UAE, as they are now unable to secure residency because of their Shiite background.

Yet other instances of ideological incompatibility between past and current practices have emerged as the war has progressed. Slim offer the strategic coordination between Russia and Israel in Syria as an example, saying that,

[...] I never thought that the number of Shia killed in Syria would introduce any change regarding the Shia in politics vis-à-vis Hezbollah. But I think that the main problem will always be the problem of communication between Hezbollah as kind of an ideological constellation and its public. How to explain to the constituency that today our allies, which are the Russians, are procreating with the Israelis in order to avoid any problem over the Syrian skies, and all this in defense of Bashar. It's getting too messy.

Editor and journalist Hanin Ghaddar concurs with Slim in that the Syrian intervention has raised critical questions within the Shia community. Particularly, she points to Hezbollah's ability to deliver credible promises, noting that, "Every time [Hassan Nasrallah] promises a victory, he comes with a victory and surprises everyone." The Syrian civil war, however, remains unresolved, and with few indications of an imminent end on the horizon. Ghaddar observes that the staunch belief in the invincibility of the resistance movement is giving way to disillusion, as victory grows elusive:

[...] for the Shia community, this is unheard of. Where's this almighty, omnipresent, omnipotent Hezbollah that would go in and just wipe out the enemy? Even the most scary enemy, like Israel, and just come back victorious in a very few days? It's not working. They realize that now they are stuck in the mud in Syria and now they have to offer all their kids to go and fight in Syria with Hezbollah because they don't have a choice anymore. At the same time, they are not fighting Israel—they are fighting the Sunnis.

In summation, criticism of Hezbollah fighting side by side with the Assad-regime in Syria converges around three points. Firstly, a sentiment shared by all confessions is that Hezbollah exposes Lebanon to sectarian strife when it sends fighters to support Assad. The political deadlock and sporadic incidents of sectarian violence give credence to this argument. Second, parts of the core constituency—the Lebanese Shia community—rejects the ideological incongruity that siding with the Assad-regime entails. The irony of “the protectors of the disinherited” allying with what resembles an oppressive dictatorship is not lost on the Lebanese. Finally, the Shia community—the principal source of recruits for Hezbollah's

warfare—is questioning the feasibility of gaining anything significant on the Syrian battlefields. The criticism has forced the party to adopt rhetoric that discursively constructs a worldview in which all of these concerns are alleviated, and that aligns the community's perception of the conflict to that of the party.

### 3.5 Intervention Timeline

Owing to the close relationship between the Syrian regime and Lebanese Hezbollah, the party had no choice but to take a clear stance as regards the Syrian demonstrations of 2011. However, it is not entirely clear exactly when Hezbollah's support of the Syrian regime went from being merely moral to full-fledged military. While Hezbollah's rhetorical support of the Syrian president has remained consistent, its active military support has been subject to change. The early days are shrouded in mystery. Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah remained reluctant to talk openly about Hezbollah's active role in Syria until 2013. Yet, anti-regime media frequently implicated the party as part of Assad's security apparatus, accusing Hezbollah of cracking down on Syrian protesters or lending snipers to the Syrian army. Reports of Hezbollah-affiliated fighters buried quietly in Lebanon—allegedly having died while “doing their jihadi duties” in Syria—gave credence to these accusations.<sup>59</sup> However, there is little concrete evidence to support that during the two first years of conflict, while the threat to the Assad regime still appeared manageable, Hezbollah's presence in Syria amounted to anything more than advice and support.<sup>60</sup> The party's operational scope was limited to protecting key Shiite shrines—foremost of which is the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus—and border villages that, due to poor mapping, contained many Lebanese Shiites that lived within Syrian territory.

By mid-2012, the Syrian regime's downfall was less of a distant possibility and more of an ongoing development. This dynamic, coupled with the increased influx of foreign fighters in 2013, compelled Hezbollah to reassess the situation.<sup>61</sup> Possibly urged on by Iran, the party assumed an active fighting role on the Syrian battlefield. Hezbollah also participated in the training of paramilitary groups, such as the National Defense Force (NDF), an amalgamation

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<sup>59</sup> "ḥizb allāh yushayyi 'shahīdan qaḍā' athnā' ta' dītih wājibahu al-jihādī," Naharnet, February 2, 2013. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/ar/70550>. Accessed February 29, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Sullivan, Marisa, "Hezbollah in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Security Report 19, 2014, 11.

<sup>61</sup> International Crisis Group, "Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria," 5-6.

of local pro-Assad militias akin to Iran's Basij force.<sup>62</sup> In May 2013, Hassan Nasrallah admitted his party's military involvement in Syria in a public speech (discussed in closer detail below). The first half of 2013 saw Hezbollah participate in several military campaigns that turned the tide on the Syrian battlefield. The regime regained control of al-Qusayr—strategic due to its proximity to Lebanon and the Alawite heartland in Latakia—and scoured the al-Qalamoun mountain range and the suburbs of Damascus for rebel pockets.

With the regime in Damascus having received some much-needed breathing room, Hezbollah focused on shoring up security along the Lebanese-Syrian border. Highlights include the Battle of Zabadani—which culminated in an unprecedented U.N.-brokered agreement that facilitated a transfer of opposition fighters to Idlib province in return for the evacuation of the Shiite villages of al-Fu'ah and Kafriya—and the Siege of Madaya. The latter drew international attention as pictures of malnourished children circulated in the international press. The entry of Russia into the war on Assad's side saw further expansion of Hezbollah operations, with reports indicating that Hezbollah and Russia conducted joint operations in Latakia and Damascus.<sup>63</sup>

The actual size and scope of Hezbollah's military presence in Syria is disputed. A common claim is that the party has dispatched roughly 3,000-4,000 fighters across the border (out of 20-30,000 members in total), and that the militia has incurred somewhere between 1,200 and 1,700 casualties.<sup>64</sup> Regardless of the precision of those numbers, one can reasonably assume that the party—and with it, the Shiite sect—has invested heavily and suffered correspondingly. A poll from March 2014 suggests that three out of four Shiites know someone who has died in Syria.<sup>65</sup> As for scope, the party initially concentrated its military operations to areas close to the Lebanese border. Later on, Nasrallah has stated his party's willingness to fight wherever they are needed on the Syrian battlefield.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria," 14.

<sup>63</sup> Katz, Muni and Nadav Pollak, "Hezbollah's Russian Military Education in Syria," Washington Institute, December 24, 2015. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-russian-military-education-in-syria>. Accessed April 27, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Berti, Benedetta, "The Syrian Civil War and its Consequences for Hezbollah," Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 2015. <http://www.fpri.org/article/2015/12/the-syrian-civil-war-and-its-consequences-for-hezbollah/>. Accessed April 27, 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Hayya Bina, "Polling Dahiyeh," 2014. [http://www.shiawatch.com/public/uploads/files/\[Polling%20Dahiyeh%20ShiaWatch33\].pdf.pdf](http://www.shiawatch.com/public/uploads/files/[Polling%20Dahiyeh%20ShiaWatch33].pdf.pdf). Accessed April 27, 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (1:07:45 - May 24, 2015). Nasrallah said, "We are fighting alongside our Syrian brethren, the Syrian army, people, and popular resistance in [all of Syria]. [...] Our presence will grow pursuant to the growth of responsibility."

## 4 Constructing a War on Terror

The methods-chapter briefly presented the analytical tools I employ to analyze Hassan Nasrallah's speeches. The following chapter puts theory into practice: I first give an account of the theoretical framework around cultures of fear and the use of fear as a political tool. I then briefly discuss directed content analysis as a methodological tool, before I proceed with the rhetorical analysis. The analysis is divided into three sections that each tackle an overarching theme in party discourse on Syria.

### 4.1 Fear as a Political Tool

Fear is, at the core, a physiological reaction designed to engender an appropriate response to a perceived threat. It is a useful emotion that allows humans to make snap second decisions on whether to fight or flee in life-and-death-situations. Experiencing fear primes the brain to process external stimuli quicker, and it makes a person more likely to decide actions based on emotion and intuition rather than rational reasoning.

This innately human response makes fear a valuable tool for manipulation—particularly when one considers two other attributes of fear: First, fear is not only a subjective feeling but also a collective experience shared in communities. Where people experience a strong sense of collective identity, a threat against one appears as a threat against all, especially if that threat targets characteristics inherent to the shared identity.<sup>67</sup> Our responses to specific circumstances are mediated through social practices—or cultural norms—that prod individuals to adopt a certain kind of behavior when confronted with a threat. It is through the power of social practices to govern our behavior that the feeling of fear can be conceptualized as a social phenomenon. Second, humans are seldom able to ascertain that the intensity of fear is rarely directly proportional to the objective character of the threat from which it is elicited. While jellyfish, for instance, are eight times more likely to kill swimmers than sharks, people express greater anxiety for the latter. The human mind erroneously judges threats that appear more dreadful as being more immediate and severe than they actually are.

Leaders who are aware of the dissonance between reality and experiential commensurability and have the skill and ability to manipulate public perception have used fear as a potent political tool. The culture of fear has—besides the physiological and psychological—a

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<sup>67</sup> Fritsche, Immo, Eva Jonas and Thomas Kessler, "Collective Reactions to Threat: Implications for Intergroup Conflict and for Solving Societal Crises," *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 5:1 (2011): 101-136.

political dimension that is deeply rooted in the human experience. As a concept in social science research, it has resurfaced intermittently to describe contemporary political cultures, such as Germany in the 1930s, the ethnic wars in the wake of the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the various “Red Scares” that took hold in the U.S. of the previous century. The concept reappeared in academic literature with the advent of the U.S.-led “War on Terror”. The willful use of the *politics of fear* by American politicians brought about a *culture of fear* in the American population. In this context, sociologist David Altheide defines the politics of fear as “the promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk, and fear in order to achieve certain goals.”<sup>68</sup>

By using fear, speakers promote a sense of impending disorder or feeling of loss of control.<sup>69</sup> The discursive construction of a phenomenon as threatening requires human agency, or what some label ‘fear entrepreneurs’.<sup>70</sup> Hence, the politics of fear has an instrumental purpose—the fulfillment of some political objective. Moreover, the politics of fear is a discursive process that taps into the cultural fabric of the audience. Politicians wishing to mobilize their constituency using fear need to be cognizant of what their audience finds salient. They need to know, as Stuart J. Kaufman puts it, “the myths and prejudices that determine which symbols are likely to move them, and what evokes their greatest collective fears.”<sup>71</sup> Scholar Tariq Ramadan concurs with Altheide and Kaufman’s contention that opportunistic individuals can use fear as a political tool. By perpetuating a state of fear and threat, they justify intrusive security policies and extraordinary measures of self-protection.<sup>72</sup>

Scholars of varying stripes have explored the instrumentalization of the fear of the ‘other’ for political gains. Using American media and statistical analysis, Shana Gadarian argues that the discourse on terrorism—particularly when it is presented in evocative and emotional terms—can lead the audience to support interventionist wars when they otherwise would have not. Political leaders advance “hawkish” policies—meaning policies that promotes interventionism and war as the best courses of action—as the remedy to the threat, and the

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<sup>68</sup> Altheide, David L., "Terrorism and the Politics of Fear," *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies*, 6:4 (2006): 415-439, 417.

<sup>69</sup> Altheide, "Terrorism and the Politics of Fear," 420; Jackson, Richard, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 20-22.

<sup>70</sup> Furedi, Frank, "The only thing we have to fear is the ‘culture of fear’ itself," *Spiked Online*, April 7, 2007. <http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/3053#.VyEDlZCLTIU>. Accessed April 27, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Kaufman, Stuart J., *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 30.

<sup>72</sup> Ramadan, Tariq, "The Global Ideology of Fear," *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Winter (2006): 12-17, 13.



anxious audience rewards them with electoral support.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, Sarah Oates finds that aspiring office-holders in both Russia and America promoted exaggerated threats and fears during election campaigns. In both cases, she found that amplifying the threat of terrorism was a decisive rhetorical tool for politicians who wanted to seek or maintain power.<sup>74</sup> Terrorism lends itself so easily as a prop in the politics of fear and threat for the same reasons that it remains the preferred method for terrorist actors: it is vicious and anonymous.

Why is rhetoric so important to understand political reality? The discourse-focused literature that informs this thesis is exemplary of how terrorism (or other comparable threats that are external to the collective identity) has increasingly come to be seen as not only a physical fact but also a social construction. Language in discourse does not simply reflect reality—it co-constitutes it. Understanding that rhetoric is a vehicle for social control leads us to an assumption briefly discussed with reference to CDA earlier: language operates to enable policy by constructing particular meanings and identities.<sup>75</sup> As Jack Holland notes, “by marking not only the limits of what it is possible to say but also what it is possible to do, foreign policy discourse [makes] foreign policy *conceivable and realizable*.”<sup>76</sup> Rhetoric—an inherent part of discourse—is a medium used by elite figures to create a certain type of knowledge for their audience that serves to legitimize, delegitimize, justify, and explain choices of policy.

Previous research on the use of fear as a political tool and the endeavor to “sell” foreign policy suggests a plethora of rhetorical themes. In an analysis of the rhetoric of the Bush administration on the U.S.-led War on Terror, Jackson identifies three overarching rhetorical themes that discursively constructed the terrorist threat: a new type of “super-terror”, the U.S. living through an era of supreme emergency, and the notion of dangerous enemies within.<sup>77</sup> These rhetorical themes not only sought to garner support for American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq but also to discipline the domestic sphere.

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<sup>73</sup> Gadarian, Shana K., "The Politics of Threat: How Terrorism News Shapes Foreign Policy Attitudes," *The Journal of Politics*, 72:2 (2010): 469-483.

<sup>74</sup> Oates, Sarah, "Comparing the Politics of Fear: The Role of Terrorism News in Election Campaigns in Russia, the United States and Britain," *International Relations*, 20:4 (2006): 425-437.

<sup>75</sup> Holland, Jack, "Howard's War on Terror: A Conceivable, Communicable and Coercive Foreign Policy Discourse," *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 45:4 (2010): 643-661, 644.

<sup>76</sup> Holland, "Howard's War on Terror," 644. Emphasis added.

<sup>77</sup> Jackson, Richard, "The Politics of Threat and Danger: Writing the War on Terrorism," Paper Presented at the British International Studies Association, Warwick, UK, December 20-22, 2004, 6-14.

In another study, Jack Holland analyzes the rhetoric used by Australian politicians to justify Australia's alignment to interventionist American foreign policy in the wake of the 9/11-attacks. He, too, identifies three "analytical moments" that enabled change in policy: the construction of an ontologized cartography that gave threats a geographical representation; the construction of a 'geographical imagination' embedded in the local cultural context that defined boundaries between the "Self" and the "Others", and portraying intervention as a noble Australian tradition and alternatives as problematic.<sup>78</sup> These themes drew on what Holland terms the 'geographies of the unconscious', which "mark the foundations of spatial identification and inclusion."<sup>79</sup> Politicians utilize the geographical imagination of the audience—incorporating questions of "Self", "Other", homeland, distance, and proximity—to sculpt foreign policy that instrumentally reshapes and reinforces the understanding of those concepts.

In general, Holland notes that the political possibility of any interventionist foreign policy is contingent upon its construction as *conceivable*, *communicable*, and *coercive*.<sup>80</sup> It needs to be conceivable in that it constructs a worldview that enables interventionism. Ideally, this worldview locates a host of actors that are relevant to the cause in that they are either hostile or friendly. Next, foreign policy needs to resonate with the audience, and that comes through it being constructed as communicable. In other words, rhetoricians need to draw on vocabularies of motive that strikes a chord in the audience, such as injustice, threat, and fear. Finally, the proposal of interventionist foreign policy is possible through a coercive component. In this sense, the frame of the policy gains a hegemonic character in that it is portrayed as the *only* remedy to a foreign threat, while alternative courses of action either are inhibited from being formulated, or framed as ineffective. The failure of a discourse to address one or more of these issues will likely lead to rhetorical failure. For example, Oates found that terrorism did not play as potent a role in British electoral cycles as it did in Russian and American ones. The British electorate simply did not perceive themselves to be central to the "war on terror". Consequently, there existed no conceivable solution in Britain for politicians to cater to fear to engender popular support for policy.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Holland, "Howard's War on Terror," 658-659.

<sup>79</sup> Holland, "Howard's War on Terror," 646.

<sup>80</sup> Holland, *Selling the War on Terror*, 32.

<sup>81</sup> Oates, "Comparing the Politics of Fear," p. 435-437.

## 4.2 Hezbollah on the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian civil war put the Party of God in an awkward situation. When Hassan Nasrallah justified his party's support for the Assad regime in 2011, he based his arguments on Syria's special role as a "resisting country". But the rhetoric about exceptionalism failed to strike a chord for Lebanese who sympathized with the democratic aspirations of the Arab Spring protests. Many ascribed Nasrallah's siding with the Syrian autocrat as another manifestation of the ideological corruption that had become associated with the party since the 2008 political crisis. Meanwhile, as the prospect of a more profound military engagement across the border grew likelier—a prospect strengthened by every Hezbollahi buried quietly in Lebanon after having completed his "jihadi duties"—the Shia community, too, grew wary. Warfare demands great sacrifice. So much so that it warrants extraordinary rhetorical effort to convince the public of its justice, necessity, and executive capacity. That is true particularly for Hezbollah and the Syrian civil war. Besides justifying directing resistance weapons at fellow Arabs (and away from the 'Zionist enemy'), the party also had to respond to critics who remembered the 2006 July War and saw Hezbollah's adventurism as a source of renewed calamity for confessional Lebanon.

Using directed content analysis, I designate three overarching rhetorical themes that the party uses in official discourse to construct its intervention in the Syrian civil war: Manichaeism, the supreme enemy, and hawkishness. I designate these themes with backing from extant literature, and in particular Holland's terminology of conceivable, communicable and coercive discourse construction. These themes are, of course, rarely isolated in speech. In fact, many statements that I have designated analytical relevant to one theme are just as central to one of the others. For instance, when Nasrallah details the atrocities of ISIL in Syria he simultaneously amplifies the threat they pose and give a rationale for concerted efforts to curb that threat. Moreover, while accounting for themes I also discuss two additional components that allow the rhetoric to resonate with the audience. The first concerns ideological continuity. As noted above, discourse rarely originates in a vacuum. It needs to accommodate the local, cultural context and incorporate recognizable tropes (or cultural references). Second, much like comparable leaders in comparable situations have done before, Hezbollah has sought to channel a message of threat and fear—a potent rhetorical tool in societies where the sense of collective identity is strong.

