

*What is the impact of Hizbullah's intervention in  
Syria on the party's image as a Lebanese  
national movement?*

Birgitte Skrøvje Abrahamsen



Asia and Middle East Studies  
Master's Thesis in Middle East Studies (MES4590)  
Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages  
30 credits

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

Spring 2017

© Birgitte Skrøvje Abrahamsen

2017

*What is the impact of Hizbullah's intervention in Syria on the party's image as a Lebanese national movement?*

Birgitte Skrøvje Abrahamsen

<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Print: Privat/Webergs Printshop, Oslo

# Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine whether Hizbullah's intervention in the Syrian Civil War has affected the party's image as a Lebanese national movement, a narrative it has strived to maintain ever since the 1990s, when it started downplaying its bonds to Iran and concurrently emphasizing its Lebanese identity. Based on the situation in the fall of 2016, my analysis shows that Hizbullah's discursively attempts to fit the intervention within its "Lebanonized" narrative through several strategies. It encourages national unity against what it considers a new enemy of the country, namely Islamist extremist groups; claims its role as a national protector of all Lebanese, and calls for dialogue and a political solution to the crisis. While this discourse has been recognized and reproduced by many of Hizbullah's supporters in Lebanon, the party has not managed to convince the critics. Instead, the intervention has been regarded as a provocation and provoked increased suspicion about Hizbullah's real identity. The discourse falls within the critics' broader narrative of Hizbullah as an Iranian movement, operating as a state within a state. As concluded within this thesis, the case of the intervention in Syria should be considered an example of Hizbullah's struggle to balance the contradicting components of its identity. It is also an illustration of how the wider Lebanese post-war political discussion has failed to move beyond the constrictions of sectarianism and foreign alliances.

# Acknowledgements

First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Associate Professor Jacob Høigilt at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages (University of Oslo). His excellent guidance was invaluable in this process. I could not have wished for a friendlier or more competent supervisor!

I am deeply thankful to all the people I interviewed for sharing their knowledge and time. I am very grateful to all my instructors in Arabic and Middle East Studies throughout the years: at Institut Français du Proche-Orient in Beirut and at the University of Oslo. I would also like to thank the Centre for Islamic and Middle East Studies (University of Oslo) for granting me the scholarship which made my stay in Lebanon possible.

Finally, to my dear family and friends, in Norway, Lebanon, and elsewhere: Thank you for being there for me throughout my years of study.

*Birgitte Skrøvje Abrahamsen*  
*Oslo, May 2017*

## **Note on Transliteration and Translation**

This thesis follows the transliteration system and the norms of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) which are explained on the journal's website:

<https://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/index.htm>.

I use the transliteration "Hizbullah" since this is the preferred variant of IJMES.

When citing from Hassan Nasrallah's speeches, I use Hizbullah's official English translations which are available at the party's official website, its newspaper al-'Ahd, or its Media Relations Office website.

All other translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction .....	1
2. Background and Previous Literature .....	3
2.1. Hizbullah’s Three Main Origins.....	3
2.2. The Lebanonization Process .....	9
2.3. Hizbullah and The Syrian Civil War.....	13
3. Theory and Methodology .....	15
3.1. Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method.....	15
3.2. Scope .....	17
3.3. Data Selection.....	18
3.4. Importance of Primary Documents .....	22
3.5. Using Interviews as a Source .....	22
4. The Lebanese Discourse on Hizbullah’s Intervention.....	23
4.1. Ambiguous Anti-Imperialism .....	23
4.2. Safeguarding the Nation.....	25
4.3. Cooperation and Dialogue.....	29
4.4. Religion .....	30
4.5. The Iranian Link Emphasized .....	32
4.6. Questioning Hizbullah’s Lebanonization .....	33
4.7. Destabilizing Domestic Political Processes.....	34
5. Conclusion.....	35
6. References .....	38

# 1. Introduction

Hizbullah in Lebanon is often described by scholars, journalists, and people in general as more powerful than the Lebanese state itself. Since Hizbullah entered electoral politics in 1992, the party has managed to establish itself as a dominant force within the official political system. However, its influential position in Lebanon and its popular base is also to a large degree grounded on its undertakings outside of party politics, including institution building, a media empire, a welfare system, and most importantly, its militia (Harb and Leenders 2005).

For these reasons, Hizbullah has been accused of operating as a state within a state. Hizbullah's political opponents have questioned the party's long term motives for Lebanon, arguing that its main goal is to establish an Islamic state on the basis of the Iranian model. Critics have also emphasized Hizbullah's origin as an Iranian-trained militia ('Ayash 2016). Although Hizbullah sticks to Ayatollah Khomeini's principles of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, the party simultaneously stresses its identity as a Lebanese movement.

Questions around Hizbullah's aspirations are to a large degree connected to the issue of its militia. While all other factions were demilitarized in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War, Hizbullah chose not to follow these demands. The act of keeping the militia contradicts the demands stated in the post-war Taif agreement (1990) and several United Nations resolutions which call for the disbanding of the all Lebanese militias.

While the UN and Hizbullah's political opponents argue that demilitarization of the party is necessary to secure the territorial integrity of Lebanon and to preserve peace and co-existence, Hizbullah's view is that the militia is an essential part of Lebanon's national defense, and that its main task is to work against Israeli occupation (Qassem 2010, 32-33).

Through its discourse, Hizbullah has strived to balance the various sides of their image: the Iranian link, its military nature, its Islamist ideology, its Shi'i nature, its Lebanese identity, and its role as a grassroot social movement.

The situation in Syria in 2011 highlighted these tensions. As the repressive and violent responses from the regime to the demonstrations grew, Hizbullah found itself in a tight situation. As the Arab Spring in Syria developed into a civil war, Hizbullah was hesitant to get

involved in the war or to even comment upon the happenings since it was dragged between two stances (Tohme 2016). The first one was its solidarity with the “oppressed,” the Syrian people, which is linked to its Pan-Arab ideological stance. The other one was its strategic interest with Syria as a partner in the Axis of Resistance: the strategic alliance between Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, which is defined by its opposition to Israeli and western interests in the Middle East (Sullivan 2014, 9).

With the situation in Syria, Hezbollah’s various loyalties and identities became even more evident than before. The decision to intervene in the war, officially in 2013, was for some Lebanese a sign that the group cared more about its regional interests than about its loyalty to Lebanon (al-Nahar 2016). The choice was difficult to defend for the Lebanese since the war did not directly involve Lebanon, unlike the case with the resistance activities against the Israeli occupation and the war in 2006.

So, how did Hezbollah link the intervention in Syria to the party's image as a national movement, an intervention which is highly controversial and which fights the opposition in Syria which has large bases of support in Lebanon? This leads to this thesis’ main research question:

***What is the impact of Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria on the party’s image as a Lebanese national movement?***

To examine this question, this thesis will study Hezbollah's discourse in particular and the general discourse surrounding Hezbollah in Lebanese public debate. The thesis will look into Hezbollah’s own discourse on the intervention, how it integrates the involvement into its Lebanonized discourse, and will examine some of the reactions to the intervention in Lebanese media. Does it seem like the legitimization is accepted by the Lebanese public? And does this affect the image Hezbollah strives to maintain of itself as a national movement?

The topic of Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria is a new phenomenon: the intervention was officially declared by Hassan Nasrallah in 2013 (Hashem 2013). Nevertheless, it has been treated in scholarly literature from different perspectives and with various foci. This thesis adds a new perspective in that it uses the Syrian intervention as an example of Hezbollah’s strategies of maneuvering in the Lebanese multi-sectarian political landscape, and of its pragmatic discursive strategy of adapting to changing political and historical conditions. More specifically,



it contributes to research on Hizbullah's appeal to the broad Lebanese public, and not merely its base within the Lebanese Shi'a community.

The topic is highly relevant because of the dominant, and growing, position of Hizbullah in Lebanese political life and various institutions, as well as its domination and influence over the Shi'a community in Lebanon. It is also a timely one. The war in Syria has in the time of writing entered its seventh year, and Hizbullah is still present as a combat force. The fall of 2016 also marked a new phase in the war, and is characterized by two new developments: the growing foreign involvement in the conflict, and the increasing dominance of the regime and its allies, with the retake of Aleppo in December as a major victory (Chulov 2016).

## **2. Background and Previous Literature**

In order to understand the various components of Hizbullah's identity and the evolution of its image it is necessary to go back to the roots of the movement.

### **2.1. Hizbullah's Three Main Origins**

Hizbullah's historical origins and the development of its identity have been treated extensively in scholarly literature. This background chapter bases itself on mainly three sources. Norton (2014) provides a general historical outline of the development of the group, arguing that the movement has gone through a transition from being a resistance movement linked to terrorist activities, to a serious political party, as well as arguing that it should be understood as the complex organization it is, rather than being labeled with one single term. As for a thorough review of the organizational structure of the group and the establishment of Hizbullah, Hamzeh (2004) offers one of the best and most trusted sources. Finally, on the issue of Hizbullah's ideology, mindset, and the party's stances on a number of international and national issues, Naim Qassem (2010), Deputy Secretary-General of Hizbullah since 1991, is a much used insider source in scholarship on Hizbullah.

Hizbullah was formed mainly because of three major developments that took place in Lebanon and the region in general from the 1950s and onwards.

#### ***The Political Awakening of the Shi'a Community in Lebanon***

The politicization of the Lebanese Shi'a began as early as in the 1950s. At that time, this

community was an impoverished and marginalized part of the Lebanese population, and the areas dominated by the Shi'a were underdeveloped and neglected by the Lebanese state (Alagha 2006, 22-24).

In terms of politics, the Shi'a had very limited power. This was partly due to the political system in Lebanon. Lebanese politics was and is still based on the system of *confessionalism*, which was stipulated in the unwritten al-Mithaq al-Watani (The Lebanese National Pact) from 1943. The main principle of the Lebanese confessional system is that power is shared between the various religious sects of the country.<sup>1</sup> Parliamentary seats and high-level posts in the military and the bureaucracy are allocated to the religious sects proportionally based on their population size within Lebanon. Also, the three top positions in Lebanese politics are distributed in sectarian terms: the president is always a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shi'i Muslim.

The proportionality is based on the census from 1932, in which the Shi'a represented a minority in the confessional landscape of Lebanon (19,4%) compared with the Maronites (28,8%) and the Sunnis (22,4%) (Faour 2007, 909).<sup>2</sup> However, one of the weaknesses of how the system was implemented in Lebanon was that neither the National Pact nor the Taif agreement (1989) said anything about whether and how one would adapt the system to demographic change. In 1975, the Shi'a constituted almost 30% of the Lebanese population (Hamzeh 2004, 13), which was a dramatic increase from the 1932 figures. Yet, the demographic growth was not translated into increased political power, and the Shi'a remained with limited voice in Lebanese politics.

Traditionally, the Shi'i sect had been reluctant to get involved in politics. Throughout history, the Sunnis had been unwilling to accept the Shi'a as "real islam." The Shi'a had been a minority that has been persecuted and traditionally has had little power in politics (Norton 2014, 12-13). When the Lebanese Shi'a first started engaging in politics as early as the 1950s, many of them joined various secular parties, such as communist and socialist parties (Norton 2014, 15). The

---

<sup>2</sup>The National Pact was revised in the Taif Agreement from 1989, in the aftermath of the 15 years long Lebanese Civil War. The Maronite President, for example, was given a more ceremonial role, and the governmental and parliamentary seats were divided 50-50 between Christians and Muslims. This reduced the power of the Christians, who had previously been favoured with the ration 6-5 (Maktabi 1999, 220).

formation of Hizbullah was a part of this Shi'i political revival. The group differed, however, from most of the other political groups in that it built an Islamist ideology.

The Islamist movement in Lebanon revolved to a large degree around important religious leaders. The most important one is considered to be the charismatic Islamist leader Imam Muṣā al-Ṣadr, an Iranian cleric with Lebanese roots, who came to Tyre in South Lebanon in the 1960s (Norton 2014, 17). Al-Ṣadr had pursued Islamic religious studies in the holy city of Najaf in Iraq, where most up-and-coming Lebanese clerics went to study (Qassem 2010, 63). The link to Shi'i religious education in Iraq was significant for the formation of the early inner-core of Hizbullah.