### 4.2.1 The Manichean Worldview

A major theme that informs Hezbollah's rhetoric on Syria is the Manichean worldview. Manichaeism is a doctrine that discerns a logical and empirically sound division of forces that act on the behalf of good and evil. This mentality pervades ideological battlegrounds, in which questions of morality and faith are salient. The party advances a dualistic perspective on the conflict, and in the process defines in- and out-groups. While the original Manicheans—a syncretic religious sect named after the Baghdad-based ascetic Mani—believed that the forces of 'good' and 'evil' could coexist, the understanding of Manichaeism in modern political theory assumes that the existence of one is deleterious to the existence of the other. 'Good' is locked in an uninterrupted existential struggle with 'evil' that only ends when one side vanquishes the other. Manichaeism is not an entirely alien concept to Hezbollah's worldview. Ayatollah Khomeini, whose influence on party ideology is paramount, held that pervasive imperialism had divided the world into two groups, those who oppress (*mustakbirin*) and those who are oppressed (*mustad'afin*).<sup>82</sup>

The dualism intrinsic to Manichaeism makes neutrality impracticable. There are no third parties: one is either with or against either side. This binary worldview is evident in Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's 2013 Resistance Day speech. Throughout it, he justifies Hezbollah's stance vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict, as this excerpt exemplifies:

There are *two sides in this struggle*: the first is an axis of the U.S., the West, and regional Arab states that brought the takfiri groups to the battlefield. These ones disembowel, behead, disentomb, and destroy the past. [...] On the other side, a state that has a clear stance as regards the Palestinian cause, the resistance movement, and the Zionist project. At the same time, it is announcing its permanent readiness for dialogue, political solution, and reforms. Take whatever side you want. As for Hezbollah, it cannot be in a front with America, Israel, and those who stab chests, behead others, and disentomb graves.<sup>83</sup>

The Secretary-General implies that those who are not supporting the Syrian regime are in league with the other side—America, Israel, and the takfiri. By establishing a sharp divide between good and evil forces, the Manichean worldview supports an “either with us or against

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<sup>82</sup> Alagha, Joseph, *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 115-119. Terms are in Farsi.

<sup>83</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (56:50 - May 25, 2013). I have used italicization throughout this chapter to highlight important words and phrases in the block quotes.

us” rhetoric. Such logic rejects pluralism, gray areas, third parties and neutrality. Journalist Nahed Hattar, writing on Syria for the pro-Hezbollah Al Akhbar, is more explicit as to where this logical conclusion leads:

In a war for national liberation, there is no opposition, dialogue, reconciliation or clemency, but only a single political yardstick by which everyone is measured. Those inside the country are either *patriots or traitors*; those outside the country are either *allies or enemies*.<sup>84</sup>

Manichaeism allows the party and its supporters to stigmatize those who deviate from Hezbollah’s line on the Syrian conflict. Neutrality has become morally reprehensible, if not impossible altogether.

The concept of morality underpins the Manichean worldview. Evil forces commit evil acts, and the converse goes for the forces of good. Hezbollah needs to convince the audience of not only the righteousness of its side, but also the corruption of the other. The conceptualization of this moral dichotomy means offering evidence that supports and strengthens the divide. The atrocities committed by ISIL in Iraq and Syria serve as urgent reminders of the dangers of not rallying around the resistance. A speech held on Resistance Day 2015—barely a week after the fall of Ramadi to ISIL—is typical of the party’s construction of a link between their opponents and immorality. With great emotion, Nasrallah urges the audience to remember,

A few days ago, the scenes were heartbreaking. Tens of thousands of Iraqis were fleeing Ramadi. Everyone was fleeing along with their mother, father, wife, and children. Holding a small bag in their hands, they were walking with fear in their eyes. Who assumes responsibility for that?<sup>85</sup>

Emotional language that incorporates the vocabulary of family and fear allows rhetoricians to engage with the listener’s sense of morality. The audience is left with a firm conviction: there is no ambiguity as to the moral character of those who brought about the scenes from Ramadi.

Hezbollah and the resistance axis is framed as a guarantee against those moral outrages occurring. Nasrallah reinforces this idea in a February 2014 speech, where he refers to

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<sup>84</sup> Hattar, Nahed, "bi-hudū': sūrīa al-jarīḥa; 'ilā al-salāḥ," Al Akhbar, May 22, 2015. <http://al-akhbar.com/node/233726>. Accessed February 17, 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (1:06:05 - May 24, 2015).

Hezbollah's participation in a successful Syrian military operation to retake the city of al-Qusayr the previous summer:

There are 30,000 Lebanese—Christians as well as Muslims—in Qusayr. They were aggressed against; their villages were occupied; some of them were kidnapped; some of them were killed; Lebanese women were raped. *Is this not shameful? Do you want me to provide you with names? Is that not shameful? What did you in Lebanon do? What did the Lebanese state do? What did the Lebanese government do? It did nothing, except disassociate.*<sup>86</sup>

Nasrallah brings in the morally relevant concept of shame and implies that the Lebanese government's policy of disassociation—a choice based on consensus that seeks to keep Lebanon insulated from the conflict next door—is shameful. By failing to support Hezbollah's entry into Syria, the Lebanese government has become an unwitting ally of the other side. The right choice is presumably the one made by Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, who evicted the rebels. The narrative is simple: the party and the Syrian regime (good) saved innocent Lebanese (also good) from the vile killers, rapists, and attackers staffing the ranks of the FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra (evil) while the Lebanese government (morally ambiguous) refused to take action.

The components of discourse are rarely innovative. The rhetoric that constructs the discourse draws on cultural references, symbols, and historical analogies already ingrained in the local context. In Hezbollah's case, the overarching worldview that informs its rhetoric is the concept of and project relating to resistance. Central to the resistance project is a strong sense of anti-Imperialism that designates world powers with a problematic history in the Middle East region as the foremost adversaries. Lebanese scholar Amal Saad-Ghorayeb describes Hezbollah's animosity towards the purposefully vague concept of "the West" as an invariable component of the party's intellectual structure.<sup>87</sup> That the U.S. surfaces as the Western power par excellence in both the 1985 Open Letter and the 2009 New Manifesto—the latter a fundamental innovation of the former in other respects—supports this notion.<sup>88</sup> Central to the civilizational struggle between the Occident and the Orient is the perception of a grand

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<sup>86</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (49:40 - February 16, 2014).

<sup>87</sup> Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 90.

<sup>88</sup> Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents*, 41 and 121.

conspiracy that aims to sow discord between the peoples of the Middle East, with the end goal being to usurp the region's wealth and resources.<sup>89</sup>

Hezbollah draws on this well-established diatribe to diagnose the conflict in Syria. In doing so, the party puts the Syrian civil war on a par with other Western-backed “plots”, such as the Balfour Declaration and the neo-conservative plan for a ‘New Middle East’.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, by retaining the same enemies from one conflict to the next, the party reinforces the connection between the popular resistance against Israeli occupation—a legitimate and just battle in the eyes of resistance sympathizers—and saving Syria. Hezbollah's use of the resistance signifier in the Syrian civil war is another illustration of the resistance concept's independence of temporal and spatial constraints.

While the party borrows from preexisting ‘templates’ to construct a Manichean perspective, it has also introduced new components. This innovation owes in large part to the two major developments that the Syrian battlefield saw in 2013, which radically shifted Hezbollah's battlefield assessment. For one, Hassan Nasrallah admitted his party's active military involvement in the conflict.<sup>91</sup> The announcement came on the threshold of the large-scale offensive against the Syrian city of al-Qusayr, a campaign in which Hezbollah would be unable to keep a low profile. Secondly, extremist militias, such as the Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL, had grown into formidable fighting forces on the ground. Islamist gains and intra-rebel defections had made it increasingly evident by early 2013 that extremists were eclipsing the moderate opposition, of which the Free Syrian Army was the premier expression.

The two developments are closely connected. Rumors of Hezbollah's presence in Syria had already started to cement the conflict as sectarian in terms. Conversely, the growing influence of takfiri groups in Syria allowed Hezbollah's discourse to depict a credible and unifying enemy. With strengthened justification, the party felt confident enough to commit to the conflict. Consequently, Hezbollah borrows rhetoric from the ideological constellation

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<sup>89</sup> Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, 91.

<sup>90</sup> U.S. Foreign Secretary Condoleezza Rice, while visiting Lebanese PM Fouad Siniora during the 2006 July War, suggested that the conflict was part of “the birth pangs of a new Middle East.” Hezbollah took this statement as confirmation of a conspiracy that aimed to restructure the region according to U.S. interests. Hassan Nasrallah framed the “Divine Victory” as a significant setback for this project.

<sup>91</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (May 25, 2013). Nasrallah revealed as much when he forwarded a challenge to the perpetrators behind the bomb attacks that had recently struck Beirut: “We disagree over Syria. You fight in Syria; we fight in Syria; then let's fight there.”

surrounding the resistance project while infusing it with new themes. The following accusation levied by Nasrallah in 2014 is typical of the party's mixture of old and new:

America, the West, and those who are with them are bringing along all the terrorists and takfiri groups from all around the world. They are offering facilities, visas, funds, arms, expenses, media and political cover, international decisions and so on. They are bringing them to Syria. To what intent? To destroy Syria and the axis of resistance that has become a threat to the Zionist scheme and the presence of Israel in the region. This is the biggest modern sin.<sup>92</sup>

In the Party of God's discourse, America—with backing from other Western countries and with Israel as a vanguard—is attacking the resistance by facilitating the inflow of radical militants. The party treats a new symptom—the takfiri threat—that identifies the familiar diagnosis of a grand conspiracy.

While many see the paradox in the proposition that the United States provides funding to ISIL, they might agree that the U.S. is benefitting from its spread. Using the deductive device best explained as *cui bono*, the party leader suggests the following line of thought in a February 2015 speech:

Who are [the takfiri] serving? For whose interests are they fighting? Here and for the first time I dare say, consider the Israeli Mossad, the CIA, and British intelligence. Previously, we did not pose the *theory of a conspiracy*. Now, however, let us consider those. Everything that the takfiri current and Daesh does serves Israel, Israel's hegemony over the region, and U.S. hegemony.<sup>93</sup>

Such conspiratorial thinking is, as argued above, typical to the resistance worldview. Regardless of the ideological mismatch between ISIL and the West, this accusation benefits from logic. The takfiri are attacking the axis of resistance, which weakens that axis' capacity to fight Israel. An ancient proverb holds that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. By linking Israeli and takfiri animosity against the resistance, the rhetoric of the party strengthens the perception of an alliance of convenience.

The two excerpts above serve as a reminder that rhetoric is not a matter of authenticity, but perception. Objective reality serves a subsidiary function that at most supplements the

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<sup>92</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (36:15 - May 25, 2014).

<sup>93</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (47:00 - February 16, 2015).



worldview propagated in the rhetoric. Hence, we should interpret Hezbollah's use of tradition and myths to justify its intervention in Syria not as repositories of exact facts about the realities on the ground but as clues about how the party imagines its actions in the present. Party rhetoric implicates the United States—a time-honored enemy for the transnational Shia community—in supporting extremist groups such as ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. This assertion repeats despite U.S. bombing raids targeting al-Nusra facilities and ISIL's avowed hostility towards the West. While the accusation is bound to strain the credulity of even the most avid followers, it benefits from continuity. The attraction of this narrative is not its factuality, but its familiarity and ideological convenience.

The party designates takfiri groups in Syria a threat to the resistance axis. A related rhetorical process seeks to explain the exact nature of that threat. In doing so, the party has used examples from atrocities in Iraq and Syria—the extremists' brutal conduct in Palmyra, for example, was appropriated to describe the essence of takfiri groups. The party also offers a deeper analysis that seeks to explain the motive for committing massacres. A concept that recurs in Hassan Nasrallah's speeches on the Syrian civil war is the existence of a "takfiri mentality" and the hold it is gaining among anti-Assad forces:

The greatest power and the overwhelming current that dominates the political forces controlling the field are the takfiri groups. [...] This *mentality* does not accept dialogue. [...] What future do you see for Syria under the mentality of such groups? What future for Lebanon, for Palestine, for the peoples of the region do you foresee?<sup>94</sup>

The extremists are guided by a discrete mentality. What is more, Nasrallah suggests that this mentality has hijacked the once moderate Syrian opposition—a statement that, while exaggerated, still contains a grain of truth. As noted above, Islamist groups of varying stripes had largely supplanted the moderate opposition by late 2013 in several areas of the country, particularly in the East and the North. In February 2014, as the government offenses of the previous year were winding down, the Secretary-General elaborates further on what it is about this mentality that makes its eradication a necessity:

The problem is not in takfir [the act of denouncing someone an unbeliever] solely.

The problem is that when they denounce others as unbelievers they do not accept

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<sup>94</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (45:05 - May 25, 2013).

this other who differs from them on the ideological, intellectual, sectarian, or political level. Without seeking any other solution, they immediately deem his blood, honor, and wealth permissible. They immediately resort to elimination, exclusion, cancelation, and eradication. This is well known.<sup>95</sup>

The takfiri are not only a threat to non-adherents identity, Nasrallah suggests, but also their lives. Extremists dehumanize those with differing views through the act of takfir. Moreover, they are incapable of “seeking any other solution”. The dual construction of the takfiri groups as incapable of compromise *and* as the predominant power on the Syrian battlefields is a powerful rhetorical tool. While outside observers may disparage the Syrian regime’s violent conduct against its opponents—the use of barrel bombs and prolonged sieges have elicited particular criticism—Hezbollah’s rhetoric underlines the necessity of those same practices. In the fight against ‘evil’, all means are legitimate.

Just as the promotion of a Manichean worldview requires a dangerous ‘other’, it also necessitates the demarcation of ‘self’-boundaries. In other words, discourse needs to identify the forces of ‘good’. The Islamic Republic of Iran—Hezbollah’s source of spiritual inspiration and monetary support—is a self-evident member of that group. Meanwhile, due to increasingly converging interests, Hezbollah’s principal friend in the Syrian conflict has been the Syrian regime. The intimacy of that relationship has been subject to change over the course of the last five years. Hezbollah initially did not provide—in any official capacity at least—military support to the Syrian regime prior to April 2013. The party maintained a sympathetic stance towards its resistance ally that nevertheless sought to keep Lebanese and Syrian fates apart. The foremost objective of party rhetoric on Syria in 2011 and 2012 then was to differentiate the Syrian regime—a vital ally of the Islamic resistance—from comparable Arab dictatorships, such as that of Mubarak and Gadhafi—both of whose downfall Hezbollah had applauded. The party sought to convince its constituency that siding with Assad was not a sign of hypocrisy, but rather the result of a careful analysis of the political situation. This initial objective is evident in the Secretary-General's speech on Resistance and Liberation Day in 2011, where he maintained that,

We are before a resisting and opposing country, its regime, its leadership, its army, and its people. This is a central point. Also, among the essential points that we build our stance on is that *the Syrian leadership is convinced by its people of*

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<sup>95</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (26:50 - February 16, 2014).

*the need to implement reform*, fight corruption, and opening new horizons in the Syrian political life. [...] I know that [Syrian president Bashar al-Assad] is ready to take very great reformative steps, but with serenity, care, and responsibility.<sup>96</sup>

Syria, in other words, differs from other Arab regimes in that it, as a “resisting and opposing country”, is an essential member of the “axis of resistance”. Whereas Egypt, for instance, distanced itself from the Palestinian cause in the late 1970s, Syria’s vehement hostility to Israel remained a fixture of Middle Eastern politics. Moreover, Nasrallah suggests that Bashar al-Assad’s leadership contrasts that of Gadhafi’s and Mubarak’s in that he acts within the bounds of reason and compromise. The Syrian president shows willingness to implement change, though not through rash decision. The implication is that it is the opposition—and not the government—that is veering the country towards chaos.

The exceptionalism of Syria gained rhetorical traction as the militia and the regime started to conduct joint operations on the battlefields, and Nasrallah’s defense of Syria has grown more confident and ardent. On Resistance Day 2014, Nasrallah reiterated the party’s position vis-à-vis Syria:

[Syria] alone is still carrying *the honor of not communicating with the enemy*, of not signing an agreement with the enemy, and of not having any kind of relationship with Israel. It has protected, supplied, and supported the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance and is still doing so. It has paid the price for doing that. It is still fighting for that. This Syria, this is what we are defending. Why is it not our right to defend our points of strength, *our backbone*, our support, the source of pride for the umma, and the steadfast Arab lighthouse that withstands normalization and surrender?<sup>97</sup>

Syria as the “backbone of the resistance” is another recurring theme that plays on the fact that the Assad regime, though rarely participating as a fighting member of the Islamic Resistance, functions as the conduit that keeps all parts in direct contact. The Syrian regime is both a vital backchannel for arms and personnel, and historically a guarantor of the security of the Syrian-Lebanese border.

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<sup>96</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (06:50 - May 25, 2011).

<sup>97</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (30:50 - May 25, 2014).

Hence, Hassan Nasrallah's justification for including Syria within the category of 'good' rests on two assertions: First, Syria—in the context of the Arab Spring—is an exceptional case. The Assad-regime cannot be compared to similar dictatorships in Cairo and Tripoli. Second, the Syrian regime is the backbone of the Islamic resistance against Israeli and Western machinations in the region. These rhetorical themes associated with the Manichean worldview echoes through the lower echelons of the Party of God. Mohammad Raad, head of the Loyalty to the Resistance bloc in the Lebanese parliament, assessed Hezbollah's involvement in an interview with Al Monitor:

We appeared alongside the Syrian people when we saw that the extremist terrorists had drawn the swords of injustice to destroy Syria and eliminate the aspirations of the Syrian people to achieve reformist development in their state. [...] And because a weak Syria will reflect negatively on the status of the resistance in facing the Israeli occupation of Lebanese lands [...].<sup>98</sup>

Raad brings reasonable reformers and the Syrian regime into the same camp. Moreover, he, too, observes that what is good for the takfiri is good for Israel. Finally, he heightens the moral saliency of the battle in Syria using words such as "injustice". In a different interview with Al Monitor, Hezbollah media relations chief Mohammed Afif points out that,

When the Arab Spring came, some accused us of being a sectarian party; though our stance from the Tunisian, Egyptian, Bahraini, Yemeni and Libyan revolutions was clear, nobody wants to see that, they only took our stance on Syria. In Syria the case is different. We are defending the resistance, our country Lebanon and all the people of the region, we are defending the Christians, the Druze, the Sunnis and the Shiites. There's an existential threat not only for us but for the whole region. It's our *war on terror*, a genuine war on terror.<sup>99</sup>

Afif emphasizes like Nasrallah and Raad that there was a significant difference between Syria and other Arab regimes. Moreover, his statement highlights another rhetorical effort: Nasrallah's Hezbollah has tried hard to depict the takfiri threat as a national challenge as

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<sup>98</sup> Hashem, Ali, "Senior Hezbollah official speaks out," Al Monitor, May 22, 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/hezbollah-ready-war-israel-syria-army-michel-aoun.html>. Accessed November 24, 2015.

<sup>99</sup> Hashem, Ali, "Hezbollah's media machine changes gears," Al Monitor, June 5, 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/hezbollah-media-manar-changing-syria-israel-message.html>. Accessed November 24, 2015.

opposed to a sectarian one. Hezbollah's war in Syria is, in other words, not a war for the Shiites or for a Shiite militia. Rather, it is a battle in defense of all Arabs against terror.

#### 4.2.2 The New Super-Threat

The takfiri presence, while disastrous for voices of moderation in Syria, was a boon to the communicative efforts of the Shiite militia. Whereas the party earlier had constructed the conflict as a battle pitching the resistance project against time-honored ideological enemies, the advent of ISIL allowed the party to present a credible and dangerous enemy—credible because of ISIL's avowed hatred of *al-rāfiḍa*,<sup>100</sup> and dangerous because of the group's meteoric rise on the Syrian scene. Hezbollah has sought to construct the takfiri threat as something without historical precedent. In party rhetoric, groups such as ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra come to pose a *super-threat* whose continued existence is inimical to the existence of not only the Lebanese Shia community, but also the entire Arab world. The party sketches out catastrophic scenarios to follow a takfiri takeover that engenders a feeling of supreme emergency in the community. The goal of using the vocabulary of emergency is, as social mobilization analyst Benford summarizes, to convince listeners that, "any response other than collective action is unreasonable."<sup>101</sup> In other words, the threat is framed as too catastrophic to not counteract.