In 1974, al-Ṣadr initiated a populist social-political movement that he called Ḥarakat al-Maḥrumin (The Movement of the Oppressed) (Hamzeh 2004, 21) which aimed at improving the socio-economic living situation of the poor segments of the Lebanese population of all sects. This meant, to a large degree, the Shi'a population which was based mainly in the areas of South Lebanon, eastern Beqaa, and the southern suburbs of Beirut.

At this time, tensions increased in Lebanon over issues connected to the political system of confessional representation and PLO's presence in South Lebanon from 1970 and onwards. The discontent among Lebanese Muslims grew as the demands for a more equal power sharing system were overlooked by the Christians. The sectarian political imbalance also resulted in some regions being favored in terms of development. As mentioned earlier, the Shi'i areas were low on the priority list of Lebanese governments.

Sectarian political imbalance was one of the main reasons for the Lebanese Civil War (Makdisi and Sadaka 2003, 9-11). In general, the war was a consequence of a larger struggle concerning the identity and the future of Lebanon. While the Muslim communities were leaning towards the ideology of Arab nationalism, the Christians were more interested in keeping their ties to the Western world. Especially when the PLO was expelled from Jordan in 1970 and established a new main base in South Lebanon, this division grew even more, and culminated in the civil war which broke out in 1975 and lasted until 1990.

During the Lebanese Civil War, the Shi'a activists that would later be a part of Hizbullah operated in various groups. Among the militias that fought in the war was the military wing of

al-Ṣadr's Movement of the Oppressed, which was given the name Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya (Amal). Hizbullah was to a large degree formed by former Amal movement members and clerics affiliated with Ḥizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya (The Party of the Islamic Call) (Hamzeh 2004, 22), a movement and Iraqi party which was founded in Najaf in the 1950s and which worked against Western influence and the secularization of Iraqi society (Bernhardt 2016).

In Hizbullah's first years, the movement was less a strict and centralized organization than an underground network. Several groups that conducted militant operations and kidnappings of especially Western targets in the 1980s were linked to what was to become the organization of Hizbullah. This was certainly the case for the group known as Ḥarakat al-Jihad al-Islami (Islamic Jihad), which is believed to have been a part of this network, and carried out the attack on the US military barracks in 1983, which was one of the deadliest attacks in US history (Hamzeh 2004, 82-86). As Norton comments, many of the kidnappings, suicide bombings, and other attacks by the network are strongly believed to have been more or less directed by Iran (Norton 2014, 78).

To conclude, one of the roots of Hizbullah's establishment is the cause of the marginalized Shi'i community in Lebanon. Hizbullah has certainly succeeded in giving the Shi'a a voice, as it today is considered to be the most powerful political force in Lebanon. The connection to the Shi'i cause naturally formed Hizbullah's identity as a sectarian party, as it was promoting the rights of the Shi'a. Naturally, the Shi'i identity was even more expressed in the Civil War, which was fought along confessional lines. However, al-Ṣadr's project was originally aimed at improving the living situation of all poor Lebanese. Nevertheless, Shi'ism remains an important part of Hizbullah's identity, and another vital reason for this is the movement's close relationship to Iran and in particular its implementation of Khomeini's ideology *wilāyat al-faqīh*.

### ***The 1979 Iranian Revolution and its Aftermath***

The Iranian Revolution was a major boost for the Lebanese Shi'a activists. The fact that the Iranian revolutions managed to overthrow a corrupt and western-allied Shah to establish a political system based on Islam, inspired the activists in Lebanon to continue the struggle (Hamzeh 2004, 18). Iran supported the creation of Hizbullah militarily and financially. It sent the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) to train the Hizbullah militiamen in the Beqaa valley so that

they could better confront the Israelis (Hamzeh 2004, 24). Still today, Iran supports Hizbullah financially, but figures concerning this support are not publicly available, as is the case for much of the information concerning Hizbullah. The U.S. Department of Defense estimated in a report from 2010 that the annual support was around USD 100-200 million (U.S. Department of Defense 2010, 8).

There is no doubt that the revolution in Iran, and the Islamic character the Iranian state would adopt, was one of the main reasons for the establishment of Hizbullah, as well as its future identity. With Hizbullah, Iran managed to contribute to the creation of regional power over which it could exercise much influence and which would adopt some of the same aspirations and ideology as the Iranian state.

The ideology was the doctrine of the *wilāyat al-faqīh*., which Ayatollah Khomeini developed during and in the aftermath of the revolution, and which became the ideological foundation of the new state system. Qassem (2010) emphasizes the importance of the religion of Islam and the ideology of Khomeini for the group. For example, Qassem lists “Belief in Islam” and “Jurisdiction of the Jurist-Theologian” as two of the three main ideological pillars of Hizbullah (Qassem 2010, 67-123).

As Hizbullah clearly stated in its first official declaration, Al-Risala al-Maftuḥa (“The Open Letter” 1985) in which it outlined its goals and its ideological pillars at the time, the group adopted the doctrine of *wilāyat al-faqīh*. According to this doctrine, the religion of Islam provides guidelines to all aspects of life, and it should be present both in the private and the public sphere, including politics. In the absence of the Hidden Imam and as a continuation of the line of the 12 imams, the jurist-guardian (*al-wāli al-faqīh*) should act as the leader of the society, both religiously and politically (Kverme 2012). In effect, Hizbullah follows the orders of the Supreme Leader, the first one being Ruhollah Khomeini, the second one (and present one) Ali Khamenei.

The Iranian, and Hizbullah’s version of Islamism, is based on Shi‘ism. Shi‘i motives are also being used actively in Hizbullah’s general discourse and has in this way shaped the nature of the movement. Religious expressions are common in the speeches of Hassan Nasrallah, so are the references to Husayn, the son of ‘Ali, whom Hizbullah portrays as a revolutionary hero in its discourse (see, for example, Nasrallah 2016b). His martyrdom, as well as the general

struggle of the Shi'a and their fight against discrimination and for recognition are being linked to the project of resistance and the fight against injustice that Hizbullah promotes. The image of Hizbullah as an organization for Shi'a only, its ideological base of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, and the importance of Shi'i religious motives in its discourse have been some of the obstacles for Hizbullah in its attempts to appear as a national movement for all Lebanese.

As for their regional strategies of Iran, one of the main pillars in Iranian politics is the resistance against Israel. The historical timing of the Israeli invasions of Lebanon and its growing involvement in the Lebanese Civil War combined with the Islamists' victory in Iran, explain much of the reason for Hizbullah's birth as a resistance movement and the influence from Iran on the movement (Hamzeh 2004).