Hezbollah fuels a sense of emergency by amplifying two threat attributes: severity and urgency. The discourse constructing the severity of failure in Syria has focused on hypothetical scenarios that appear credible as they correspond to preconceived notions about the enemy and the victims. Those scenarios have seen change in scope and content since May 2013—at which point the party admitted its involvement in the war. Yet, a recurring theme in the loss rhetoric of the party is the prospect of irrevocable loss. Initially, Hezbollah stressed the repercussions a defeat in the Syrian civil war would have on the resistance project:

Brothers and sisters! If Syria falls in the hands of the [project], the resistance will be besieged, and Israel will re-enter Lebanon to impose its conditions on Lebanon, and renew its greed and projects in it. [...] If Syria falls, so will Palestine, the resistance in Palestine, Gaza, the West Bank, and Holy al-Quds. If Syria falls to

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<sup>100</sup> A pejorative term used by among others ISIL to disparage Shiites. Literally meaning "those who rejects," it refers to the Shiite refusal to defer to what Salafis consider legitimate Islamic authority and leadership.

<sup>101</sup> Benford, Robert D., "You Could Be the Hundredth Monkey": Collective Action Frames and Vocabularies of Motive within the Nuclear Disarmament Movement, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34:2 (1993): 195-216, 201.

the [project], the peoples and states of our region will witness a *difficult and dark era*.<sup>102</sup>

Hezbollah presents a domino-based chain of events, wherein a defeat in Syria would lead to comparable defeats in other resistance-friendly regions. As illustrated above and again here, the party also maintains a causal link between the Syrian civil war and the general resistance project. Linking the fall of Damascus of the fall of Lebanon and al-Quds is an ingenious rhetorical tool that borrows legitimacy from the fight against Israel.

The ‘severity of failure in Syria’-perception has magnified in proportion to the extremist presence across the border. The party allocates less time to the potentially disastrous consequences for the resistance project, and more to the prospect of human loss. The following observation made by the Secretary-General on Resistance and Liberation Day 2013 is typical of the rhetorical shift:

We consider that the takeover of these groups of Syria—or of Syrian provinces, especially those bordering Lebanon—poses a great danger to Lebanon and every Lebanese, not only Hezbollah and the Shiites in Lebanon. It poses a danger to Lebanon, the Lebanese, the Lebanese state, the Lebanese resistance, and coexistence in Lebanon. I have evidence. I am not accusing these groups without grounds. If these groups were to succeed in taking over provinces—particularly those bordering Lebanon—then they would *pose a threat to the Lebanese*, whether Muslims or Christians.<sup>103</sup>

Changing circumstances in Syria provided Hezbollah with a mean to appeal to Lebanese Sunnis and Christians. The latter is just as exposed to the treatment ISIL has subjected minorities to in Iraq as the Shias are. As for the former, Nasrallah frequently iterates that the majority of ISIL’s victims are Sunnis.. According to Hezbollah, the option is conform or perish:

Only those who accept to adhere to their lifestyle, bear their intellect, and pledge allegiance to their caliph under the power of weapons, are saved. This privilege is,

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<sup>102</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (55:50 - May 25, 2013).

<sup>103</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (47:10 - May 25, 2013).

of course, only for the Sunnis. [...] As for the others, it seems there is no place for them.<sup>104</sup>

Such language links the war in Syria to the continued existence of Lebanon as a state and society. Takfiri doctrine, Hezbollah suggests—with backing from highly mediated events such as the destruction of Shia shrines and mosques in Mosul—is antithetical to religious minorities. In ISIL’s society, “there is no place” for non-Sunnis. This observation is especially pertinent to Lebanon—home to eighteen officially recognized confessions.

Hezbollah has widened the pool of victims that will suffer from the extremist threat. They have also amplified the consequences of the threat’s realization. While a defeat in Syria as described in May 2013 would usher in “difficult and dark times”, the consequences a year later have taken on strengthened urgency, as evinced in a speech held on August 15, 2014:

I call on all the Lebanese to comprehend that your country, your entity, and your society is before an *existential danger* in an exceptional and very dangerous way. I am not exaggerating and whoever does not want to believe, he will believe later.<sup>105</sup>

The idea of the Syrian conflict as an existential danger (*khaṭr wujūdī*) became a recurring theme in party speech in late 2014. The context that spurred the threat amplification was the perception of ISIL’s growing power. Early June 2014 saw the group seize control over several key points in Northwestern Iraq, including Mosul. These territorial gains emboldened the extremists to proclaim the restoration of the Caliphate on June 29. Finally, the massacre of approximately 5,000 Yazidis, a religious minority particular to Iraq, following the fall of Sinjar in early August reinforced the view of ISIL as genocidal. Rhetoric that warns against existential danger aligns well with the Manichean perspective as it is used in modern rhetoric. There can be no peace between ‘good’ and ‘evil’—the battle terminates only when one side ceases to exist.

The current discourse on Syria echoes that used on Israel, which was also promoted as a threat of existential dimensions.<sup>106</sup> However, whereas Israel threatened the existence of Lebanese freedom and identity, the takfiri threaten the “human entity” of the Lebanese—an apparent

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<sup>104</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (34:45 - May 24, 2015).

<sup>105</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (1:09:40 - August 15, 2014).

<sup>106</sup> Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, 140-142.

allusion to genocide.<sup>107</sup> A comparison between the two battles is made on Resistance Day 2015, as the Secretary-General talks about sacrifice:

In the resistance war to liberate Lebanon with its people and honor, solemn sacrifices were made: martyrs, wounded, captives, and displacement. The ongoing *battle to preserve our existence*, which is taking place now, also requires solemn sacrifices. This battle is *greater, fiercer, and more dangerous* because it is in the home, somehow. There is no other choice before those who want to defend their existence, survival, dignity, honor, and homeland other than being ready to offer sacrifices and to offer them eventually.<sup>108</sup>

Nasrallah connects the current battle with resistance against Israel. What is more, he implies that the current threat is of greater scope and magnitude than the one posed by the IDF. Lebanese in general—and Shiites in particular—are familiar with the trials and tribulations associated with the fight against Israel, whether pre-withdrawal or the 2006 July War. These confrontations included displacement, occupation, and large-scale loss of life. By invoking that collective memory and drawing an historical analogy, Nasrallah plays on a potent cultural reference that illustrates the magnitude of the current threat.

What Hezbollah is doing with such rhetoric is amplifying the significance and meaning to the threat in a way that goes far beyond its physical and psychological impacts on the Lebanese Shia community. The Lebanese Shia community is over one million strong and far from vulnerable to cultural extinction. Moreover, the predicted spillover from the Syrian conflict, while a source of concern for all Lebanese, is still well-contained. Although border areas such as Aarsal have seen rebel incursions and prolonged presence of al-Nusra fighters, the Lebanese Armed Forces has proven itself capable to repel any attempts to branch out. Meanwhile, a security plan for Northern Lebanon—implemented with backing from both political camps in early 2014—has successfully quelled the inter-sectarian clashes that marred Tripoli up to 2013.<sup>109</sup> A similar plan was put into effect for the Bekaa Valley in October 2015. The risk of spillover has reduced significantly since 2014 due to both internal efforts in Lebanon and

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<sup>107</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (May 24, 2015). Whereas the Zionists aimed at, according to the party, “Judaizing” the region, takfiri seek to “kill, slaughter, disembowel”.

<sup>108</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (1:13:40 - May 24, 2015).

<sup>109</sup> Corbeil, Alexander, "Securing Lebanon, Widening Divides," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 31, 2014. <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=56303>. Accessed February 15, 2016. Animosity between the Sunni residents of the Baab al-Tibbaneh and the Alawite residents of the Jabal Mohsen neighborhoods—rivals since the Lebanese civil war—erupted into violence several times during the first two years of the Syrian civil war.



extensive regime gains in the Syrian border regions. Yet, Nasrallah's warnings of existential eradication have not dwindled. Rather, they are voiced with more frequency and severity than ever.

Besides amplifying the severity of the takfiri threat, the party has sought to ingrain the audience with a sense of urgency. By establishing the takfiri threat as urgent, the discourse emphasizes the need for immediate attention. In Hezbollah's rhetoric, the situation is urgent for two reasons: First, takfiri groups such as ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra are spreading at pace and can make unpredictable advances on the battlefield. Second, the enemy has already infiltrated the "home", meaning Lebanon, and is as such able to target the Shia community from the inside.

Hezbollah has sought to convince its audience that the realization of the threat is possible in the not-so-distant future. The rapid advance of ISIL forces in Iraq during the summer of 2014 served that purpose well. The group pointed to the surprising fall of Mosul—Iraq's third-largest city—in a lightning campaign that spanned barely a week as a prime example of the perils of underestimating the operational reach of ISIL. Further underlining the fighting capability of ISIL was the fact that they were able to repel two well-equipped Iraqi army divisions outnumbering the jihadis nearly thirty to one. Nasrallah indicates that the ISIL advance in Anbar was a game changer:

As Lebanese, do we agree that this danger exists and that it is *a permanent danger* and not a postponed danger that may come in two, three, or five years? This was true before the events of Iraq and the events of Mosul. In fact, the country was in one situation and overnight it became in another situation. Anything may take place overnight in any country because Daesh today is a real and serious threat to Syria and Iraq.<sup>110</sup>

By using the fall of Mosul as an example, the party chief seeks to convince the audience that despite the relative calm they currently enjoy in Lebanon, the local situation is susceptible to rapid and unpredictable change on the ground. Nasrallah's use of specific examples to predict future scenarios in Lebanon makes the takfiri threat a more palpable reality for the audience. The threat transforms from something abstract and distant into a concrete and immediate possibility.

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<sup>110</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (58:50 - August 15, 2014).

The party has sought to convince its audience that while the majority of contemporary ISIL operations take place in Syria and Iraq, the group ultimately has its eyes set on Lebanon. Hezbollah's narrative suggests that it is only a matter of time:

Their priority is to finish up in Syria and then come over to Lebanon. [...] The issue is a matter of time only. Thus, in principle, *they will come*, by all means, to Lebanon. We believe that if they do not come today, they will come tomorrow. They have said as much. They announced that.<sup>111</sup>

Lebanon is next in line after Syria falls. By designating Lebanon a future victim to the takfiri plot, Nasrallah makes the problem of the Syrian conflict more relevant to the Lebanese audience. The disastrous result of allowing this problem to grow unchecked is a recurrent theme since April 2013.

Urgency is also highlighted by emphasizing the threat's spatial proximity, but here Hezbollah's rhetoric runs into a challenge as concerns experiential commensurability. ISIL's advances have so far taken place on its Eastern front, away from Lebanon. The Lebanese border is relatively insulated—save for a few hot pockets of opposition concentrations in the northern hills—and largely encapsulated by the presence of the Syrian regime. This dissonance, however, has not stopped Hezbollah from emphasizing ISIL's proximity. Nasrallah portrays ISIL as an enemy that is already within the community, warning that, “[the] danger is the transformations taking place in Syria, meaning in our surroundings, at our borders, on the gates of our cities, villages and houses: the predominance of takfiri groups in the field.”<sup>112</sup> Another speech in February 2015 reinforced this closeness: “Terrorism is on the barren mountains at the border, in Qusayr, in Qalamoun, on our hills, and in bomb-laden cars. Still some parties argue whether I am right or wrong.”<sup>113</sup> To underline the spatial dimension of this urgency of the problem further Nasrallah states that the takfiri spread is only growing with time:

We are before a project that is *moving on the ground*. We are not talking about intentions. [...] They shed blood, destroy, kill, rape, and slaughter. Today, all the news coming from Syria talk about 400 martyrs and victims who were slaughtered by Daesh in Tadmur [Palmyra] for cooperating with or being affiliated to the state

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<sup>111</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (37:30 - February 16, 2014).

<sup>112</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (09:40 - May 25, 2013).

<sup>113</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (48:50 - February 16, 2015)..

administration. *Daesh expresses barbarity towards all that is humanistic and civilized.* Daesh is the clearest example of this [project]. It is not a small group in a corner in this Arab and Islamic world. On the contrary, *it is spreading.*<sup>114</sup>

Nasrallah warns against treating ISIL as a marginalized group largely confined to East Syria and North Iraq. Much like a viral disease, the extremists are spreading, extinguishing all humanity and civilization in its wake.

### 4.2.3 Hawkishness

The third and final component of Hezbollah's Syria narrative is language that constructs an interventionist foreign policy—or *hawkishness* in modern parlance—as the preferred course of action. While the party elite understood the necessity of initiating a military intervention to save Damascus, the logic of that choice eluded the greater constituency. However, detailing the virtues of intervention while simultaneously disparaging alternative solutions has gone a long way to convince the Shia community of the correctness of its choice.

Hezbollah was quick to refute approaches to the neighboring conflict they deemed ineffective or improper. Two months after the first signs of a popular mass movement, Hassan Nasrallah urged all Lebanese factions to leave Syria to the Syrians.<sup>115</sup> The language used in a speech held two years later to the date illustrates the thorough reshaping Hezbollah's evaluation of local circumstances had undergone. In the same speech that revealed the party's active presence in Syria, Nasrallah calls for realism:

Let us not hide our finger and bury our heads in the sand; let us not deal with what is taking place in Syria as if we were living in Djibouti. No, we are here at the border. God willing, *we possess the courage to speak and to act.* [...] Syria is the backbone of the resistance. It is the support of the resistance, and the resistance cannot stand with its arms crossed while its backbone is being broken. We would obviously be very stupid if we did that. A stupid person is he who watches death, confinement, and conspiracy approach without taking any steps.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah, (27:40 - May 24, 2015).

<sup>115</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (May 25, 2011). The Secretary-General cautioned that, "We as Lebanese should not interfere with what is going on in Syria, but rather let the Syrians themselves address their issues, as they are able to do that."

<sup>116</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (37:45 - May 25, 2013).

Nasrallah rules out the option of remaining passive and mocks the naiveté of believing that the resistance project can escape unscathed from what is happening just across the border.

As discussed above, Lebanese society as a whole largely supplanted the resistance as victim in Hezbollah's narrative as the extremist presence in Syria grew more pronounced. A speech held in August 2014 in the aftermath of the fall of Mosul illustrates how that change facilitated the promotion of hawkishness:

What do logic, the mind, religion, sharī'a, and human experience say? All of these say: When an entity, a state, or a society is before an *existential danger*, the absolute priority would be to make reorganizations of that entity or society in a way that meets this existential danger. Whoever does not act like this would not be acting according to the mind, religion, morality, and humanity. He would be exposing his family and people to *the danger of annihilation*.<sup>117</sup>

Nasrallah labels passive bystanders as being "stupid" in 2013; those who remain on the sidelines according to his 2014 speech, however, are not "acting according to [...] morality". Equating passivity with immorality recurs in other speeches, as well as among lower-ranking members of the party. Nabil Qaouk, the Vice-President of Hezbollah's executive council, described Hezbollah's mission in Syria as a "humanitarian, ethical duty".<sup>118</sup>

The shift in the rhetoric used to construct the necessity of 'hawks' supports the notion that Hezbollah has grown more confident in selling its war in Syria as the threat from extremists have grown. Enumerating the follies of remaining passive has the dual effect of discrediting those who wish to remain on the sidelines while implying that Hezbollah, who by now is deeply engaged across the border, made the right choice.

If Hezbollah's role is that of a war hawk, someone else needs to assume the part of peace dove. Nasrallah's denunciation of passivity is a response to competing Syria-approaches in Lebanese public discourse. In February 2015, the Secretary-General used a metaphor to mock the anti-interventionists:

When a snowstorm approaches, you cannot stand in its way and tell it: Cool down. We are Lebanese. We want to stay isolated from storms, snow, and rain.

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<sup>117</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (1:08:40 - August 15, 2014).

<sup>118</sup> "qāwūq: lan nasmaḥ li-dā'ish 'aw li-ghayriha 'istibāḥa lubnān 'aw ja'alahu maqarran wa-mamarran laha," National News Agency, November 8, 2015. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/189349/>. Accessed April 29, 2016.

We have our own snow, our own rain, our own climate. [...] Is such logic realistic, or right?<sup>119</sup>

The logic presented in this statement is meant to mirror that of the current Lebanese government, established in February 2014 with participation from all major political factions. Hezbollah's intervention in Syria counters the official policy of the Lebanese state formulated in the June 2012 Baabda Declaration. In it, the signees—among them Hezbollah MP Mohammad Raad—commit not to use Lebanon as “a base, corridor or starting point to smuggle weapons and combatants” to neighboring Syria.<sup>120</sup> This declaration forms the basis of what has effectively become the Lebanese parliament's policy of *disassociation* (*siyāsāt al-na'ī bil-nafs*). Despite Hezbollah's patent violation of the agreement, the parliament remains committed to its basis—as confirmed by Prime Minister Tammam Salam in November 2015.<sup>121</sup>

In a sign of inconsistency, Hezbollah scoffs at the Lebanese parliament's policy of disassociation, but similarly disapproves of foreign actors' active military involvement in the conflict. The party portrays the internationalization of the Syrian civil war as something detrimental to the resistance, notwithstanding air strikes against common enemies. The U.S.-led coalition, which started to launch air raids against ISIL and likeminded groups in August 2014, comes across as ineffective in the rhetoric of the Lebanese militia. While arguably essential to the Kurdish reclamation of the Mosul Dam, the American intervention failed to stem ISIL's surge in West Iraq. Referring to the fall of Ramadi—capital of Anbar province—in June 2015, Hassan Nasrallah concludes that, “those who wait for America do not reach anywhere.”<sup>122</sup> By “those”, the party chief alludes to the March 14-coalition in Lebanon, close allies of the U.S. and its regional allies (besides Israel) and vociferous opponent of Hezbollah's interference in Syria. In other words, those who entrust foreigners to stabilize Syria are waiting in vain. The motive behind Hezbollah's simultaneous disparagement of the Lebanese government's lack of initiative and the international community's show of initiative is related to the party worldview. Western interference in the Middle East is never welcome—even when directed against a shared enemy.

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<sup>119</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (33:00- February 16, 2015).

<sup>120</sup> Article 13 in the Baabda Declaration issued by the National Dialogue Committee on June 11, 2012.

<sup>121</sup> “salām: multazimūna bi-siyāsāt an-na'ī bil-nafs tujāh sūriyā wa-l-ḥall as-siyāsiyyah,” El Nashra, November 11, 2015. <http://www.elnashra.com/news/show/932101/salam-comitted-to-disassociation>. Accessed April 27, 2016.

<sup>122</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (44:10 - May 24, 2015).