Due to the close relationship with Iran, as well as the strategic alliance with Syria later on, Hizbullah is not only bound to its national responsibilities but also to its regional ones. Hizbullah is seen by many as an Iranian proxy in Lebanon which puts its Iranian commitments before its Lebanese ones. However, Hizbullah has also been popular not only among the Shi'a but also the non-Shi'a in Lebanon in its role as a resistance movement. The Israeli interventions in the Lebanese Civil War and the following occupation is the third and decisive factor which triggered the establishment of Hizbullah and shaped its identity as a group.

### ***The Israeli Interventions and the Occupation of South Lebanon***

This is a decisive factor in the creation of Hizbullah. After Black September in Jordan in 1970, the PLO headquarter was forced to relocate to Shi'a-dominated South Lebanon to continue its resistance operations from there. The Israelis eventually invaded South Lebanon, first in 1978, with the aim of ending the presence of the PLO in the area. In the first years of the PLO's presence in South Lebanon, the Shi'a were generally welcoming to them, and supported the resistance movement in solidarity with what they saw as their Arab brothers and sisters. Many also joined the ranks of the guerilla movements (Hamzeh 2004, 15-16).

However, many of the Lebanese in South Lebanon also feared that the Palestinians would become too dominant. The Shi'a feared that that the PLO wanted to set up a Palestinian state within a state in South Lebanon, and they witnessed what they considered a poor military performance by the resistance groups (Hamzeh 2004, 15,17). As Norton remarks, many Shi'a actually took a positive stance towards the Israeli invasion in 1978 (Norton 2014, 33). But the

Shi'a suffered high casualties during the first invasion, and with the second one in 1982, and the occupation that followed, the support for the resistance grew in the area. This triggered the formation of Hizbullah and strengthened its position as a resistance movement among the Shi'a in particular (Hamzeh 2004, 17).

With the presence of the three factors previously mentioned: the political awakening of the Shi'a, the Iranian revolution, and the Israeli interventions, the Shi'a activists eventually formed a more or less consistent group that later would become known under the name of Hizbullah, which managed to gain support in the Shi'a community. Even though there were several groups that conducted resistance activities against the Israeli occupation, Hizbullah soon grew to become the strongest opposition force, known for its skillfully planned operations (Norton 2014, 80). The group attacked not only the Israelis themselves, but also Israel's international and Lebanese allies, in accordance with their ideological stance against imperialist intervention in the Middle East. Although the group "Hizbullah" did not exist as a defined entity before it officially declared itself through the Open Letter in 1985, it constituted of networks that operated on the same principles (Norton 2014, 34).

## **2.2. The Lebanonization Process**

When the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990, Hizbullah stood at a crossroads. The group had so far refused to take part in party politics, as they viewed the Lebanese political system as corrupt and unjust (Hizbullah 1985). The civil war had put electoral politics on hold. But when the first parliamentary elections in post-war Lebanon were planned for 1992, Hizbullah had to choose between continuing to operate as a militia, parallel to the state, or joining the political system as a conventional party. Hizbullah chose the latter option.

By doing so, it shifted its course as a movement. It had to moderate its behavior since it was now a political party and had to play by the rules. The tone of its discourse shifted, and it talked of cooperation and co-existence. It strived towards portraying itself as a national, moderate and pragmatic movement, serving the interests of all Lebanese alike (Khatib, Matar and Alshaer 2014, 3-4). The following passage from Qassem (2010, 345) shows a typical example of such discourse:

*Lebanon needs to be a stable abode for all Lebanese, where outsiders should not be allowed to interfere either in land or in the manner of living. Lebanon's particularity as a nation of various*

*sects is an issue of paramount importance, and dialogue should be fostered to organize differences in lieu of submitting to the whims and desires of others.*

The passage highlights Hizbullah's new discourse which indicates a new openness towards plurality, dialogue, and stability.

Most importantly, the party changed its discourse and attitude to the Lebanese political system. In the Open Letter, Hizbullah calls the political system in Lebanon "rotten," and the group "could not care less about the creation of this or that governmental coalition or about the participation of this or that political personality in some ministerial post, which is but a part of this unjust regime" (Hizbullah 1985). This complete rejection of the system was revised after the end of the war, when Hizbullah pragmatically chose to change its path and enter electoral politics. Nevertheless, Hizbullah has never abandoned the goal of establishing an Islamic state in Lebanon. This remains a long-term goal in Hizbullah's ideology. It should be mentioned that the group has never expressed the wish to impose an Islamic state by force, only through the will of the people (al-Khalij 1986).

Joseph Alagha, one of the main sources in scholarly literature on Hizbullah's creation of identity, argues that the participation of Hizbullah in a pluralist political context and changing political and social settings are two main reasons for the Lebanonization process of the movement (Alagha 2013). In terms of its actual behavior, the party participated in electoral politics through national and local elections. It has been represented in parliament and in government, and it has issued election programs. In terms of cross-sectarian cooperation, the dialogue with the Christian communities is an important development. The alliance with Michel Aoun and his Christian party Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) from 2006 was a main result in this regard which Alagha even has called "a major step towards hegemony" (Alagha 2013, 112).

When Israel finally pulled out from Lebanon in 2000 and ended its 22 years long occupation in its neighbor country, Hizbullah seemingly lost much of its *raison d'être*. Hizbullah had based its existence and legitimacy on its nature as a militant movement in the resistance against the Israelis. The mission of forcing the Israelis out of South Lebanon was completed, so what would Hizbullah do now that its main rationale was gone? How would the movement prove that its militia was still relevant for Lebanon?



The event shed light on some of the problematic contradictions in Hizbullah's nature. On the one hand, the party functions in some ways as a conventional political party. It participates in elections, and has been in governments and in parliament. At the time of writing, Hizbullah and its pro-Syrian allies in the 8th of March coalition dominate the cabinet formed in December 2016 (L'Orient-Le Jour 2016a). The Party also holds 12 seats in the current 128-seats Parliament.

In other ways, the organization functions as a state within a state. Hizbullah argues that it merely assumes the responsibilities which the Lebanese state is not able to take in the Shi'a strongholds. Examples of this are providing health care and other social services, building hospitals and schools. The rebuilding of destroyed areas in the aftermath of the Israeli occupations of South Lebanon, as well as the southern suburbs of Beirut after the 2006 war, made Hizbullah even more popular among the Shi'a as it proved to be an actor that took the responsibility for its own community (Alagha 2013, 116-117). As Harb and Lenders (2005) argue, much of Hizbullah's success in consolidating the support of the Lebanese Shi'a is explained by the party's ability to create a holistic system of social welfare, resources, and institutions in which the idea of "resistance" is central in all aspects of life.

The Lebanonization process did not mean that Hizbullah revised all parts of its goals and ideology. They remained mostly the same. However, some issues were downplayed in the discourse. One important example is the long-term goal of establishing an Islamic State in Lebanon, which was stated as early as in the Open Letter. This is still Hizbullah's vision, and probably will be, as long as it is under the influence of Iran. However, Hizbullah has downplayed this issue in order to gather broad support from the Lebanese population and to facilitate cross-sectarian cooperation in the political sphere (Khatib, Matar, and Alshaer 2014, 16). Indeed, the Lebanonization process of Hizbullah is an example of how the party is pragmatic in its nature, and how it adopts its communication strategy to changing circumstances. This practice has been a vital factor to the group's survival and popularity (Khatib, Matar, and Alshaer 2014).

Despite Hizbullah's makeover in discourse and behavior, the credibility of the party's national image and its loyalty to Lebanon have been tested several times.

The assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Ḥariri is one example. The assassination of al-Ḥariri is still under investigation, and it is widely believed that Hizbullah conducted the operation with backing from Syrian security officials (Lynch 2010). Hizbullah denies this, but the movement is under big pressure since five of its members, including military commander Muṣṭafa Badr al-Din, who died in Syria in 2016, are indicted by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) (al-Monitor 2016) which is responsible for the investigation of the killing.

Obviously, Hizbullah's militia is a controversial issue in Lebanon since it opposes the principle of the total disarmament and disbanding of all Lebanese militias which was stipulated in the Taif-agreement of 1990 and the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701. Hizbullah itself argues that the militia is a necessity for the protection of Lebanon and that if the nation's goal is to build a strong state that is able to defend itself, then the "resistance should be considered an instrument of the state and not in competition with it" (Qassem 2010, 53).

However, Hizbullah has surpassed the limits of only using the militia to defend national objectives. The party has several times used its weapons to protect its own interests as a party against its fellow Lebanese. One example of how Hizbullah has misused its military strength is in the communication networks crisis. In May 2008, Hizbullah occupied West Beirut as a reaction to the dismissal of the pro-Hizbullah head of security of Beirut airport by the cabinet that wished to investigate an independent phone network, set up by Hizbullah (Norton 2014, 168-169).

Clearly Hizbullah's image is many-sided, and there is tension between these sides. The contradiction in Hizbullah's nature as a movement can be expressed in two binary pairs. The movement is at once sectarian and national, and at once a resistance movement and a regional player that operates along the lines of *realpolitik*.

One illustrating example of how Hizbullah struggles to function as a player within national pluralist politics is its stance on Palestine. As Høigilt (2007) explains, the hard-line stance Hizbullah has taken on the Palestinian case is an obstacle for its image as a pluralist movement, as it refuses all discussion on the matter with the other Lebanese parties. This case shows the limits of Hizbullah as a nationalist party, as the unwillingness to discuss on a matter that is

clearly controversial, given Lebanon's history, shows that the party is not willing to go all in for the national cause.

### **2.3. Hizbullah and The Syrian Civil War**

It might seem that Hizbullah's stance on the Syrian Civil War is similar to the Palestinian issue in that it exposes contradictions and tension between the various sides of Hizbullah's image.

The Syrian case was tricky for Hizbullah as it was forced to choose between keeping its commitments as a resistance movement and defending the Muslims' right to protest for justice against oppressive regimes on the one hand, and preserving its relations to Iran and Syria on the other. It was clear that Hizbullah was not sure what to do in the beginning of the uprising in Syria. The movement was hesitant to comment on the events in Syria and on the increasingly violent reactions of the regime against the demonstrators (Blanford 2016). In contrast, it did not hesitate to declare its solidarity with the Arab demonstrators in Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen by devoting a whole speech to the topic of the Arab uprisings (Nasrallah 2011).

When it became clear that the Assad regime would not fall after a few months after the start of the demonstrations, Hizbullah discreetly started involving itself in the war in Syria. While the engagement was limited to sending a few military advisors in the first phase of the war, as was confirmed by Hizbullah, it increased over the course of the months. Soon, Hizbullah militiamen were observed in various locations in Syria (Blanford 2016). In May 2013, Hizbullah confirmed that it had sent fighters to Syria, and more important, that the movement considered the fight against the opposition as its own (Hashem 2013).

The intervention has so far caused negative reactions in Lebanon from Hizbullah's political opponents. In 2016, Hizbullah was accused of slowing down the nomination process for the presidential elections. Its opponents argued that a political deadlock fitted Hizbullah's situation as the movement could avoid being confronted on the Syria involvement in a country with no president and a dysfunctional government. In general, the military intervention has caused increased sectarian tension and several deadly suicide attacks and car bombs, most of them in Shi'a strongholds.<sup>3</sup> The deadliest attack after 2011 occurred in South Beirut's Burj al-Barajneh

---

<sup>3</sup> See Alex Rowell's outline of the bombings that have occurred in Lebanon since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 (Rowell 2016a).

in November 2015. It killed 47 people and wounded about 200 (The Daily Star 2016b). In terms of sectarian tension, the influential Egyptian cleric Yousuf al-Qaradawi called Hizbullah “the party of the devil,” and encouraged Sunnis to fight the group in Syria (al-‘Arabiya English 2013b). In Lebanon, Sunni clerics have also called for jihad against Hizbullah (al-‘Arabiya English 2013a), and the tension has materialized as lethal clashes and increased recruitment of Sunnis to Syrian opposition groups, especially in the city of Tripoli (Norton 2014, 192).

Despite the increasingly unstable and tense conditions in Lebanon, Hizbullah seems to be determined to continue its involvement until Assad’s victory. Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem said in an interview in October 2016 that the group will continue to fight in Syria as long as the *takfirī* threat is present, “whatever the price is” (al-Manar English 2016). The Assad alliance’s advances in Syria during the fall of 2016, with the capture of East Aleppo in December, make it even more likely that Hizbullah will continue to stay engaged in Syria.