Congruent with the Manichean worldview, Hezbollah urges its audience not to remain on the sidelines. Pointing to the moral battle occurring on the other side of the border, the sayyid claims that:

It is not allowed to wait for anyone. We must take the initiative. *We must assume the responsibility.* Thus, I have something to say. You will find what I will say strange. It is, in fact, the conclusion we draw from this look over the situation of the region. To those who call on us to withdraw from Syria, I, in turn, call on you to join us in going to Syria.<sup>123</sup>

By calling on all to join the fight in Syria, Hezbollah breaks off completely with its 2011-stance of non-interference. Fighting in Syria has become a moral responsibility to not just Hezbollah, but all who are concerned with the outcome of the Syrian civil war. Instead of waiting for outside help, Nasrallah proclaims that “[...] the sound and correct choice for the Iraqis, the Syrians, the Lebanese, the Yemenis, and all the peoples of the region is to rely on themselves.”<sup>124</sup>

Hezbollah has sought to convince the audience of the fruitfulness of intervention. The main expression of the usefulness of taking action comes in achievements for the organization. Concretely, the party not only points to the results of its military campaigns but also prods the audience to imagine the possible consequences if Hezbollah were to not take ameliorative actions. Accordingly, Nasrallah when lauding his party’s military success in Syria during the Muharram observances of 2014 conjectured that,

Syria was awaiting massacres similar to those perpetrated by Daesh in al-Raqqa, Dayr al-Zūr, Mosul, and what they did today in Anbar. However we are in the fourth year of the Syrian conflict, and still the takfiri have not yet been able to seize control over Syria. Many Syrians remain safe in their villages, lands, towns, and cities without coming under this control.<sup>125</sup>

In other words, Hezbollah’s intervention across the border prevented “Syria, Iraq, and the region [from falling] in the hands of these butchers [...]” Member of parliament and ally of the Loyalty to the Resistance bloc Nawaf al-Moussawi reinforces this view in an interview with Al Akhbar, suggesting that Lebanon did not see “crimes such as those which happened

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<sup>123</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (07:40 - February 16, 2015).

<sup>124</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (45:10 - May 24, 2015).

<sup>125</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (23:10 - November 4, 2014).

in Iraq because Hezbollah was in Syria. [...] We are defending all of you when we offer up these martyrs.”<sup>126</sup> The organizational efficacy of intervening in Syria is framed mostly in terms of the disasters that have failed to materialize, as opposed to the successes the party has achieved on the battlefield. Attributing the absence of massacres in Lebanon to Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria is an easy claim to make, as it is impossible to disprove the statement.

However, the party can also point to concrete and credible military victories that back up the group’s successes on the Syrian battlefield. The fall of al-Qusayr, for instance, mitigated the concerns the constituency reserved for Hezbollah’s strategic choice to enter Syria. Additionally, the Qalamoun offensive, which lasted for a month and a half during the summer of 2015, represents a clear victory with tangible results for the security of the Lebanese Shia community. The party had frequently referred to the mountainous border region of Qalamoun as a hotbed of terrorism. Car bombs that killed dozens in the Dahieh were allegedly assembled in factories on the barren mountains. By seizing the Qalamoun Hills, Hezbollah proved its ability to collaborate with the Syrian regime to protect Lebanese interests across the border, be they diaspora communities or the destruction of bombs factories. The party touted the campaign as an achievement due in large part to the party and the Syrian regime’s prowess in battle.<sup>127</sup> The rhetorical strategy of linking the Party of God’s battlefield successes—whether actual or counterfactual—to the security of Lebanon strengthens the efficacy of hawkish foreign policy.

Hence, Hezbollah frames the fight against the takfiri threat as effective, at least in organizational terms. However, the party is aware that not all adherents are able to join the group in fighting across the border. The discursive language needs to afford each individual some measure of agency. Convincing the audience is as much an ideological campaign as it is a recruitment campaign. Persuasive rhetoric does not only seek to bolster the military ranks of the party, but also to silence dissension, shore up tacit support, and enforce a hegemonic narrative. Essentially, Hezbollah attempts to imprint its message on the audience to such an extent that they, too, become war hawks. Individual agency takes the form of day-to-day communication, as illustrated by an audience that Nasrallah held with fighters wounded in battle:

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<sup>126</sup> "qitār qānūn “al-sitīn” yanṭaliq," Al Akhbar, July 8, 2014. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/210138>. Accessed November 30, 2015.

<sup>127</sup> See speech of Hassan Nasrallah (May 16, 2015).

Now is the time for mobilization. All are able to participate, albeit with their tongue. All who have credibility with the people: contribute to this mobilization. It is necessary for the wise to speak, and for the one whose son is a martyr to speak. Even you wounded brothers have tongues, so speak. And you who are held captive, speak as well. [...] In the next phase we might announce general mobilization for all people.”<sup>128</sup>

Nasrallah’s words suggest that everyone is able to participate in the mobilizing effort. Those with credibility and wisdom should seek to convince other people of the righteousness of Hezbollah’s cause.

### **4.3 Fear and Loathing in South Beirut**

Scholars argue that when selling interventionism, political elites construct a discourse on foreign policy that is conceivable, communicable and coercive; conceivable in that it plays on preconceived notions about the ‘other’ and the ‘self’, communicable in that it uses language, symbols, and references that appeal to a particular audience, and coercive in that it seeks to silence alternative stances or render them politically unviable. By concomitantly offering a motive for intervention and rebutting alternatives, elites deny others access to the discursive space and material needed to sustain alternative approaches.<sup>129</sup> The analysis of Hezbollah’s rhetoric supports this argument. By drawing on the rich history of the resistance project, the party constructs a view of the Syrian conflict that resonates with its constituency. In effect, Hezbollah has transplanted the ‘geographies of the unconscious’, to borrow Holland’s term, which has evolved through twenty years of resistance, onto the current confrontation. The ideological continuation this step affords reshapes of the Syrian civil war into something reminiscent of a Seventh Arab-Israeli War. Furthermore, by denigrating “disassociation” and Western intervention, the party portrays its policy of preemptive action as the only morally and logically sound choice.

The Party of God thrives in times of external confrontation. Just as the July War in 2006 (sometimes known as the Sixth Arab-Israeli War) enabled a stagnating Hezbollah, as one

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<sup>128</sup> "naṣr allāh: lan nasakat wa lan nudārī... 'innaha ma' raka wajūdīya," Al Safir, May 23, 2015. <http://assafir.com/Article/421291/MostRead>. Accessed November 30, 2015.

<sup>129</sup> Holland, Jack and Mike Aaronson, "Dominance through Coercion: Strategic Rhetorical Balancing and the Tactics of Justification in Afghanistan and Libya," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 8:1 (2014): 1-20, 4.



scholar puts it, to “reinvigorate and revive its resistance program”,<sup>130</sup> so did the sudden and serious appearance of takfiri groups in Syria serve to reinforce the relevance of *al-muqāwama*. While the Shia of Lebanon initially questioned their patron’s backing of the corrupt Assad-regime, they now see the party’s intervention in Syria as essential to community interests.<sup>131</sup> Party discourse has sustained this shift. Excerpts from high-ranking members—primary of which Hassan Nasrallah—illustrates that three themes in particular have emerged: a Manichaean worldview that pits the forces of ‘good’ against ‘evil’; a portrayal of supreme emergency exemplified by an enemy whose ruthlessness lack historical precedent; and the proposal of interventionism as the only viable solution to counter the threat. These themes resonate with the constituency due to among other things their ideological coherency, their use of historical analogies, and incorporation of well-known cultural references.

However, the primary reason for the resonance of these themes is that they are channeled increasingly and more frequently through an enduring narrative of fear. Warnings of cultural extinction at the hands of an incredibly dangerous and powerful enemy enhance the message’s saliency. Fear is a time-tested political tool in mass-mobilization. But political fear is also, as discussed above, more than a rhetorical instrument. Critical discourse analysis tells us that discourse operates in a dialectical relationship with the audience. While discourse cannot be formulated without consideration of the local context, it also transforms social practices in ways that are beyond conviction and adherence to a shared worldview. Following this assumption, we should expect the use of fear in rhetoric to have a transformative impact on the audience’s behavior. This impact is the topic of discussion in the following chapter.

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<sup>130</sup> Leenders, Reinoud, “How the Rebel Regained His Cause: Hizbullah & the Sixth Arab-Israeli War,” *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, Summer (2006): 38-57, 44.

<sup>131</sup> Shanahan, Rodger, “Hezbollah’s New Ground,” *Post-War Watch*, March 1, 2015. <http://postwarwatch.com/2015/03/01/hezbollahs-new-ground/>. Accessed April 27, 2016.

## 5 Establishing a Culture of Fear

Hezbollah's rhetoric concerning the Syrian civil war promotes a culture of fear in the Lebanese Shia community. This fear manifests itself through a refocusing of attention. Intensive promotion by fear mongers on the threat from takfiri groups leads to distortion of, or insufficient attention to, related issues. Indicative of this is that the Lebanese Shia community is increasingly viewing the takfiri threat as the major challenge facing the community, while other societal ills—such as political instability and sectarian polarization—and the battle against Israel recede to the background.<sup>132</sup> Saying that the Shia community in Lebanon is living in a culture of fear does not imply that terror is on the mind of every member of that community at all times. It means that the takfiri threat dominates the political agenda, crowding out concerns over whether Hezbollah's intervention in Syria serves the interests of the Lebanese Shia community.

Agenda setting are is an important aspect of fear culture. This paper, however, focuses on the two repercussions of political fear that carry the most significance to Lebanese society. First, the hegemonic discourse of fear silences dissenters. The threat narrative reinforces a mentality that simultaneously instills cohesiveness and support, and suppress criticism and detractions. The urge to “flock together” in times of crisis makes the community not only more tolerant of crackdown on dissidence, but also turns the community into an agent of censure in its own right. Second, the outside threat—the source of the fear—strengthens collective identity. The perception of a threatening ‘other’ strengthens the imagination of a collective ‘self’. This dynamic is important: a stronger sense of identity in confessional Lebanon translates into sectarian polarization.

The French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville said that “a simple but false idea will always have greater weight in the world than a true but complex idea”. For the Lebanese Shia community—embroiled in a war that is at once a part of the Arab Spring, the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the sectarian rift between Sunni and Shia, and the tug-of-war between Russia and the West—Hezbollah's simple, binary narrative outweighs the objective truth. Politician and activist Ibrahim Shamseddine, referring to the bewilderment of the Shia community, sums up the collective confusion by saying that, “You cannot think about it, you

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<sup>132</sup> Hayya Bina, “Fifteen Questions for the Lebanese Shia Community,” 2015. <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/623>. Accessed April 27, 2016. Also, interviews with Slim, Shamseddine, Al-Amine.

are not well informed, and you do not analyze it. So you are fed with information. The information should be hot and attractive.” He indicates that ordinary people are either unwilling or unable to form their own judgment on the matter and defer to the authority of figures such as Hassan Nasrallah, who offers a narrative of threat and fear that is coherent, culturally resonant, and straightforward.

Besides the psychological expediency of appealing to audience fears, other factors aid Hezbollah with instilling its narrative in the community. Hezbollah’s control of infrastructure in Shiite-populated areas, for example, allows the party to filter away conflicting perspectives. Political activist Malek Mrowa explains, “[...] the media, for example. In the Shia areas—the South, Baalbek—they own the monopoly of cables, TV, what you watch. They don’t see Jazeera, Future, MTV etc. They only see the Hezbollah Al Manar and Al Jadid. Only the ones that will give them their picture.” By keeping control over the public’s access to televised news, the party ensures that the television audience receives a one-sided message. Lending credibility to that message is its coherency. As Khalil al-Khalil—a political personality with strong ties in the South—notes, Hezbollah’s narrative is not a one-man show:

[Hezbollah] pays a lots of money for the propaganda and the surrounding atmosphere that they create. And then, Hezbollah has eight or nine or ten members of parliament. Their job daily is to go up on the stand and make speeches to the public about things like this. Repetition, repetition—people start to believe.

As the previous chapter illustrated, Hezbollah MPs such as Mohammad Raad and Nawaf al-Moussawi use the same rhetoric as Hassan Nasrallah when discussing the Syrian issue. They form part of a cadre of high-ranking party members whose public profiles give them plenty of airtime.

### **5.1 Authentic or Fabricated Fear?**

There is no foolproof way to demonstrate that the Shia community’s reaction to the takfiri threat goes beyond objective necessity. The line between excessive emotion and reasonable realism is hard to define. Likewise, it is challenging to determine whether these reactions are signs of consequential or manufactured fears. Historian Peter Stearns suggests that there are, in principal, two ways to ascertain whether a given culture of fear is abnormal. First, one could do a cross-case comparison that uses separate cases that witnessed similar

developments. The chief problem with this method is that the multitude of variables that make up the differences between one case and the next will diminish the significance of any findings. The second measurement then, which is historical comparison, affords the analysis some coherency as the actors and the environment remains the same<sup>133</sup>. The objective of the historical approach is to discover any temporal variation in fear culture with certain points of reference as indicators. As explained above, this paper employs concepts such as censorship, collective identity, and sectarian polarization in that function.

There are, however, other indications that there has been a shift in the Lebanese Shia community as regards its perception of threat. Polls conducted in Lebanon during the summer of 2015 indicate that about 57 per cent of Lebanese Shia considers "the takfiri threat" the most important issue facing the community today, with renewed conflict with Israel trailing behind on second place at 26.5 per cent.<sup>134</sup> Considering that the "takfiri threat"-component of Hezbollah's rhetoric is relatively new—becoming a recurring theme in Nasrallah's speeches only in 2013—Sunni extremism has enjoyed a meteoric rise on the list of Shia concerns.

Another point of ambiguity concerns real versus manufactured threats. Are the Shiites, in other words, correctly judging that the takfiri—which, in most cases, refers to the likes of ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra—pose the biggest threat to the community? The spates of bombings that have rocketed Lebanon since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war serve to reinforce this perception. Sunni Muslim perpetrators attacking areas of heavy Shia concentration augments the experiential observation, supporting the narrative that demonical takfiri seek the eradication of heretical Shiites at all costs. Moreover, it supports the notion that backing Hezbollah's fight in Syria correlates positively with safety in Lebanon.

Several points can be made showing how that assessment might be erroneous. Bombing plots against Beirut and Tripoli are probably not—as Hezbollah tries to suggest—concocted by foreign jihadis in Aleppo and Homs. In fact, the twin bombings that struck southern Beirut in November 2015 constitute ISIL's first major operation on Lebanese soil. Previous incidents with a large death toll, such as the 2013 Iranian embassy bombing or the August 2013 Roueiss bombing, have all been claimed by homegrown Lebanese groups that share no affiliation besides the ideological with the Islamic State.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Stearns, Peter N., "Fear and History," *Historiein*, 8 (2008): 17-28, 19-20.

<sup>134</sup> Hayya Bina (2015). "Fifteen Questions for the Lebanese Shia Community."

<sup>135</sup> They were claimed by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades and the Brigades of Aisha, respectively.

The same logic applies across the border. While ISIL—under its Arabic acronym Daesh—bears the brunt of Hezbollah’s denunciation, the two rarely meet on the field of battle. This asymmetry is not lost on critical observers. According to Hanin Ghaddar, “[...] there is not a single place in Syria where Hezbollah and ISIL have fought,” affirming the suspicion held by many that “[...] it’s mostly against the Free Syrian Army.” Even in altercations on Lebanese soil wherein ISIL’s participation has been confirmed, it has been the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) with support from the Internal Security Forces (ISF)—and not the Islamic Resistance—that has clashed with them.<sup>136</sup> ISIL—as opposed to the Free Syrian Army (FSA)—is an enemy against which all Lebanese can form a united front. Yet, for various geographical and political factors, it is towards the FSA that the Lebanese militia and the Syrian regime have focused their efforts.

Hezbollah’s framing of the conflict works in that it ingrains in the audience the belief that the majority of clashes are with extremists. Ghaddar hints at the hegemony of Hezbollah’s frame, noting that, “[...] the community does not know that they are not fighting ISIL, because all of the literature is saying that they are fighting ISIL. So, they believe in that.” Though there have been incidents that have been "linked to ISIL", it is unclear exactly how strong this link is, or whether such a link is any proof that orders to terrorize Beirut originates in Raqqa. More likely, a link to ISIL probably indicates ideological inspiration or identification with ISIL. Hezbollah certainly wants to reinforce the perception that terror in South Beirut originates in Shiite-hating cells in Syria—and not in disillusioned Lebanese Sunni neighborhoods. Moreover, Hezbollah has also tried to connect bombings outside of Lebanon to their adversaries in Syria, implying that supporting the Party of God across the border means safety for Arab and European cities.<sup>137</sup> A Hezbollah sympathizer interviewed by the ICG is exemplary of the attitude that the party wants to instill in its audience, saying that, “[...] opposition armed groups in Syria are terrorists and should be eradicated. These attacks [in Beirut] will only boost our determination and conviction that Hizbollah had to fight them before they became a greater and more dangerous threat”.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Itani, Fidaa, "Jihadists 8 – Lebanon 6," NOW Media, January 26, 2015.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/564728-jihadists-8---lebanon-6>. Accessed January 15, 2016.

<sup>137</sup> “ḥizb allāh yastankir tafjūr ’iṣṭanbūl al-’intiḥārī: muḥāribat al-irḥāb la yakūn ‘abr ’idānah man yuḥāribuh fi sūriyā,” Naharnet, January 12, 2016. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/ar/199220-hezbollah-syria-terrorism-istanbul.html>. Accessed January 12, 2016.

<sup>138</sup> International Crisis Group, "Lebanon’s Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria," 12.

There are other ways besides opinion polls and media analysis to measure whether a given culture of fear is authentic or not. Key informants—individuals with intimate and particular knowledge of a given subject (see methods-section)—are well disposed to judge whether a culture of fear is emergent or well established. Not only are they aware of temporal changes, but several—particularly those not affiliated with a political current—are by virtue of proximity able to judge whether the fear is authentic, meaning that it is in response to real and not perceived, threats.

All informants that I spoke to have been long time members and observers of the Lebanese Shia community, and several have regular interactions with diverse groups of run-of-the-mill Shiites. Many spoke about a culture of fear in contemporary Shia Lebanon. When describing Hezbollah’s fear mongering, journalist and civil society activist Ali al-Amine use the term “industry of fear” (*ṣinā‘at al-khawf*) to emphasize that the atmosphere of panic is contrived. He suggests that using fear as a political tool is a rhetorical shortcut:

There is some kind of exaggeration in this industry of fear. You use this method when your political view is unconvincing. You borrow then the idea of making people more fanatic to protect your project, and to justify your project. [...] It is an exaggeration of the danger that people are living with. This fear has been manufactured; most of it is not true.

Al-Amine sums up by stating that, “all of these fears are manufactured to justify a project that neither the Shia nor the Lebanese have any interest in.” His contention touches on one of the key objectives of the politics of fear—justifying collective action to which the constituency might otherwise not have agreed. The end goal of political fear is to teach the audience the worth of specific political values.<sup>139</sup> In this case, that value is preemptive military action.

Khalil al-Khalil does not believe that the takfiri poses a threat to the Shia community commensurate with the fear it generates. Yet, not everyone is able to judge the threat correctly. Al-Khalil thinks that there is an intellectual divide in the community, saying, “Do I believe that Daesh would come and slaughter the Shia? For me, this possibility may exist ten to fifteen percent. But in the minds of the Shia community, maybe sixty to eighty percent believe that this is possible.” He makes an important point as regards fear culture. While

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<sup>139</sup> Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, 4.

political fear bases itself on misinformation, one cannot fabricate a threat entirely. Creating a culture of fear entails amplifying an existing threat beyond any statistical justification.