Domestic Lebanese political life was more or less in a state of a deadlock in August 2016. By then, Lebanon had been without a president for more than two and a half years, since Michel Suleiman left office in May 2014. The lack of president was the main issue that needed to be resolved. The parliament, which elects the president, had by then failed all the election attempts. The reason was a lack of the two-thirds quorum that a candidate needs to be selected as president. The Loyalty of the Resistance-block, led by Hizbullah, and the Change and Reform block, led by Aoun's party Free Patriotic Movement, had an average MP attendance of respectively 2% and 3% only in 43 of the 50 election rounds (Rowell 2016b).

In Lebanese public debate, Hizbullah and its allies has been accused of bearing much of the responsibility for the political deadlock Lebanon between May 2014 and October 2016 when the country was without a President. The reason is that several times, Hizbullah and its Christian Allies in Michel Aoun’s party the Free Patriotic Movement boycotted the parliamentary sessions. In most cases, the boycotts resulted in lack of quorum (at least two-third of the 128 MPs have to be present) and consequently the failure of electing a new president.

Despite much controversy, criticism, and impact on Lebanese domestic politics, the party doesn't seem to have any plan of pulling out of Syria. The question is: Will it sacrifice its credibility as a national, responsible, and moderate Lebanese party in order to maintain geo-

political interests, or does it manage to discursively link these interests to objectives that seem favourable to a larger mass of the Lebanese population and political sphere?

### **3. Theory and Methodology**

#### **3.1. Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method**

The methodology of this thesis is based on the assumption that the study of human products like texts and actions “is fundamentally and inescapably a matter of understanding and interpretation” (Thompson 1990, 274). One of the main ideas within the tradition of interpretation in the humanities is the process of the *hermeneutical circle*. This is the circular process of understanding the element in relation to the whole, and the whole in relation to the element (Jordheim et al. 2008, 226-230). In this thesis, I look at the relationship between the discourse on Hizbullah’s intervention in the Syrian Civil War, “the element”, and its general image as a Lebanonized, national movement, the “whole”. How do these parts affect each other? Also, there is a circular movement in my own understanding of the topic. As an analyst, I make my own interpretation and this will inevitably, to some degree, be shaped by my own pre-understandings, knowledge, and values. As according to the tradition of humanities, how we understand something is dependent on what we already know.

The interpretation in this thesis is carried out through a discourse analysis. Various definitions of the term *discourse* exist. I will lean on the definition that discourse is “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 1).

According to this definition, discourse analysis bases itself on the idea that language is never neutral. Rather, it has an important role in shaping our reality. *How* we discuss a subject can indicate how we interpret the world around us. Also, the type of discourse that we use and that surrounds us can influence our opinions and consequently, it can affect our own and others’ future actions (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 5-6).

I am also leaning on Fairclough’s idea that discourse is not only limiting people’s actions. Rather, it can also be used by individuals in their own interests as a way of framing their actions (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 62). This is particularly evident in the case of Hizbullah, as its

way of adapting its communication strategies to changing historical situations and events has been crucial for its ability to maintain its dominant position in Lebanon (Khatib, Matar, and Alshaer 2014)

Further, discourse analysis is connected to the theory of *social constructionism*. This theory exists in different variants and is used in many disciplines, such as psychology and sociology. It is difficult to sum up social constructionism in *one* definition. Instead, as Burr (1995) explains, social constructionism is based on several assumptions. It is based on the idea that it is impossible to obtain an objective understanding of the world, since understanding of knowledge is a social construction, which is culturally and historically dependent on our circumstances. Burr (1995) also emphasizes another main trait of social constructionism, which is that our actions depend on our constructions of knowledge.

In this analysis, I am making an attempt to identify and describe the various discourses that are present on the topic, both in Hizbullah's argumentation as well as the reactions in the general public discussion in Lebanese media. How do these actors frame the intervention in Syria? Do they identify a contradiction between the intervention and Hizbullah's image as a national movement?

Through discourse analysis, I try to define how the various discourses are dealing with Hizbullah's intervention. I will examine how the discourses construct their arguments, identify key concepts that are recurrent in the discourses, and examine grammatical structures. The ultimate goal is to identify how the discourses on the Syrian intervention can play a role in the reshaping or continuation of Hizbullah's image as a Lebanonized movement.

I have organized the content of the discourses according to the various *topoi* I have identified. The concept of *topos* (pl. *topoi*) originates from Aristotelian rhetorics. In scholarly literature, there exists some disagreement regarding the definition of this concept, as Aristotle offered various descriptions of the word (Žagar 2010, 17). Hence, I will lean on one definition of *topoi* which has been used in the scholarly field of discourse analysis:

*[...]parts of argumentation which belong to the obligatory, either explicit or inferable premises. They are the content-related warrants or 'conclusion rules' which connect the argument or*

*arguments with the conclusion, the claim. As such, they justify the transition from the argument or arguments to the conclusion* (Kienpointner 1992: 194, as cited in Žagar 2010, 5).

Thus, warrants are underlying structures in the topoi. Actors use topoi to convince someone or to argue for their case. One example of a topos is “danger”, with the underlying warrant: “If there are specific dangers or threats, one should do something about them” (Boukala 2016, 258).

### **3.2. Scope**

The thesis limits its focus to the events of the fall of 2016. During this period, there was a lot of discussion in Lebanese media concerning Hizbullah’s domestic role connected to the presidential elections. In August 2016, the country had been without a president for two and a half years. Hizbullah and its allies in Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement boycotted the parliament session and hindered a quorum and consequently the election of a president. However, the situation within Lebanese politics also saw a great change during the fall of 2016, as parliament on October 31, 2016 finally succeeded in electing Lebanon’s new president, Hizbullah’s candidate, Michel Aoun.

Another reason why it is interesting to look at this time period is that the situation in Syria also changed in that Assad’s allies, including Hizbullah, made great advances, which culminated in the capture of East Aleppo in December 2016.

In terms of Hizbullah’s own narrative during this period, it seems to have landed on a main argument, whereas it in the first years of the Syrian conflict it was more hesitant and deployed various arguments to justify its involvement.

During the fall of 2016, the main argument of Hizbullah was the safekeeping-argument. In Hizbullah’s view, the party was simply protecting Lebanon from the threat of terrorist groups which were present in Syria. The development of the various jihadi groups has strengthened this argument, as various groups such as the Islamic State or Jabhat Fath al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nuṣra) gained a stronger position in Syria throughout the conflict.

The fall of 2016 was also the period when I conducted field work in Lebanon and was able to keep a close look on developments, to follow the media picture, and discuss current issues with my informants and people in general.

Naturally, as this thesis is limited in terms of length, the amount of data on which it bases itself is restricted as well. With this in mind, I found fall 2016 an interesting period.

### **3.3. Data Selection**

I am basing my analysis on op-eds, editorials, and articles from various Lebanese media outlets, speeches from Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, and interviews with experts in the field. While most of these sources are used as primary data material as a basis for the analysis, the interviews with academics and journalists (Calabrese, Tohme, Blanford, and Khashan) who do not operate as political actors, are used more as secondary sources.

#### ***Media Articles***

I have selected media texts from various Lebanese channels. Most of them are op-eds from two of the main newspapers in Lebanon, al-Nahar and al-Safir<sup>4</sup>. These two newspapers were not only the most widely distributed in Lebanon, but they also represent opposing political views. Al-Nahar is in general rightist, critical to the Syrian regime, and expresses the main views of the 14<sup>th</sup> of March alliance. Al-Safir, its main competitor, is leftist, supports the Syrian regime, and is seen as a voice of the 8<sup>th</sup> of March alliance (Dragomir, Thompson and Jamaï 2012, 20-21). Al-Mustaqbal is owned by and expresses the opinions of the political party Tayyar Al-Mustaqbal (Future Movement) (Dragomir, Thompson and Jamaï 2012, 20-21). L'Orient-Le Jour is the only francophone newspaper in Lebanon, and is similar to al-Nahar in its ideological orientation (US Embassy Beirut 2008). NOW is a popular Lebanese online news webpage and its views are considered to be critical towards Hizbullah and supporting the views of the 14<sup>th</sup> of March alliance and the Future Movement (Dragomir, Thompson and Jamaï 2012, 22). The transcript of President Aoun's speech was found on the Presidency of the Lebanese Republic's website.

#### ***Speeches***

Hizbullah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's speeches reach a wide audience and are often

---

<sup>4</sup> Al-Safir went out of production in the end of December 2016, due to financial problems (Hamada 2017).



commented upon in media. I have not included all of Nasrallah's speeches from the fall of 2016 in my data collection. Rather, I have selected the speeches that are most relevant for the topic, in other words, the ones which comment upon the group's involvement in Syria, and the ones that communicate points which seem to be recurrent in the discourse.

### *Interviews*

I have interviewed seven individuals that possess an expertise on the subject of Hizbullah and its involvement in Syria: three academics, one legal expert, one journalist, one Hizbullah party member, and one prominent Lebanese Shi'i cleric. As some are critical and others supportive of Hizbullah's intervention, the interviews have provided me with the big picture of the case and introduced me to the various arguments and discourses on both sides.

### *Media texts*

Date	Author	Title	Source	Type of text	Main topic
August 15, 2016	طلال سلمان	خطاب الحد الفاصل بين "الجهاد" والإرهاب	السفير	Editorial	The author comments on a speech of Nasrallah. He praises Hizbullah's fight against the opposition, and warns that the opposition groups will ruin the name of Islam.
October 1, 2016	ابراهيم حيدر	شباب "حزب الله": ماذا بعد سوريا؟	النهار	Op-ed	The author queries the issue of what will happen with Hizbullah's fighters after the end of Syrian Civil War.
October 9, 2016	علي الحسيني	"حزب الله" في سوريا... "المكتسبات" قبل التسويات	المستقبل	Op-ed	Criticism of Hizbullah's intervention. The author argues Hizbullah is more concerned with gaining territory than with reaching political solutions.

October 26, 2016	سامي كليب	بين "الثائر" و "الإرهاب"	السفير	Op-ed	The author argues that the Syrian Civil War is one of the causes of the political crisis in Lebanon, and that sectarianism has reached a peak since Taif.
October 31, 2016	مشال عون	خطاب القسم الذي تلاه رئيس الجمهورية العماد ميشال عون فور اعلان انتخابه في مجلس النواب	Presidency of the Lebanese Republic's website.	Inauguration speech of President Michel Aoun	The President comes with ambiguous statements: the need to isolate Lebanon from regional conflicts, but also fight terrorism pre-emptively.
November 1, 2016	Hussain Abdul-Hussain	"Aoun declares Lebanon's alignment with Iran, Hezbollah and Assad"	NOW	Op-ed	The author warns that with Aoun as President, Lebanon will head in a more Hizbullah-friendly direction.
November 20, 2016	ابراهيم حيدر	جيش "حزب الله" في سوريا بدل المقاومة... القصير قاعدة خلفية والمعركة ما بعد حلب	النهار	Op-ed	Reaction to the military parade of Hizbullah. Hizbullah is more of an army than a resistance movement.
November 26, 2016	أحمد عياش	جيشان: الجيش و"حزب الله"	النهار	Op-ed	On Hizbullah's military activities. Hizbullah carries the Lebanese identity, but in reality, it is an Iranian militia.
December 24, 2016	-	"Souhaid :Les Libanais ont renoncé à leur souveraineté au profit du Hezbollah"	L'Orient-Le Jour	News article	Secretary-General of 14 <sup>th</sup> of March says Lebanon has given up its national sovereignty to Hizbullah.

### *Speeches by Hassan Nasrallah*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Occasion</b>	<b>Main topic</b>
August 13, 2016	Ceremony marking 10 year anniversary of the «Divine Victory» in the war against Israel in 2006 (Location: Bint Jbeil).	Hassan Nasrallah emphasizes the importance of the resistance in the region and why Hizbullah's fight in Syria is necessary for the future of Lebanon and the region in general.
October 11, 2016	10 <sup>th</sup> day of Muharram. 'Ashura'. (Location: Sayyid al-Shouhada' complex, Beirut).	Hassan Nasrallah elaborates on the war in Syria and motivations.
November 4, 2016	Ceremony held in honor of late leader Mustafa Shehadeh (Location: unknown).	Hassan Nasrallah comments upon the victory of Michel Aoun and the accusations against Hizbullah for benefiting from the presidential vacuum.
December 23, 2016	Speech to Hizbullah university students at an academic ceremony in Beirut (Location: unknown).	Hassan Nasrallah comments upon the recent developments in Syria and the victory in Aleppo.