## 5.2 Disciplining Dissent

As the culture of fear grows stronger in a given community, so does the urge to form a unified and coherent front. The community comes to view its ability to combat threat as directly linked to its internal cohesiveness. This need to conform leads to what Jackson argues is one of the primary ideological purposes of constructing a culture of fear—disciplining domestic sources of criticism.<sup>140</sup> Analysts have already observed a link between feelings of existential threat in the Lebanese Shia community and strategies of social control, the primary of which is the silencing of dissenting voices.<sup>141</sup> Some see this reaction as a natural response to the Party of God's feelings of vulnerability. ICG points to the Hezbollah-government clashes of 2008 that among other things led to the expulsion of the then-mufti of Tyr, Ali Al-Amine, as an example of the party's proclivity towards suppressive behavior under times of stress.<sup>142</sup> Criticism from the moderate Shiite cleric elicited violent reaction due to atmosphere of emergency that prevailed.

The disciplining of domestic sources of criticism, however, is not always as overt as acts of violence. One of the effects of the politics of fear, as Altheide observes in his book, is to, "[stifle] dissent as being unresponsive to citizen needs or even unpatriotic." Altheide illustrates how following the 9/11-terrorist attacks the unanimity of the American political and media response urged potential critics to toe the line.<sup>143</sup> Formal and informal pressure radiated from not only the political establishment, but also civil society and media. In the fight against terrorism, dissent came to represent, if not views that were un-American, then at least something just as dangerous. Hence, during times of emergency, dissent is unwelcome as it weakens the cohesiveness of the community and consequently its wherewithal to combat the threat. Moreover, if the rhetoric encourages it, dissent could come to represent an even more egregious sin to the public—particularly in conflicts that advocate narratives of 'good' and 'evil'. Because of the Manichean worldview that Hezbollah promotes, those who choose to

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<sup>140</sup> Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*, 180-185.

<sup>141</sup> Bahout, Joseph, "Sectarianism in Lebanon and Syria: The Dynamics of Mutual Spill-Over," United States Institute of Peace, Peacebrief 159, November 15, 2013. <http://ciao-dev.cdrs.columbia.edu/catalog/29740>. Accessed April 27, 2016.

<sup>142</sup> International Crisis Group, "Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria," 19-20,

<sup>143</sup> Altheide, David L., *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear*, (Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2006), 105-106.

question the party's intervention in Syria risk appearing as opponents of the axis of resistance and—due to the sometimes indistinguishable difference between the two—as an enemy to the welfare of the Lebanese Shia community.

The following part of this thesis will discuss the channels through which the culture of fear in today's Lebanese Shia community disciplines domestic criticism. As shown below, the dialectical relationship between fear and silence is multifaceted, ranging from voluntary compliance to violent sanctions. Common to all the facets is the perception of real or perceived consequences associated with deviating from socially accepted behavior.

### **5.2.1 Self-Censorship**

Self-censorship occurs when individuals choose to withhold non-conforming opinions even when not compelled to do so by any entity, whether political or social. Inherent in the idea of self-censorship is that the perceived threat of sanctions—regardless of who levies them—may deter dissent almost as potently as the actual application of sanctions. Hence, in a culture dominated by fear, self-censorship is a survival strategy. Speaking in opposition to a reigning power or widely accepted cultural norms usually has some form of consequence. The nature of the backlash ranges from social pressure— isolation, shunning, and avoidance—to the more immediate such as bodily threats and vandalism. If the potential repercussions of speaking out seem credible and severe enough, people may choose to remain silent. In this instance, ordinary citizens and not the community or the authorities (Hezbollah in this case) act as the primary agents of censure.<sup>144</sup>

The Lebanese Shia community is showing signs indicative of self-censorship. Several of my respondents could relate of occasions in which they refrained from voicing criticism against Hezbollah as that would inevitable result in a counter-reaction against them. Malek Mrowa gives an example that supports this observation. He coordinates a non-governmental organization called the Lebanese Civil Coalition (LCC). The LCC formed in 2011 as a protest to the increased sectarianism of Lebanese politics. Officially, it maintains no sectarian affiliation and advocates a broad civil movement. Several of my interviewees who had interacted with or participated in the LCC, however, alleged that the group did in fact represent a discrete Shiite political voice. The fact that the vast majority of those who have signed LCC declarations are of Shiite origin supports this claim.

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<sup>144</sup> Jackson, "The Politics of Threat and Danger," 15.



The LCC emerged as a vociferous critic of Hezbollah's stance vis-à-vis Syria, issuing several appeals that called for non-interference. However, Mrowa explains that the coalition stopped publishing communiqués in late 2014 because the activists grew wary of potential repercussions. According to Mrowa, members in general were

[...] feeling that Hezbollah is tolerating us as individuals, but if we still come under the LCC so publicly, we will be vulnerable, they will target us. [...] We are not very public because the members feel that there is a pressure. And it is in the mind of the people. [...] The members that are involved, that live in the Shia community, feel this. So we stopped the communiqués.

Mrowa sees this as a survival tactic, noting that, “we are self-censoring in that we are self-preserving.” The particulars of the pressure felt by the members of the coalition remains unclear, but it was apparently strong enough to discipline non-conforming individuals to modify their behavior and to resort to self-censorship in the service of continuing their activism, albeit with lesser efficacy.

Journalist Al-Amine—himself affiliated with the LCC—also believes that the culture of fear is leading people to modify their behavior, particularly those who live in close connection to the Lebanese Shia community. Al-Amine counts himself among that group, but he thinks that

No one else is doing the same thing because of the fear factor, and the pressure maybe—some people might not be able to handle it. There is a big group that might have a different point of view [from Hezbollah], but their ability to express themselves is not easy. I am talking specifically about the Shiites who are opposing Hezbollah.

Al-Amine too feels that the pressure to conform is intangible, but that it originates from the community. He indicates that those who live in close proximity to the Shia community—the South and the Dahieh, for instance—feels more acutely the pressure to conform to social norms. This observation seems logical, as those who have daily interactions with ordinary community members will be more apprehensive towards conveying antisocial behavior, as that would alienate people within their social circles. A Shiite intellectual speaking with L'Orient-Le Jour described this dynamic as being particularly evident in tight-knit villages

and communities, where would-be critics keep silent for fear of being ostracized or marginalized.<sup>145</sup>

Though the LCC felt enough pressure to cease their public criticism of Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, other public figures have had an inverse experience. Lebanese journalist Mustafa Fahs thinks that the room for criticism has widened, saying that, "After the Syrian conflict, all the taboos have been lifted." According to him, there has been a change within the party following Syria:

Before they were better at managing things. They did not do as much wrong. The magnitude of their [recent] mistakes have allowed us to criticize them. [...] There is this Egyptian saying: "If you walk straight ahead, your enemies will be unable to harm you." Well, they are not walking straight now.

Fahs contention that the perceived room for criticism is wider since Hezbollah's intervention in Syria may be special to him. While of Shia origin—he is the son of recently deceased anti-Hezbollah cleric Sayyid Hani Fahs—he does not travel in circles where Shiite identity prevails. His journalistic work falls more in the camp of the Future Current than it does its domestic adversary, the March 8-alliance. By keeping a distance from the Shia community he probably feels less compulsion to conform, and subsequently freer to criticize the community protector.

Self-censorship is merely one expression of behavioral modification brought on by the urge not to alienate segments of one's community. The climate of fear in Lebanon's Shia community has also given birth to other ways of self-policing aimed at not antagonizing Hezbollah. Ibrahim Shamseddine, who is chairman of the Association for Charity and Culture, gives an example. He agrees that there is a degree of self-censorship in the community, but not the censorship where "you don't say anything about the other side." Rather, he explains, his organization takes care not to appear as a potential threat:

We are not clandestine people. We don't operate under cover. We are very transparent. And I've made sure during the last ten or eleven years [that] everything is transparent. I make sure not to hide anything—this is one of the

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<sup>145</sup> Khoder, Patricia, "Pour les opposants chiites, les pertes du Hezbollah en Syrie ne provoqueront pas un soulèvement contre le parti," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, June 5, 2015. <http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/928260/pour-les-opposants-chiites-les-pertes-du-hezbollah-en-syrie-ne-provoqueront-pas-un-soulevement-contre-le-parti.html>. Accessed April 29, 2016.

strong points, to put it this way. If you don't want to antagonize or irritate somebody, just always let yourself be seen.

Shamseddine's tactic highlights another facet of self-censorship: intentional transparency. While not an expression of censorship in an overt way, it is still a form of behavioral modification originating in the desire to avoid potential sanctions.

### **5.2.2 Social Pressure**

The consequences of not falling into line in a culture of fear are seldom fatal in democratic societies—or semi-democratic ones like Lebanon for that matter. However, when the community mood values the importance of unity and coherence in the face of external threat, detractors might face punishment from civil society. With a perceived external threat, the importance of internal unity takes on a higher dimension. Ibrahim Shamseddine observes this development, saying that there is a feeling that

[...] All Shiite should be unified now. We should have the same enemy, or we have the same enemy. Okay, you are right Mister Shamseddine, but the enemy is making benefit of your position and your speech. This is not the time; the time is not too democratic.

He is supported by Malek Mrowa who explains that there are indications of dissidence in the community, but that there is a feeling of “being like a flock of sheep—we're scared, we have to mass together.” The feeling of emergency has concrete repercussions on dissent. Several of my interview subjects told that not falling in to rank resulted in social pressure manifested through counter-criticism and vague threats. In some cases social pressure gave way to social exclusion and isolation.

Social pressure emanates from the collective as whole rather than discrete actors. Accordingly, the pressure does not link to Hezbollah directly, but as an agent with significant influence in the Lebanese Shia community, the party ultimately decides what is acceptable behavior and what it is not. Those applying the pressure belong to the community. They are sympathizers of Hezbollah, the Resistance project, or proud Shiites. They may also have interests connected to the party that they feel are jeopardized by critical individuals. Mrowa points to extended family as micro-level venue through which they experience backlash from the community:

There is tremendous pressure. [...] They send somebody from your family—this is how they work with us—somebody from within our families. You know how it is—extended families, al-Amines etc. The cousins will come and say, ‘we like you, but I think we cannot protect you, [...] you better calm down.’

Several of those counted among the independent Shia come from large extended families that have deep roots in the Lebanese Shia community. The family name carries with it first and foremost protection, but also prestige and authority. It is probably not coincidental that several of today’s prominent non-partisan Shia—Ali Al-Amine, Mustafa Fahs, Ibrahim Shamseddine—are sons of “moderate” and well-respected clerics. Considering the weakness of the Lebanese state, extended family takes the role of protector—particularly in the South and in the Bekaa. Threatening dissidents with the loss of support from the extended family is one way to ensure that would-be critics think twice before launching any new initiatives.<sup>146</sup>

Social pressure makes non-compliance costly enough to be undesirable. In some cases, the community takes harsher measures to police dissenters. Some of my respondents suggested that taking the wrong side could lead to isolation and public shaming. Mrowa offers a concrete example of this tactic, saying that, “If somebody is with us on a social level and he owns a supermarket or a little store, suddenly nobody buys from him anymore. Because of their network. They will come and be nice and everything, but suddenly, nobody buys from you“. Boycotting is an effective way of communicating protest against unacceptable behavior. Additionally, it is a tactic that is particularly useful in tight knit communities like that of Shia Lebanon, where non-partisan consumers are few and far between.

Others could relate of isolation from a personal perspective. Ibrahim Shamseddine—son of Mohammad Mehdi Shamseddine, Musa al-Sadr's successor to the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council—considers himself a “sheikh without a turban”. His charity organization works extensively with the Shia community, and takes on a particular active role during the holy month of Muharram. However, despite his lineage and social entrepreneurship, Shamseddine believes that he is being isolated from funeral speeches—a ceremony that usually takes place on the seventh day of Muharram and on which it is customary for local authority figures to speak in remembrance of the deceased—because of his failure to align. He thinks that his controversial figure makes him an unwelcome liability, saying that he is not invited “[...]”

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<sup>146</sup> Abdallah, Myra, "The Challenge of anti-Hezbollah Shiites," NOW Media, March 3, 2016. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/566691-the-challenges-of-anti-hezbollah-shiites>. Accessed April 29, 2016. Ghaddar, too, points to family as a source of pressure.

even if I'm friends with the deceased person's family. They get a bit embarrassed. They prefer not to receive heat or pressure." Instead, the families tend to invite members of Hezbollah or Amal to hold the eulogies. Undoubtedly, these occasions serve as arenas where the speaker—besides praising the dead—has the opportunity to confess moral, political, or even religious opinions. A family that allowed a non-affiliated, if not opposing, speaker to take the stage as such a symbolic occasion could face harsh sanctions. For instance, the party employs large swathes of the community and could use employment as leverage. Moreover, in Lebanon's dysfunctional political system, Hezbollah and Amal act as gatekeepers and offer alternatives to state services, and consequently holds significant advantage over the welfare of ordinary Shiites.

Social pressure is not violent. Nonetheless, the sanctions for non-conforming individuals have the potential to get visceral, as illustrated by the public smear campaigns social actors sympathetic to the party have directed against several independent Shiites over the last few years. Hanin Ghaddar counts among that group. She has a long history as a vociferous critic of Hezbollah, Iran, and the Syrian regime. Writing for the English-media website NOW Lebanon, she has repeatedly denounced Hezbollah's intervention in Syria. During the spring of 2014, she found herself on the receiving end of a public smear campaign. Following an appearance at a conference in Washington where she discussed Hezbollah and Syria, media sympathetic to the party published several articles that criticized her participation.<sup>147</sup> Her negative reflections on the party provoked some ire. However, media sympathetic to the party attacked her more for attending the same conference as former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. According to the conference organizers, Ghaddar and Barak were not present at the same seminars. Media outlets such as Al Akhbar and Al Manar, however, presented an interpretation that suggested the two had worked in tandem to criticize the Islamic Resistance.<sup>148</sup>

While the campaign launched against Ghaddar was vicious, it does not suggest that the community is completely intolerant of criticism of the Party of God. Speculating on the

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<sup>147</sup> "ṣaḥāfiyyah lubnāniyya tunāfis bārāk fī wāshintun," Al Akhbar, May 12, 2014. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/206213>. Accessed January 7, 2016.

<sup>148</sup> Georgiou, Michel Hajji, "Avec Hanine Ghaddar, le Hezbollah poursuit sa campagne pour museler les opposants chiïtes," L'Orient-Le Jour, May 14, 2014. <http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/867138/avec-hanine-ghaddar-le-hezbollah-poursuit-sa-campagne-pour-museler-les-opposants-chiïtes.html>. Accessed January 7, 2016.

reason for why a campaign was launched against her, Ghaddar notes, “It’s not because I went too far; I didn’t go too far.” Rather, she explains

They can’t come and say you’re not supposed to write that, or criticize me for what I write, because a lot of people are writing the same thing. But they can criticize me in front of the community for being in the same conference with Ehud Barak. [...] It was an opportunity they used, the presence of Barak, and basically for them this was something they weren’t gonna miss. So they launched a campaign.

Ghaddar agrees that while the party and its sympathizers will not muzzle individual critics for voicing their opinions, they will attempt to tarnish their reputation if the opportunity presents itself.

Ghaddar’s treatment is not unprecedented. In September 2012, Lebanese Al Akhbar newspaper published a string of articles that leveled grave accusations against notable Hezbollah-critics. The newspaper cited U.S. diplomatic cables sent from the embassy in Beirut—released among thousands of others in the Cablegate scandal—that detailed American contact with Lebanese Shia politicians, activists, journalists etc. The opening article carried the headline “The Shiites of the American embassy”. Subsequent articles focused on individuals or groups that had been in contact with the embassy.<sup>149</sup> The descriptions are not flattering. The figures that appear in the cables are denounced alternately as “clients”, “tools” or members of “Feltman’s delegation”.<sup>150</sup> According to Al Akhbar, they were tasked with tarnishing Hezbollah’s reputation, creating an alternative to the party inside the community, and to submit “reports that ranged from giving news of Hezbollah’s movements and its missiles to observing what children said in the streets of the Dahieh.”<sup>151</sup> Ibrahim al-Amine, the head of the papers board of directors, asked rhetorically in an editorial published alongside the articles, “do they not grope their necks when they leave their defiled homes every day?”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ayyoub, Sahab, "wīkīlīks: shī ‘at al-safāra: fidā ‘ijir filtmān," Al Akhbar, September 14, 2012. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/167153>. Accessed March 22, 2016.

<sup>150</sup> Jeffrey D. Feltman was the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon from 2004 to 2008. Several of the "Shiites of the embassy" met with Feltman in the U.S. embassy compound in Awkar, Beirut.

<sup>151</sup> Ayyoub, Sahab, "wīkīlīks: shī ‘at al-safāra: fidā ‘ijir filtmān," Al Akhbar, September 14, 2012. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/167153>. Accessed March 22, 2016.

<sup>152</sup> Al-Amin, Ibrahim, "lā makān baynana li-l-khawna," Al Akhbar, September 17, 2012. [www.al-akhbar.com/node/167331](http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/167331). Accessed March 22, 2016.

In October 2012, the Lebanese Civil Coalition organized a press conference at the premises of the Lebanese Journalists Union to address what they deemed a Hezbollah-led smear campaign. The conference issued a joint communiqué that condemned Al Akhbar's demagogical journalism, and charged Hezbollah as the articles' mastermind.<sup>153</sup> There is no proof, however, of Hezbollah's direct involvement. While Al Akhbar's editorial stance rarely strays from pro-resistance, it is not a Hezbollah-mouthpiece per se. It leans towards leftism, and has been known to publish articles critical of the party.<sup>154</sup> However, the average reader perceives that its orientation aligns with that of Hezbollah, and consequently concludes that the paper reflects the views and intentions of the party and the Shia community. Hence, Al Akhbar does not stifle dissent but promotes social pressure through labeling individuals as "traitors" and their actions as "treacherous". Meanwhile, the newspaper responded the day after by reporting more slander, accusing one of the press conference attendees of being in league with the Israelis.<sup>155</sup> Al Akhbar exhibited a clear lack of objectivity when it presented the information from the cables. Regardless, irreparable damage had already been done to the reputation of several public figures. The articles portrayed the subjects as traitors, and used excerpts from the diplomatic cables to support that contention. The "Shiites of the embassy"-handle resurfaces intermittently as a designation of someone who works against what is perceived as Shiite collective interest.

Not all acts of social pressure are publicly mediated. Shamseddine believes that Hezbollah, while not actively silencing him, is trying to subvert his authority: "I know they criticize me secretly. They speak against me, they work against me, they say "don't listen to him" [...]." Asked whether he thinks there is room for diverging opinions within the Lebanese Shia community, Shamseddine thinks that, "There is room for another opinion [but] the room is not really a wide one." This observation resonates with another key purpose of social pressure: it is primarily a tool aimed at enforcing conformity and not maintaining silence. Social pressure is not inherently antithetical to the free exchange of opinion in that sense.

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<sup>153</sup> Picaly, E. B., "Independent Shi'ites in Lebanon Challenge Hizbullah," Inquiry & Analysis Series Report No. 938, The Middle East Media Research Institute," 2013. <http://www.memri.org/report/-en/0/0/0/0/0/7017.htm>. Accessed April 27, 2016.

<sup>154</sup> Picali (2013) establishes a rather tenuous connection between the paper and the party. Al Akhbar has published material critical of Hezbollah in the past.

<sup>155</sup> Ayyoub, Sahab, "The "Embassy's Informants" Show Solidarity with Each Other," Al Akhbar, October 3, 2012. Translated by ShiaWatch.com, a Hayya Bina project. <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/237>. Accessed March 22, 2016. Disclaimer: One of the key informants for this thesis heads Hayya Bina. However, I did not discuss this article nor any other details related to the Wikileaks scandal with this informant.

Additionally, Hezbollah wants to be perceived as a benevolent social actor, and not a repressive militia.

Ali al-Amine echoes this observation. Speaking on the consequences of criticizing Hezbollah, he says that, “Till now, it has been bearable. It is not a new front, this critical way of working with Hezbollah. [...] They are used to us; they are used to the fact that we have an alternative voice.” Al-Amine agrees that Hezbollah and the Shia community are accepting of reasonable criticism. As the editor of the online newspaper Al Janoubia, which has taken an editorial stance in opposition to Hezbollah’s, intervention in Syria, he—along with his co-journalists, most of whom are Shiite—possess intimate knowledge of the room for dissension in contemporary Shiite Lebanon. At times, they have received signals indicating that they have crossed a line. Al-Amine could point to incidents of social pressure that he believed originated from the community and, in his opinion, the party itself:

Sometimes there are threats. For example, many people are threatening the online work through social media. They accuse us of being agents. This happens unofficially of course. It comes indirectly through the audience of Hezbollah and some of the organizations linked to Hezbollah. Hezbollah has people who are assigned exclusively to social media.

He holds social media in particular as an avenue of pressuring and discrediting non-conforming Shiites. A concrete example surfaced in March 2016. A post spread through Facebook and WhatsApp claimed that Al Janoubia received funding and took orders from IDF spokesperson Afikhai Adrei. The message had the appearance of a news bulletin and cited a source in the Lebanese Security Forces. The post emphasizes that the newspaper is headquartered in the Dahieh, and al-Amine voiced concern that it was a prelude to stepped-up aggression against the newspaper.<sup>156</sup>

Malek Mrowa, too, singled out social media, saying that, “[...] you write something against them—and we’re very polite—just against their policy, and your Facebook [page] gets jammed.” Once again, it is hard to judge whether Hezbollah is exerting the pressure, or whether sympathizers are willingly taking up the cross for the party. Hezbollah has—as explained above—an impressive communications network. But the party has been slow to

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<sup>156</sup> "Anti-Hezbollah news outlet comes under threat," NOW Media, March 2, 2016. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566681-anti-hezbollah-news-outlet-comes-under-threat>. Accessed April 29, 2016.



embrace social media.<sup>157</sup> Yet, while there are threats, al-Amine stressed that, “none of them have taken on a physical dimension.” This observation reinforces the key component of social pressure discussed above. While the urge to conform is strongly felt by those who stick with their unpopular convictions, social pressure is a non-violent method that seeks to regulate rather than repress the behavior of other people.

### 5.2.3 Intimidation

Pressure as a vehicle for social control is effective under certain conditions. However, when pressure fails to deter or compel individuals to behave in a specific manner, cautious warnings may give way to violent threats, i.e. intimidation. There have been but a few incidents since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in which Hezbollah has overtly advertised sanctions to non-compliance. And in cases where violence has been used, the degree of Hezbollah’s involvement remains unclear.

Respondents felt that Hezbollah resorted to intimidation to establish a set of red lines. Ahmed El-Assaad, Secretary-General of the Lebanese Option Party (LOP), believes firmly that Hezbollah was behind the killing of LOP-affiliated student activist Hashim al-Salman. Al-Salman took part in a protest against Hezbollah’s interference in Syria outside the Iranian embassy in Beirut in June 2013 when men wearing yellow armbands—which several observers took as a sign of Hezbollah involvement—attacked the gathering. The student activist died in the ensuing altercation, possibly to a gunshot wound.<sup>158</sup> El-Assaad describes the event as the protestors “[crossing] the red line,” and suffering the consequences: “We have strong supporters, people that speak out. You don’t find that in the Shia. We are the only ones with a loud voice. And we have paid the price, of course, with our beloved martyr Hashim [...]” Hezbollah apparently has certain unwritten rules that delineate accepted behavior. As relates to this case, an anti-Hezbollah demonstration in the middle of the Dahieh against an Iranian institution might have been too awkward for the party to let pass.

Other respondents also outlined metaphorical red lines. Ali al-Amine regularly treats issues related to the party and the Shia community in his online newspaper. He claims to have received “indirect messages” indicating that criticizing Hassan Nasrallah publicly was one such red line. According to al-Amine, “You can talk about anyone in Hezbollah, but you

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<sup>157</sup> Khatib, Matar and Alshaer, *The Hizbullah Phenomenon*, 189.

<sup>158</sup> “Beirut protester killed outside Iran embassy,” Al Jazeera, June 10, 2013.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/20136910330195585.html>. Accessed January 7, 2016.

don't talk about Nasrallah." The role of the current Secretary-General has, as discussed in a previous chapter, grown paramount. His personage lends the party great credibility and authority in political as well as religious matters. With that in mind, it is conceivable that the party will not tolerate any attempt to damage Nasrallah's standing among the Shiites of Lebanon.

Other respondents could talk of red lines of more concrete character. Malek Mrowa expects severe, violent backlash from Hezbollah if the Lebanese Civil Coalition were to open an affiliate office in South Lebanon. The constituencies surrounding Tyr and Nabatieh being of particular importance to the party, it is understandable that they would dislike a potential opponent doing political outreach in their backyard. Lokman Slim offered another example of what Hezbollah considers its "prerogative", namely religious authority. Slim suggests that, from Hezbollah's perspective, powerful clerics that are critical of the organization constitute the "Achilles heel", particularly if that cleric is part of a wider movement. He puts this observation in connection to the 2008 eviction of the mufti of Tyr—a powerful cleric with a significant institutional base.

Language is power and perception easily becomes reality. Hegemonic discourse has the ability to affix labels to people who exhibit a certain kind of behavior. Critics who opposed the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, for example, risked being labeled as unpatriotic or internal threats.<sup>159</sup> Such labels serve to not only isolate dissidents but also establish what behavior is acceptable to deal with them. Recall, for example, Nahed Hattar's polemic in the *Al Akhbar*, where he held that "In a war for national liberation, there is no opposition, dialogue, reconciliation or clemency, but only a single political yardstick by which everyone is measured. Those inside the country are either patriots or traitors [...]"<sup>160</sup> Language that labels critics as "traitors" also enables power holders to treat them as such. Hence, labeling is in itself a means of intimidation used to censure would-be dissidents.

Though the party itself seldom talks about dissent in the Shia community—at least not publicly—head on, the last few years has witnessed a slow change. Several independent Shia were thoroughly unseated by an unprecedented piece of polemic that surfaced in May 2015. In an interview leaked in *Al Akhbar* and *Al Safir* newspapers, Hassan Nasrallah denounces the independent Shia in no uncertain terms, claiming that

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<sup>159</sup> Holland and Aaronson, "Dominance through Coercion," 5.

<sup>160</sup> Hattar, Nahed, "bi-hudū': sūrīa al-jarīḥa; 'ilā al-salāḥ," *Al Akhbar*, May 22, 2015. <http://al-akhbar.com/node/233726>. Accessed February 17, 2016.

Anyone who says anything contrary to what is said here is a moron, a blind person, and a traitor. The Shiites of the American embassy are traitors, agents, and morons. No one can alter our convictions. We will not be silent anymore and we will no longer humor anyone. [...] We will not be silent after today. The one who speak against us, we will look into his eyes and say to him, ‘You are a traitor,’—whether old or young.<sup>161</sup>

By all accounts, this is the first and only incident since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in which the Secretary-General is quoted as disparaging criticism within the Shia community in particular. By using the expression “Shiites of the embassy”—a term coined by the pro-Hezbollah media during the smear campaign in 2012—Nasrallah demonstrates awareness of the infamy a select group of independent Shia have attained. The statement is a clear example of intimidation of possible detractors. But Nasrallah never explains explicitly what the consequences of countering Hezbollah’s narrative are—those are left to the imagination, a reinforcement of the notion that fear culture thrives on uncertainty and ambiguity.

Nasrallah’s indictment of the independent Shia incited both applause and condemnation. Supportive of the party, Al Akhbar published an editorial written by editor-in-chief Ibrahim al-Amin. In it, he attributes Nasrallah’s statement to the growth of an “army of ditherers” that “analyzes and spouts adolescent nonsense”. Moreover, some of them have decided “to tie their fate to the decision of the choir of collaborators and takfiri [...]”. As for those who support the party, they have an obligation to “not only be enthusiastic about [Hassan Nasrallah’s] loud and clear statement but to stop [going on about the same things over and over again]”—meaning that while Hezbollah’s choice is controversial, it nevertheless requires wholehearted support. In a salient reminder of Hezbollah’s Manichean worldview, al-Amin urges people to

[Choose] between two lines and paths [...]. This stage obliges us to take a resolute stance, not matter how difficult and painful it is [...]. In this time of resoluteness, people must choose the party and trust its leadership to lead the campaign. At this point, there is no room for additional searching and careful inspection [...].<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> "naṣr allāh yulawwiḥ bi-’iḻān "al-ta’bi’iah al-’āmmah" didd al-takfirīyyīn," Al Akhbar, May 23, 2015. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/233804>. Accessed January 7, 2016.

<sup>162</sup> Al-Amine, Ibrahim, "zaman al-ḥasm," Al Akhbar, May 25, 2015. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/233926>. Accessed February 17, 2016.

The supreme emergency of the situation demands, according to al-Amin, concerted effort. He presents two choices: rally around the party or be part of the side that works against its interests. There is no place for critics anymore. Those who voice opposition to the party line risk being ostracized as traitors.

Khalil al-Khalil—who attends regularly an unofficial gathering of like-minded independent Shiites critical of Hezbollah’s Syrian policy—noticed the implied threat in Nasrallah’s statement. “These speeches, when [Nasrallah] tells you, those who do not want to join us, they are traitors—okay, is he talking about me? I don’t think so. But he is addressing the general public, ‘Mind you, don’t be against me’ [...]”. Malek Mrowa, too, did not fail to see the implication in the Secretary-General’s remarks. For him and the LCC, however, they felt much more pointed: “They were talking about our communication. This is what everybody felt. Let us lay low. [...] Before, we were non-existent. Suddenly, we became villains and [traitors]. So that was the signal.” Ghaddar, too, saw the hidden implication in Nasrallah’s words. Basically, she thinks the message was that “any Shia criticizing Hezbollah will be considered a traitor and will be dealt with as such.” Mustafa Fahs, on the other hand, did not read the statement so much as a threat than as an appeal to the Shia community to stay unified.<sup>163</sup> The variation in interpretation is testament to the insecurity bred by cultures of fear.

### 5.3 Sectarian Polarization

The politics of fear constructs and sustains collective identity. By propagating the existence of an external threat while at the same time playing on collective fears, the unity of the imagined community is bolstered.<sup>164</sup> People resort to sectarianism as an organizing principle for their everyday lives. In the process, they delineate the frontiers between the self and the other, and come to see the success of the in-group as being dependent on the relative standing of out-groups.

As discussed above, Hezbollah promotes a worldview that divides people into either pro- or anti-resistance. However, there are indications that while Hezbollah’s public, clear-cut rhetoric of good and evil is consistent, the discursive work done on lower and internal levels

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<sup>163</sup> "Les « faux amis » et les « chiites de l’ambassade US » dans le collimateur du Hezbollah," L’Orient-Le Jour, May 25, 2015. <http://www.orientlejour.com/article/926607/les-faux-amis-et-les-chiites-de-lambassade-us-dans-le-collimateur-du-hezbollah.html>. Accessed April 29, 2016.

<sup>164</sup> Jackson, Richard, "Security, Democracy and the Rhetoric of Counter-Terrorism," *Democracy & Security*, 1:2 (2005): 147-171, 156-157.

differ. Specifically, it seems that the further from the party elite the discursive work is done, the more language associated with sectarianism supplants that of resistance, which by large is a pan-Arab idea. According to Ibrahim Shamseddine, the conflict needs “to be manifested as Sunni-Shia,” as this “the way you get fighters. It’s the way you make this huge movement.” The problem of such discourse is that it makes the category of ‘us’ exclusively sectarian-based, i.e. Shia, and the category of the ‘other’ so murky that it includes segments of the population that otherwise harbor no ill-will towards the community. In confessional Lebanon, such rhetoric leads to sectarian polarization.

### 5.3.1 Repercussions of Polarization

The Lebanese cleric Mohammed Mehdi Shamseddine, an ardent advocate for sectarian coexistence, famously once said, “There is no Lebanon without its Christians and there is no Lebanon without its Muslims”. Ibrahim Shamseddine, his son, has adopted a motto in a similar vein: “The community is not the party and the party is not the community”. Yet, among contemporary Lebanese, the common perception is that the inverse holds more truth and the Lebanese Shia are increasingly conflated with the Party of God. This conflation spells bad news for intersectarian harmony in a time where many non-Shias view Hezbollah’s behavior as unacceptable. Ahmed El-Assaad supports the idea that the party’s deteriorating reputation is detrimental to the Shia, observing that, “they think that most of the Shias are pro-Hezbollah and that’s why they have a kind of negative relation with anything that is Shia, because they feel that [the Shia community] is a part of Hezbollah”. While the ultimate decision to enter Syria rests with the party leadership, outside observers have come to see it as a collective Shia effort.

Observers are concerned that the growing polarization between Lebanese confessions is the precursor to the type of militia culture that dominated the civil war (1975-1990).<sup>165</sup> An increase in militarization of the sects manifests itself in, among other things, stepped-up recruiting. Maintaining two fronts and losing fighters day-by-day forces Hezbollah to harvest manpower from the base. Shiite men as young as sixteen are enticed into fighting in Syria.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> International Crisis Group, "Lebanon's Self-Defeating Survival Strategies," 1.

<sup>166</sup> “Deadly experience,” *The Economist*, August 20, 2015. <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21661826-costly-valuable-lessons-guerrilla-army-once-fought>. Accessed January 18, 2016.

Unprecedented, some observers indicate that Hezbollah is drawing recruits from Lebanon's large overseas diaspora.<sup>167</sup>

Another byproduct of sectarianism is diminishing levels of trust across group lines.<sup>168</sup> In what appears as a zero-sum game, a gain for one side is perceived as a loss for the other. In confessional Lebanon, where sects are the main elements of representation, the lack of trust translates into government stalemate. The ongoing presidential crisis best exemplifies this development. The office of the president of the republic, which according to the National Pact of 1943 pact is reserved for a Maronite Christian, has remained vacant for close to two years. Lebanon's two political coalitions, the March 8- and March 14-alliances, have so far been unable to agree on a consensus candidate to replace former incumbent Michel Suleiman, whose term came to an end in May 2014. Neither camp is willing to accede to a candidate that could tilt the balance of power in favor of the other. That goes double for Hezbollah, which balks at having a president that could challenge its unilateral decision to interfere in Syria or, even worse, question its continued role as an armed militia.<sup>169</sup>

The presidential vacuum has ripple effects throughout the Lebanese political system. Political interaction through democratic institutions has given way to bilateral dialogue that at best keeps the government operational. The parliament is unable to deliberate on new policy to rectify the deteriorating economic situation or to form a coherent policy to deal with the influx of Syrian refugees. Moreover, the current parliament, whose term originally came to an end in June 2013, has extended its own mandate twice in lieu of popular elections, citing the instability brought on by the conflict in Syria. Critics have labeled the move "unconstitutional".<sup>170</sup> Lack of cooperation across sectarian lines is not only damaging to the state's ability to function properly, but also its political legitimacy.

Sectarian polarization in Lebanon might provoke, besides political deadlock, violence between sects. Scholars have argued that as individual perception of out-group threat increases, they grow more accepting of behavior that maintains or intensifies the conflict.

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<sup>167</sup> Luca, Ana Maria, "How ISIS terror benefits Hezbollah," NOW Media, December 8, 2015. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/566351-how-isis-terror-benefits-hezbollah>. Accessed January 18, 2016.

<sup>168</sup> Ramadan, "The Global Ideology of Fear," 12.

<sup>169</sup> Zeid, Mario A., "Lebanese Presidential Elections," Carnegie Middle East Center, February 4, 2015. <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=58965>. Accessed February 19, 2016.

<sup>170</sup> Holmes, Oliver, "Lebanese parliament extends own term till 2017 amid protests," Reuters, November 5, 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-parliament-idUSKBN0IP18T20141105>. Accessed February 19, 2016.

Logic and rationality give way to emotion as the base on which decisions are formed in high threat-level situations.<sup>171</sup> Slim sees the unpopularity of Hezbollah operations across the border as a “recipe for an explosion”, noting that there is “something brewing in the underground of Lebanese society”. Indeed, Lebanon has seen several instances of sectarian violence that seemingly links to the Syrian civil war. Clashes in Tripoli between Alawites and Sunnis, while not a novel thing, took on increased intensity immediately following the outbreak of hostilities across the border. The spate of bombings that shook Shia-populated areas of Beirut in 2013 seemed to emanate from Lebanese Sunnis disgruntled with Hezbollah’s decision to intervene. The southern city of Sidon, too, has been the scene of violent clashes between followers of Sunni Salafi cleric Ahmed al-Assir, and the LAF and Hezbollah. Al-Assir had frequently agitated against Hezbollah’s support of the Assad-regime. As the Syrian conflict progressed, he urged his followers to join sides with rebels across the border. A particularly violent battle in June 2013 between followers of al-Assir and the LAF/Hezbollah resulted in approximately 50 dead soldiers and Islamists.<sup>172</sup>

There is a host of interconnected processes that drive sectarian polarization in Lebanon. For one, the battle in Syria has had a demonstration effect. Fighting between the Alawi-dominated, Shia-supported Assad regime and Syria’s Sunni majority acts as a catalyst for intersectarian violence in Lebanon. This dynamic is particularly evident in Tripoli. Moreover, Lebanese Sunni Muslims lack credible political leadership. The Future Movement, which forms the largest member of the March 14-alliance and whose base is Sunni, has failed to champion the political and economic interests of the Sunni community. Heading the party is Saad Hariri, son of Rafic Hariri whose assassination spurred the Cedar Revolution in 2005. Aggravating the leadership crisis is that the younger Hariri spends most of his time in self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia. The lack of a credible, moderate Sunni leadership has facilitated the growth of influence for radicals that portray Hezbollah—and as an extension the Lebanese Shia community—as existential threats. Finally, state weakness inhibits political actors from forming a concerted response to the deteriorating conditions for the poor and

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<sup>171</sup> Gordon, Carol and Asher Arian, "Threat and Decision Making," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 45:2 (2001): 196-215.

<sup>172</sup> Zaatari, Mohammed, "Mission accomplished, Assir on the run," *The Daily Star*, June 25, 2013. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Jun-25/221488-mission-accomplished-assir-on-the-run.ashx#axzz2X5c750Ja>. Accessed February 19, 2016. Al-Assir was apprehended by the authorities at Beirut International Airport in August 2015, allegedly trying to flee the country.

refugees. The poor and the disillusioned are deep recruitment pools for non-state groups that seek members.

There is no denying that socioeconomic and political conditions in contemporary Lebanon is aggravating sectarian relationships. But there is also, as this thesis argues, a discursive component in the mix. Hezbollah's use of fear as a political tool contributes to sectarian polarization in at least two ways. First, by promoting a sense of fear and threat in the Lebanese Shia community, the party both militarizes and isolates the sect in the Lebanese context. Warnings of existential warfare and cultural extinction make the community fearful of the 'other'. The feeling of threat increases the saliency of in-group identity and the necessity to form a united front. Second, the party fails to convince moderate Sunnis that its intervention in Syria is anything but a war against Sunni Islam. Not only discourse on the official level but practices and language from the Shia community at large promotes a frame of sectarian warfare that equate Hezbollah gains in Syria to Sunni losses in Lebanon.

### **5.3.2 A Resurgence in Shia Collective Identity**

The perception of an outside threat to a social community's values, beliefs, and security strengthens feelings of the necessity of in-group solidarity and cohesiveness. Belonging to a group—and working towards strengthening that group—is a survival tactic for individuals. This observation stems from 'Terror management theory', which holds that increased awareness of mortality in individuals leads to increased support and defense of distinct collective identities and the norms that govern them.<sup>173</sup> Fears of death and annihilation due to weak state structures give saliency to the 'us' category, a term some have coined tribalism. Tribalism is made manifest in the reversion to sect, creed, clan, and village by the citizens of failing states.

The drive towards tribalism is logical. Michel Nehme, in an article on political identity in the Middle East, succinctly states that, "If the need to feel secure is a fundamental human requirement, it is [...] attained in considerable measure by belonging to a group that is in turn secure." This logic governs the Middle East in particular which, due to its due to its political history and societal make-up, abounds with examples of subjugation and physical extinction.

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<sup>173</sup> Fritsche, Jonas and Kessler, "Collective Reactions to Threat." See also: Giannakakis, Andrew E. and Immo Fritsche, "Social Identities, Group Norms, and Threat: On the Malleability of Ingroup Bias," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37:1 2011: 82-93; Moskalenko, Sophia, Clark McCauley and Paul Rozin, "Group Identification under Conditions of Threat," *Political Psychology*, 27:1 (2006): 77-98.



Weak state structures and entrenched sectarianism induces the fearful individual to turn to his or her “own people” for protection.<sup>174</sup> This observation is particularly relevant to the case treated in this thesis. Today’s Lebanese political system falls somewhere in between functioning democracy and illegitimate autocracy. Popular elections are held in the framework of sect-based power sharing, modern state institutions and traditional patronage networks are barely distinguishable, and the avowed respect for human rights intermittently give way to repression and illiberality.

The culture of fear has given birth to a curious paradox in the Shia community of Lebanon. According to Ibrahim Shamseddine, the special history of the Shiites in Lebanon has made the community confident: “[...] it feels arrogance. It has got some kind of vanity, of we are strong.” Yet, as Shamseddine notes, concurrent with the feeling of power is a feeling of vulnerability: “The Shiite, they still—and this is very strange—they still think that they are oppressed and that they are always targeted. Hezbollah has created and always keeps on working on this [rhetoric].” Hezbollah has strengthened this perception through its framing of the Syrian conflict on the one hand by enumerating the community’s many enemies and on the other magnifying those enemies’ capabilities to harm the Shia. Arguably, this duality of strength and weakness is only viable through effective manipulation. Thus, political fear might help explain why the Lebanese Shia, who over the last thirty years have travelled from the margins of political relevance to the center of action, still perceive themselves as victims. How else can one reconcile the distinctively Shiite pride and sense of superiority that grew out of the Israeli wars, with the current Shiite fear of cultural extinction?

The contradiction is not particular to the Lebanese Shia community. Ramadan employs the label “ideology of fear” to describe the paradox and states that, “the first tragic consequence of the ideology of fear is to transform all societies and their members into victims.” He notes that the process of victimization takes place regardless of the relative power between victim and perpetrator. For instance, he observes that Israel has cultivated a victimization narrative ever since its foundation in 1947, despite developing military and economic supremacy over its Arab neighbors.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Nehme, Michel G., "Identity and Fear: A Survey Study of the Arab East," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 30:4 (1996): 3-23, 5-6.

<sup>175</sup> Ramadan, "The Global Ideology of Fear," 14.

A core objective of political fear then is to magnify your opponent's strength and your own weakness to create a demand for protection. Discursively constructing the takfiri as an outside threat serves that purpose. The Shia does have genuine reasons to fear the takfiri, but the fear is amplified in the internal culture to keep it unified. Shamseddine laments this rhetorical strategy, observing that, "We are not poor anymore. We are not pushed aside anymore. But we keep complaining [because] they keep us under fear [saying] 'they are going to eat you up, they are going to attack you. Stick together, stay Shiite, stay with us'." Ghaddar supports the pervasiveness of this narrative. She observes the development of tribalism, arguing that, "Hezbollah has basically told [the Lebanese Shia] that everybody hates you, so of course, the choice is to stick together. It's basically rule number one when it comes to the factor of fear—you stick together."<sup>176</sup> The increase of in-group cohesiveness comes at the expense of intergroup interaction. Mustafa Fahs notes that, "It is clear that we [the Shia community] are isolated" adding that this development "is intentional by the people who are leading them."

However, the isolation that Fahs speaks of is not as clear-cut as it seems at first glance. While the Lebanese Shias are distancing themselves from the Sunni counterparts, they maintain a working relationship with the Maronites. Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)—headed by Michel Aoun—institutionalized this relationship in a 'Memorandum of Understanding' in 2005. The agreement facilitated the defection of the FPM from the March 14-alliance to Hezbollah's bloc. This gave the March 8-alliance significant advantage in on the political scene as the FPM represent the largest party in the Christian portion of the parliament. However, a Shia-Maronite alliance does not exclude Shia sectarian isolation. Whereas sectarianism in the Lebanon of the 1980s meant hostility between Muslims and Christians, the relative decline of Maronite political relevance has made such dynamic an artifact of history. Rather, sectarianism in contemporary Lebanon is best understood as increased animosity between Sunnis and Shias. The Shias then are isolated in so far as they remain a numerical minority in a Sunni-majority Levant.

The combined feeling of isolation and vulnerability that the culture of fear engenders is ripe for political manipulation. Perceived threats to physical safety make people more mindful of their own identity-based symbols and supportive of those who offer ways to maintain them.<sup>177</sup> The rhetorical analysis conducted earlier in this thesis illustrated how Hezbollah utilizes

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<sup>176</sup> Malek Mrowa made the same observation.

<sup>177</sup> Kaufman, Stuart J., "A Symbolic Theory of War," Paper Prepared for Presentation at ISAC-ISSS Conference, Austin, Texas, November 14-16, 2014, 8.

symbols and narratives connected to the resistance project, which in many ways is a Shia project, to not only explain the world around them but also portray itself as a community protector. Al-Amine compares the cultivation of a culture of fear to investing in a valuable asset:

If the Shiites look around them, they see that everyone that is outside their environment is either an enemy, or soon to be an enemy. You can invest in this fear and possibility. This is the only asset that Hezbollah has in the community, the only asset in which they can invest in order to convince the community to support actions that are unreasonable and illogical.

Hezbollah's invests in fear to create a justification for hawkish extra-group policy. Moreover, the party portrays itself as the only agent able to undertake such policy:

Because of the sectarian split that is happening, Hezbollah is able to convince people by saying that, 'I'm the one who is going to protect you against all those who are attacking you.' A big portion of Hezbollah's rhetoric now that justifies what they are doing. This kind of speech, it is not directly said. But the content is actually saying that, 'you Shia are in danger, and the US, the Saudis, Daesh, and Israel are going to kill you'. The intimidating rhetoric is a means of controlling [the Shia].

The party is, according to al-Amine, creating a zone of hostility that begins at the boundary of the Shia community.

A central clue to this thesis is that perception oftentimes *is* reality. People respond to their surroundings as they construe it. The objective meaning of reality in this sense has little relevance. Rather, it is the idea that people construct through cognitive processes that come to represent reality. An implication of this is that if a person perceives something as real, it becomes real in its consequences. The Lebanese Shiites then, like other groups that perceive themselves vulnerable, are closing rank behind those that have the ability to offer them protection—a commodity on which Hezbollah, as some argue, enjoys something akin to a monopoly.<sup>178</sup> Lokman Slim concurs that Hezbollah satisfy a vital need for the Shia, saying

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<sup>178</sup> Srour, Ramy, "With Heartland Threatened, Lebanon's Shiites See Hezbollah as 'Protector of the Community': Q&A with Sahar Atrache," Global Observatory, July 30, 2014. <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/07/-heartland-threat-lebanon-shiites-hezbollah-protector-of-the-community-sahar-atrache/>. Accessed January 18, 2016.

that, “this atmosphere of fear implies the need of protection”. And in a state such as Lebanon, where the central government is unable or unwilling to guarantee security for all, Slim sees Hezbollah’s appeal as logical: “If they don’t find any other protector, they will resort to Hezbollah”.

That is not to say that the Shia community unequivocally supports Hezbollah’s Syria policy. Rather, they have come to see the necessity of it. Hanin Ghaddar supports this notion, noting that, “Whether they [the Shia community] like it or not, whether they agree with it or not, I think this is the only choice and they have accepted it. If Hezbollah fails in Syria, they believe that the Shia community will be treated like the Palestinians during the civil war”. Lokman Slim, too, observes that the community regards the intervention as a *fait accompli*. While the intervention might affect them negatively, they have no option but to accept the party’s policy.

### **5.3.3 Alienating the Sunni Community**

The Shia community is not the only agent in Lebanon that participates in and constructs the discourse on the Syrian civil war. The Sunni community, too, is both an audience to and an important factor in Hezbollah’s rhetoric. The party’s actions in Syria have ramifications that go far beyond the Shia heartlands in Beirut, the Bekaa, and the South. Hezbollah has traditionally sought to sell itself as a pan-Arab movement as opposed to a sectarian-based one. The party has successfully cultivated this image in the past. Following the Israeli withdrawal in 2000 and the July 2006 War, diverse segments of society threw their weight behind the Resistance. Although selling this image has become harder since 2008, a large part of Hezbollah’s rhetoric is still devoted to an audience beyond the Shia community.

Hence, Hezbollah has attempted to frame the Syrian conflict in non-sectarian terms. The party portrays the battle as one that concerns all sects and denominations, and not one that pits Shia Muslims against Sunnis. The language that serves that end takes on explicit overtones, as exemplified by a speech Hassan Nasrallah held during the Muharram observance in 2014:

The conflict is not sectarian at all. Now it might happen that in one place both sides are from the Sunni sect and in another place one side is Sunni while the other side is mixed and it includes Shiites. Does that make the conflict a Sunni-

Shiite struggle? Never! Is this axis we belong to, fight in, and help to keep steadfast and to keep its banner raised high a purely Shiite axis? Never!<sup>179</sup>

This effort to keep sectarianism out of Hezbollah's narrative is deliberate. The potential mobilization effect of religion the party foregoes, illustrates how much the party values its cross-sectarian appeal. The potency of religion as a repository of language, symbols, and cultural references has been used to great effect in similar conflicts to garner support and spur mobilization. Several symbols inherent to Shiism, such as victimhood and tyranny, work well to the Syrian conflict. Moreover, just like ISIL has popular folk stories to frame its war in Syria as a part of end times, so has Shia Islam. These signs derive from the esoteric interpretation of *al-jafr*, a mystical book that allegedly outlines events to occur before the reappearance of the Mahdi. This strand of Shia eschatology holds, among other things, that Syria will undergo civil strife, that an unjust Sunni ruler that persecutes minorities will ascend to power, and that his rule will come to an end as an army of liberation comes from the East.<sup>180</sup>

Kamran Aghaie argues that the Karbala Paradigm has "served as a vindication of the Shia cause in the face of Sunni criticism".<sup>181</sup> It draws a line from the battle of Karbala, in which Yazid and his supporters killed Husayn and his supporters. In Shia consciousness, the former has come to represent the archetypical evil oppressor, while the latter are warrior who fight for the cause of justice and dignity. Yet, regardless of the political expediency such rhetoric could have served, it remains unused. Even at distinctively Shia religious celebrations, such as the month of Muharram, Nasrallah has largely refrained from using Shia rhetoric with the battle in Syria. This principle, however, was compromised somewhat in 2015, when the Secretary-General assured Iraqis of their ability to combat ISIL "in the name of Husayn".<sup>182</sup> It is however too early to tell whether that case is an abnormality or a sign of an emerging trend in party rhetoric. In subsequent speeches the Secretary-General has continued to use non-sectarian rhetoric.

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<sup>179</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (57:25 - November 3, 2014).

<sup>180</sup> "Is Hezbollah's Syria Approach Tied to End-Times Doctrine?" Al Monitor, September 12, 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/hezbollah-nasrallah-shiite-doctrine-syria-conflict.html>. Accessed April 29, 2016.

<sup>181</sup> Aghaie, Kamran S. *The Martyrs of Karbala, Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), p. 8–9.

<sup>182</sup> Speech of Hassan Nasrallah (October 24, 2015).

Hezbollah does not want the conflict to assume a sectarian hue. Consequently, a disclaimer that distinguishes moderate Sunnis from the extremist current usually accompanies any reference to the takfiri threat. Hezbollah refer to its opponents in Syria—and those behind various terrorist attacks in Lebanon—invariably as 'takfiri', and never 'Sunni'. Yet, as the ICG points out in a 2014 report, the takfiri term is “a double-edged sword”.<sup>183</sup> While the term serves as a rallying cry for the party’s supporters, its vagueness inflames sectarianism.<sup>184</sup> The party has applied the label to as diverse groups as ISIL, the FSA, and Lebanese extremist cells connected to firebrand cleric Ahmed al-Assir. Despite Nasrallah’s repeated clarification between takfiri and authentic Sunnis, the term’s vagueness is obviously a source of contention. Lokman Slim supports this notion, saying that,

The main problem that Hezbollah faces—especially in Lebanon—was always to try splitting takfiris from Sunna. At the level of political discourse, yes, they are more or less succeeding. [...] However, when I observe what is happening at the grass roots level, I have much more fears. I am not sure that this split between the bad takfiris on the one hand, and the neutral Sunni on the other hand, is an equation that Hezbollah will be able to keep or maintain.

According to Slim, Hezbollah is not succeeding in differentiating between Sunnis and takfiris. The result is more polarization, as Shias conflate Sunnis with takfiris, and moderate Sunnis interpret Hezbollah’s diatribes as directed towards them.

The ambiguity of the takfiri-term has potential disastrous consequences for how the Lebanese Shia differentiates hostility that emanate from disaffected Lebanese Sunnis and ideologically-committed extremists—a byproduct Robin notes as an interesting contradiction in the politics of fear. While the fear of the ‘other’ is used to achieve political gains, the objects of fear are looked upon as politically empty.<sup>185</sup> There is a strategic utility to this oversimplification. By robbing the threat of any political grievance, we are allowed to treat them as intractable foes, unwilling or unable to compromise. Sunni extremism in Syria, then, is not a political development grounded in the marginalization of the Sunnis under Assad's rule or connected to the disillusionment with the so-called Arab spring. Rather, it is perceived to be the byproduct of a "takfiri mentality" originating from the devious minds of a few but charismatic individuals. By robbing the assailants of any political motive, Hezbollah not only dehumanize

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<sup>183</sup> International Crisis Group, "Lebanon’s Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria," 5.

<sup>184</sup> International Crisis Group, "Lebanon’s Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria," 15.

<sup>185</sup> Robin, Corey, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.

them, but also reinforce the notion that there is no methodological debate to be had at home concerning how to deal with takfiri. The community has to unite and fight, because they all face the same uncompromising threat. The domineering effect of fear results in a reductionism that “transforms reality into a series of discreet, disconnected facts, and the Other into a series of acts without cause, without history or historic depth, without reason and rationality”.<sup>186</sup> As a result, the takfiri become faceless apparitions who have no claim to any legitimate grievance.

Hezbollah’s attempt to frame the conflict in non-sectarian terms is an example of rhetoric that fails to resonate simply because the audience’s experiential observations contradicts it. These observations originate in a wider context that at times operates independently of Hezbollah’s official rhetoric. Shamseddine agrees that there is a difference between Hezbollah’s official discourse and its interpretation on the ground level:

The real work, the inside, deep work is ‘We’re Shiite. We fight against those who happen to be Sunnis, getting together because they are Sunnis. [...] Nehna, we are Shiite. We are being attacked because we are Shiite. [...] Because all over history the Shiite were oppressed.’

It is hard to gauge whether Hezbollah uses sectarian rhetoric in non-official discourse, and such an inquiry falls outside the remit of this thesis. Yet, there are indications of *Hezbollah supporters* utilizing such language. Here the difference between discourse and rhetoric becomes important. While the party may control its own rhetoric, it cannot fully control the discourse on the Syrian conflict—discourse is formulated through a multilevel process that involves practically all agents of society.

Non-official discourse regarding the Syrian war that originates in the transnational Shia community abounds with sectarian rhetoric. Hezbollah might refrain from utilizing Shia symbols and religious language in its discourse. The wider community, on the other hand, has no problem justifying intervention in Syria by referring to religion. One such expression comes through Shia *laṭmiyya*—works of poetry that are recited in groups and often accompanied by hand clapping and chest thumping. For instance, a YouTube video published by a resistance friendly channel shows the child prodigy Hadi Faour as he performs a *laṭmiyya* to a large crowd of enthusiastic men dressed in Hezbollah garb. The *laṭmiyya* in

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<sup>186</sup> Ramadan, "The Global Ideology of Fear," 12.

question contains the following verse: "O'takfiris just you wait, we shall dig up your graves. We have answered your call, O'Ali".<sup>187</sup> The religious reference is slight, but nevertheless strengthens the discursive idea that the "us" is someone who would answer the call of Ali—meaning the Shia.

Songs of a more conventional structure also base their call to mobilize on sectarian rhetoric. Hezbollah supporters released a number of propaganda songs online during the spring and summer of 2013.<sup>188</sup> At that time, it was an acknowledged fact that fighters affiliated with Hezbollah were present at the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus' southern suburbs. Attacks from neighboring Sunni villages in the area surrounding the shrine inspired transnational Shia mobilization in its defense. However, it is unclear whether these Hezbollah fighters went to Syria on their own accord or were dispatched by the party. Most likely, they arrived with the party's blessing as volunteers to join up with the al-Abbas Brigade (liwā' 'abū al-faḍl al-'abbas)—a transnational outfit whose principal mandate is to protect Shia shrines. The brigade is primarily composed of Iraqis, which allegedly did not arrive there "under the auspices of the state or any organization".<sup>189</sup> The shrine holds particular reverence amongst Shiites. Zaynab was the daughter of Ali and Fatima, and sister of Shiite Islam's third imam, Husayn. Zaynab symbolizes defiance to tyranny and inhabits a central role in Shiite consciousness.<sup>190</sup> A video produced in Iraq reportedly shows a mix of Iraqi and Lebanese fighters—presumably from Hezbollah—as the backdrop to "O Zaynab", an arousing martial song.<sup>191</sup> Another song published on YouTube in July 2013 incorporates the frequently used line "labbayki yā zaynab" (to you, O Zaynab) and plays over footage of speeches of Hassan Nasrallah and interspersed with what appears to be Hezbollah combat operations.<sup>192</sup> As does a

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<sup>187</sup> Electronic Resistance, "Hezbollah Latmiyeh by Hadi Faour," YouTube, October 30, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJ7IXtRCKxY>. Accessed February 21, 2016.

<sup>188</sup> Smyth, Phillip, "The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," The Washington Institute, February 2015. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects>. Accessed April 27, 2016.

<sup>189</sup> Karouny, Mariam, "Shiite fighters rally to defend Damascus shrine of Sayyida Zaynab," Daily Star, March 4, 2013. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Mar-04/208671-shiite-fighters-rally-to-defend-damascus-shrine-of-sayyida-zeinab.ashx>. Accessed February 18, 2016.

<sup>190</sup> Aziz, Jean, "Hezbollah Leader Defends His Party's Involvement in Syria," Al Monitor, May 2, 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/hezbollah-nasrallah-speech-involvement-syria.html>. Accessed February 18, 2016.

<sup>191</sup> Blanford, Nicholas, "Video appears to show Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiites fighting in Syria," Christian Science Monitor, January 18, 2013. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0118/Video-appears-to-show-Hezbollah-and-Iraqi-Shiites-fighting-in-Syria>. Accessed February 18, 2016. Blanford, who frequently writes articles about Hezbollah's military operations and who has a book to his name on the subject matter, deduces Hezbollah interference based on how the fighters handle their AK-47s.

<sup>192</sup> See this video uploaded to YouTube on July 25, 2013, entitled "Labbaik ya Zainab": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFkFr3CKJ3E>. Accessed February 18, 2016.



production by Ali Barakat, whose songs about Hezbollah and the Syrian war has made him a star in the Shia community.<sup>193</sup> The expression is a central motif in the Sayyida Zaynab narrative and has been invoked in social media and during funerals.<sup>194</sup> While these videos cannot serve as evidence that Hezbollah as an organization used sectarian rhetoric to engender support for the shrine, they do illustrate that sympathetic individuals and like-minded organizations framed the mission to protect Zaynab, of which Hezbollah-fighters were a central part, as a mission to protect a revered Shiite shrine against Sunni Muslim aggression.

As much as the party may want to portray the conflict in Syria as non-sectarian in character, the participants, rhetoric, and location of the conflict indicates a battle of Shias and Sunnis. The division of actors participating in the war follows sect. The higher echelons of the Syrian regime comprises mainly Alawite, a sect that while not equivalent to Shiism has due to political expediency come to be seen as one and the same.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, the regime's main regional ally is Iran, the primary manifestation of Shia revivalism in the region. Finally, the host of non-state militias that have aligned themselves on the regime side does not only include Shia Lebanese Hezbollah, but also Iraqi people militias drawn from the Shia-majority areas around Karbala and Basra.<sup>196</sup> Meanwhile, Assad's internal enemy in Syria is, by virtue of their demographic majority, Sunni Muslims and, due to the security vacuum the war has created, extremist Salafi groups. Both currents receive support from Sunni majority states on the Arabian Peninsula.

The power of language lies in refashioning perception into reality. If individuals so-inclined wish to frame the Syrian civil war as sectarian, there is no lack of seemingly apparent evidence to draw upon. Just as Hezbollah's Manichean worldview appeals to a large audience, so does the sectarian warfare perspective: it offers a simple and context-aware understanding to complex processes of geopolitical and historical origin. The power of the Sayyida Zaynab

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<sup>193</sup> Shia Voice, "Labayki ya Zainab - Ali Barakat," YouTube, April 12, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7--uBwDcN1o>. Accessed February 21, 2016.

<sup>194</sup> Smyth (2015).

<sup>195</sup> One of Lebanon's most prominent Shiite clerics of the last century, Musa al-Sadr, recognized the Alawites as Twelver Shiite Muslims despite the theological divergences between the two sects. The Alawites of Syria welcomed this recognition as it countered the claims made by hardline, anti-regime Syrian Sunni Muslims who held that the Alawite sect fell entirely outside the pale of Islam. See: Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, edited by Martin Kramer (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), p. 237-54.

<sup>196</sup> For more information on the web of Shiite militias that prop up the Syrian regime, see "The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," The Washington Institute, February 2015. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects>. Accessed April 27, 2016.

narrative illustrates the experiential commensurability of that frame. It reminds the Shia of similar destructive acts perpetrated by Sunni Muslims against Shia holy places, such as the bombing of the al-Askari mosque in Samarra in 2006. Once a narrative has taken hold, the human mind tends to filter out pieces of information that conflict. The fact that Bashar al-Assad in the course of the war has targeted not only Sunni Muslims but also Druze, Turkmens, and Kurds does not weaken the Sunni-Shia conflict narrative. It does not fit the overarching narrative. Similarly does not ISIL's killing of Christians, Yazidis, Turkmens and other sects unrelated to the Shia—not to mention the overwhelming Sunni victims—hurt the narrative.

The flashpoint city of Tripoli in Northern Lebanon, often the scene of intersectarian clashes, exemplifies the adverse effects of the Sunni-Shia conflict narrative. While several factors account for the rise of Sunni extremism in Lebanon, some scholars note that the most prominent is Hezbollah unchallenged control over Lebanon, of which the foremost expression is its intervention in support of Bashar al-Assad.<sup>197</sup> Mohammad, a self-appointed 'emir' in a small Tripoli neighborhood, is exemplary of the perception that Hezbollah's war in Syria is a war against Sunni Muslims. He told the London-based newspaper al-Hayat that, "[...] Hatred is growing day by day and discord increases because of the party's decision to fight us on Syrian lands and to kill our youth. But we promise them that we will not stop the fight against them until God's will is done."<sup>198</sup> Mohammad, along with other influential figures, use Hezbollah's intervention in Assad's favor as a recruitment tool to send Tripoli youth to fight in Syria.<sup>199</sup>

Just as the Shias of Lebanon cling to the mantle of victimization, so is increasingly is the Sunni community. Narratives that link the community's ever-deteriorating stance within Lebanon with the rise of Shia power is gaining hold.<sup>200</sup> Hezbollah does this to delegitimize its battlefield opponents, but thereby contributes to the conflict's radicalization by feeding a

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<sup>197</sup> Lefèvre, Raphaël, "Tackling Sunni Radicalization in Lebanon," Carnegie Middle East Center, December 24, 2014. <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=57592>. Accessed February 16, 2016.

<sup>198</sup> Ayoub, Suhaib, "ḥikāyat shāb kharaja mujāhidan wa-`āda li-tajnīd shāban li-l-qitāl dīd nizām al-`asad," Al Hayat, March 11, 2014. <http://www.alhayat.com/Articles/1022428/mohammed-tripoli-emir-battle>. Accessed February 17, 2016.

<sup>199</sup> Naylor, Hugh, "Lebanese Sunnis who fought in Syria's war are returning home radicalized," The Washington Post, November 27, 2014. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/lebanese-sunnis-who-fought-in-syrias-war-are-returning-home-radicalized/2014/11/26/e8f8ab98-719b-11e4-a2c2-478179fd0489\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/lebanese-sunnis-who-fought-in-syrias-war-are-returning-home-radicalized/2014/11/26/e8f8ab98-719b-11e4-a2c2-478179fd0489_story.html). Accessed February 18, 2016.

<sup>200</sup> Daher, Aurélie, "In the Wake of the Islamic State Threat: Repercussions on Sunni-Shi'i Competition in Lebanon," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, 8:2 (2015): 209-235, 219.

Sunni-versus- Shiite sectarian narrative that inevitably grows in the war environment. What is more, the participation of resistance supporters in articulating discourse coupled with the reality of the Syrian conflict adds to a narrative of religious warfare.

## 6 Conclusion

The Syrian civil war is ongoing, and so is Hezbollah's involvement in it. As such, this thesis describes but a part of the Lebanese Shia community's foray into the Syrian conflict, the dynamics of which may change as time goes by. But regardless whether one is looking back now or at some distant point in the future, if there is one moment that marks a watershed in Hezbollah's Syrian intervention, then it is May 25 2013—the day Hassan Nasrallah openly admitted his party's military involvement in Syria. It marked a complete departure for the party from previous held notions about non-interference and the inviolable right of the Syrian people to determine their own destiny. It made the party liable to accusations of hypocrisy and ideological corruption, not only from the “outside” world, but also within the Shia community itself. What is more, it made imperative the realignment of the party constituency's view of the conflict to better reflect its own. Instead of seeing the party as defending a violent dictator from an armed, moderate opposition, it was framed as fighting a war on terror. Instead of inviting discord and chaos unto Lebanon, the party was portrayed to be safeguarding the country from the calamities of the region. And instead of being perceived as bringing the Lebanese Shia community into a complicated and protracted war, the party framed its intervention as protecting them from an existential threat.

This thesis set out to shed light on a textual and a social phenomenon, interrelated through the power of language: Hezbollah's discourse as regards its involvement in the Syrian civil war, and the culture of fear that discourse engenders in the Lebanese Shia community. To discern the particulars and generals of Hezbollah's rhetorical components I subjected a number of speeches held by party-chief Hassan Nasrallah (in addition to a number of statements by lower-ranking party officials) to a directed content analysis that mixed a theoretical and explorative approach. As for the current state of the Lebanese Shia community, I relied mainly on interviews with key informants that possessed both personal experiences and general knowledge about the subject in question.

Hezbollah communicates its involvement in the Syrian civil war through three overarching rhetorical themes. First, a Manichaean worldview that renders war conceivable by demarcating a set of friendly and hostile identity-based groups. Second, the discursive construction of a new “super-threat” makes intervention communicative in that it affirms the necessity of taking action, and the disastrous ramifications of letting the threat grow unchecked. Third, the party proposes interventionism—or as I refer to it, hawkishness—as the

only remedy to the problem, and coercively discards alternative approaches such as disassociation (the official policy of the Lebanese parliament). Undergirding these themes are historical analogies and familiar cultural references such as resistance, Western conspiracies, and injustice. By incorporating ideas and history related to the party's history, it maintains an ideological link between the Syrian conflict and the wars against Israel that ultimately transplants to the former some measure of the legitimacy associated with the latter. The primary reason for the discourse resonating among the audience, however, is due to its use of fear and collective identity. This thesis has shown how fear can be experienced as a collective emotion whenever the threat targets characteristic inherent to collective identity. Moreover, fear as an emotion is liable to manipulation and amplification through the power of discourse.

The end result is a culture of fear, that in the Lebanese case is not entirely natural or purely psychological. Rather, that fear has in large part been brought on by a human agency that seeks to use fear as a vehicle for social control. Hezbollah discursively constructs a world wherein a feeling of threat strengthens the salience of in-group identity and cohesiveness. The appeal for unity has taken on greater moral force and voicing disagreement with the party is seen as an act of disloyalty—or even treason. Moreover, party rhetoric—while at the surface non-sectarian—incites Sunni disenchantment by failing to distinguish between moderate Sunnis and takfiri. In the binary worldview of Manichaeism, there are no side lines. Regardless of how flawed and unrepresentative such Manichean thinking is, it offers a lens through which the current complexity of regional relations appears deceptively simple and understandable, and as a consequence, Lebanese Shias and Sunnis perceive Hezbollah's rhetoric—and the accompanying rhetoric that emanates from the larger community—as conflating moderate Sunnis and takfiri. Hezbollah's efforts to avoid framing the conflict as being between Sunni and Shia notwithstanding, the audience increasingly views the battle as a sectarian one.

This thesis reaffirms the persistence of fear as a governing human emotion across diverse societies. Cultures of fear are not—as the Western-oriented literature on this topic seems to suggest—confined to European and American democracies. Rather this social phenomenon is universal, and can affect any society where hostility towards an external 'other' is conceivable. Studying this phenomenon in different cultural contexts opens up the possibility of exploring, for instance, how particular cultural references—in this case, resistance—are utilized to advance a discourse that supports the politics of fear. It also sheds light on how

different actors besides incumbent governments and leading politicians use fear as a political tool to advance specific courses of action

Another avenue of future research lies in the wealth of ways discourse may manifest itself. This thesis has concentrated primarily on oral communication and written text. An extension would see focus given to other message transmitters, like the explicit use of symbols (posters, paintings) and material practices. Intrusive security measures, for instance, often accompany cultures of fear. Vehicle controls, identity checks, and stepped-up recruiting can act as signifiers for the observing audience that reinforces a discourse that is also articulated through oral and textual practices.

A recurring notion of this thesis is that perception is key. While the fear of takfiri groups is artificially inflated, the reality that it generates will have—and in any sense already have had—tangible consequences for those who subscribe to it, among them the Lebanese Shia community. As internal cohesiveness is perceived to be essential to group survival, signs of dissension within the ranks grows increasingly unacceptable. Independent Lebanese Shiites often speak of a “third way” for Shiite politics—the first and second being Hezbollah and Amal respectively. In this time of emergency, the feasibility of creating such a way remains blocked. Hezbollah’s discourse on the Syrian civil war has also defined how Lebanese Shiites perceive themselves in a region of several sects and ethnic groups. The end-result is diminishing levels of trust across group lines, which translate into continued governmental stalemate, deterioration of state capabilities, and in the most extreme cases, acts of violence.

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## Appendix A: Speech Index

SPEECHES QUOTED IN THESIS			
Date	Occasion	Location	Additional
2011 May 25	Day of Resistance and Liberation	Nabi Sheath, Bekaa	<a href="#">Link</a> .
2013 May 25	Day of Resistance and Liberation	Western Bekaa	<a href="#">Link</a> . English subtitles available.
2014 February 16	Martyr Leaders Day	Televised address	<a href="#">Link</a> .
2014 May 25	Day of Resistance and Liberation	Bint Jbeil, South Lebanon	<a href="#">Link</a> . English subtitles available.
2014 August 15	Anniversary of the July 2006 War	Televised address	<a href="#">Link</a> .
2014 November 3	Ashura Commemoration	South Beirut	<a href="#">Link</a> .
2015 February 16	Martyr Leaders Day	Sayyed Ashuhada Compund, Dahieh	<a href="#">Link</a> .
2015 May 16	Victory in Qalamoun	Televised address	<a href="#">Link</a> .
2015 May 24	Day of Resistance and Liberation	Nabatiyyeh, South Lebanon	<a href="#">Link</a> . English subtitles available.
2015 October 24	Ashura Commemoration	South Beirut	<a href="#">Link</a> .
SPEECHES NOT QUOTED IN THESIS			
Date	Occasion	Location	Additional
2012 May 25	Day of Resistance and Liberation	Bint Jbeil, South Lebanon	<a href="#">Link</a> . Transcript (in English).
2013 April 30	Update on recent events	Televised address	<a href="#">Link</a> . Transcript (in English).
2013 June 14	Injured Fighter Day	Televised address.	<a href="#">Link</a> .
2013 September 23	Update on recent events	Televised address	<a href="#">Link</a> . Transcript (in English).
2014 July 10	Al Quds Day	Televised address.	<a href="#">Link</a> . English subtitles available.
2014 September 23	Update on recent events	Televised address.	<a href="#">Link</a> . English subtitles available.
2014 November 4	Ashura Commemoration	South Beirut	<a href="#">Link</a> .
2015 July 10	Al Quds Day	Televised address	<a href="#">Link</a> . English subtitles available.

## **Appendix B: Presentation of Interviewees**

### **Ahmed El-Assaad**

Date: October 13, 2015

El-Assaad is the General Chancellor of the Lebanese Option Party (LOP), a secular political party established in 2007 that draws support primarily from the Shia community. It remains independent of the two opposing political camps in Lebanon. El-Assaad returned to Lebanon in the early 2000s after years of living in Europe and the U.S. The LOP participated in the 2006 and 2009 parliamentary elections and won a thirty percent share of the votes in the 2009 election in El-Assaad's home district of Marjayoun, South Lebanon. Both his father, Kamel El-Assaad, and grandfather, Ahmed El-Assaad, served as speakers of the Lebanese parliament. The El-Assaad family is one of the feudal clans that ruled the Shia south before the civil war.

### **Lokman Slim**

Date: October 16, 2015

Slim is known in contemporary Lebanon as an independent social political activist and publisher. He heads the Hayya Bina initiative, a project aimed at empowering citizens in the Lebanese confessional political system through, among other things, teaching women English. Hayya Bina works mainly with marginalized Shiites. Slim also directs the UMAM Documentation and Research organization, which offers a platform for discussion about the violence that marred Lebanon during the civil war.

### **Hanin Ghaddar**

Date: October 19, 2015

Ghaddar is the managing editor of the English-language online newspaper NOW based in Beirut. She writes commentaries and analyses that focus mainly on Hezbollah, the Shia community, Syria and Iran. Ghaddar also contributes to other newspapers, and has written accounts of her childhood and family in South Lebanon.

### **Ibrahim Shamseddine**

Date: October 20, 2015

Shamseddine serves as the president of the Association for Charity and Culture, which among other things work with educational initiatives in the South and in the Beqaa Valley. He was the Vice-President of the Council for Development and Reconstruction between 1991 and 1996, and served as non-partisan Minister of State for Administrative Reform in 2008 and 2009 during Siniora's tenure as prime minister. Shamseddine is the son of Mohammed Mehdi Shamseddine, a Shia cleric known for

his moderation and calls for Muslim-Christian coexistence. The older Shamseddine served as president of the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council between 1994 and 2001.

### **Malek Mrowa**

Date: October 21, 2015

Mrowa is a political activist with years of experience with Arabic media. He is the former owner and manager of the London-based *Al Hayat* newspaper and the Beirut-based *Daily Star*. He currently coordinates the activities of the Lebanese Civil Coalition and is the General Secretary of the Democratic Renewal Movement, a reformist, secular political party in Lebanon. He has been a board member of the Lebanese Press Association since 1993.

### **Khalil al-Khalil**

Date: October 26, 2015

Al-Khalil hails from a Tyre-based family with a long history of political participation. He has served as Lebanese ambassador to several countries, among them Iran, Germany, and Turkey. Al-Khalil maintains a sizeable constituency in the Tyre-region, which he visits every weekend.

### **Ali al-Amine (Arabic-speaking)**

Date: October 27, 2015

Al-Amine is a Lebanese social and political activist associated with the Lebanese Civil Coalition. He is also the editor of the online journal *Al Janoubia* which focuses on issues related to the Shia community. The newspaper has taken an editorial stance against Hezbollah's intervention in Syria. Al-Amine is the son of Sheikh Ali al-Amine, the former mufti of Tyre and outspoken Hezbollah critic.

### **Mustafa Fahs (Arabic-speaking)**

Date: October 27, 2015

Fahs is a Lebanese journalist and political activist associated with the Lebanese Civil Coalition. His journalistic work has been published in several Middle Eastern newspapers. Fahs is the son of the late Shia cleric Sayyed Hani Fahs, who repeatedly voiced criticism of Hezbollah and called for Islamic-Christian dialogue.