### *Interviews*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
October 25, 2016	Erminia C. Calabrese	Researcher in political sociology. Author of new book (2016) on the militants of Hizbullah.	L'insitut de recherches et d'études sur le monde arabe et musulman (IREMAM).
October 26, 2016	Omar Nashabe	Newspaper editor, legal expert at the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, university lecturer. Pro-Hizbullah.	Al-Akhbar (pro-Hizbullah newspaper), Lebanese American University (LAU), Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL).
October 27, 2016	Hicham Tohme	Researcher and lecturer on media and politics. Pro-Hizbullah.	American University in Beirut (AUB).
November 4, 2016	Nicholas Blanford	Journalist and author. Interested in Hizbullah's military activities.	The Christian Science Monitor, The Daily Star, NOW, The Times, and others.
November 15 and 24, 2016	Hilal Khashan	Professor of Political Science and Department Chairperson. Anti-Hizbullah.	American University of Beirut (AUB).
November 13 and 24, 2016	The interviewee wished to remain anonymous	Party-member.	Hizbullah.
May 11, 2017	Sayyid Ali Fadlallah	Lebanese Shi'i Cleric	The Shi'i religious establishment in Lebanon.

### **3.4. Importance of Primary Documents**

Working with primary sources is valuable in all social sciences and in the humanities. Vitalis (2006) argues that archival research, in other words the study of primary documents, is essential for all social scientists who wish to treat historical topics. By basing the study on primary documents, and in my case, mostly in Arabic, the researcher might be able to discover new aspects in the texts, or interpret them differently than what has been done previously. Without this direct contact with primary sources, the result can easily become a reproduction of other researchers' arguments, without the scholar being able to use first-hand sources to directly support or reject her arguments (Vitalis 2006).

One of the limits of a discourse analysis is the difficulty of choosing a fair selection of data which is representative for the various opinions in the public sphere. In my case, this is particularly difficult due to restraints of time and the limited length of the thesis. However, I believe the material I have chosen provides examples of the main fault lines in Lebanese public debate.

### **3.5. Using Interviews as a Source**

I have been using elite interviewing as a data collection method. "Elite" can be defined in many ways, but in my case, this points to individuals that are public figures in Lebanese society, academia, media or politics, and/or have a special competence and knowledge on Hizbullah.

Interviewing can be useful in verifying or challenging content from data that has been collected previously, and to gain new insight or angles on a certain topic. It can also, in some cases, provide inside information on topics where textual information is not always publicly accessible or existing. Nevertheless, interviewing in social sciences can also be methodologically problematic in some ways.

One of the major drawbacks of qualitative interviewing is that the information that is produced through the interview can be subjective (Richards 1996). One example of this is that the interviewee can be biased in that he only provides information that supports his argument or point of view, or changes the story slightly to appear more sympathetic. Moreover, the data the researcher acquires from the interview can sometimes be dubious simply because it relies on

human memory, which is not 100 percent dependable. People can forget and mix up facts and events.

Hizbullah's military involvement in Syria can be a controversial conversation topic for some. In the case of my interviewees, I don't consider this to be an issue. Except for the party member, my interviewees are all public figures who write and talk regularly in public about the topic. Nevertheless, I made sure to follow standard etiquette. At the start of the interview, I always made sure to ask whether the interviewee agreed to tape-recording, whether they wanted to remain anonymous, and also informed them that the data could be used for my thesis. Three did not agree to tape recording and only one asked to stay anonymous.

## **4. The Lebanese Discourse on Hizbullah's Intervention**

### **4.1. Ambiguous Anti-Imperialism**

An important topos in Hizbullah's discourse on the intervention in Syria is anti-imperialism. The party warns that without the Axis of Resistance, the Middle East will fall to what Hizbullah considers to be the imperialist powers, mainly the U.S. and Israel, and their projects in the Middle East. In Hizbullah's view, the Western alliance is cooperating with the *takfīrī*-groups, the term it uses to refer to the opposition in the Syrian Civil War. According to Hizbullah, they serve Western and Israeli interests in the region, and they want a weak and fragmented Syria that is no threat to Israel:

*The aim is that Syria falls, becomes feeble, becomes distorted and divided, for the sake of the eyes of their "Israeli" friend and ally [...] They want the battle to continue in Syria and bloodshed to continue. This is what America wants, and this is what "Israel" wants, and this is what is backed by some regional and Gulf states (Nasrallah 2016b).*

In this way, Hizbullah discursively links its fighting in Syria to its general worldview: everything that happens in the region should be seen in terms of the rivalry between the two main forces competing for influence in the Middle East. These forces are, in Hizbullah's worldview, the Americans and the Israelis, first and foremost, on the one hand; and on the other, the Axis of Resistance: Iran, Syria, and Hizbullah. Hizbullah classifies every actor in the region in one of these two categories.

The resistance project is understood by Hizbullah as the only viable way of maintaining the Lebanese nation's dignity and sovereignty. According to Hizbullah, the party needs to defend Syria, which they see as vital for the resistance, in order for the axis to survive: “[...] Syria was, and still is, and will become the main chain in the axis of the resistance.” (Nasrallah 2016b).

Hence, Hizbullah presents the intervention as a national cause. In the eyes of the party, and in line with its Lebanonized discourse, the protection of the resistance movement is indeed a Lebanese project. Hassan Nasrallah goes so far as to claim that that "The future of Lebanon is the Resistance, the future of Palestine is the Resistance, and the future of Syria is the Resistance" (Nasrallah 2016a). He continues: “The future of the region is the futures of our peoples and our nation and its dignity, pride and sovereignty” (Nasrallah 2016a). However, the dedication to the resistance is definitely not a feeling which is shared by all Lebanese. Hizbullah’s rationale of sustaining the resistance activities after the end of the Israeli occupation was never accepted by many Lebanese (Norton 2014, 117-118). It is also peculiar that Nasrallah uses the word “sovereignty”. In this context, the word most likely points to independence from foreign intervention in the region and should be interpreted as Pan-Arab sovereignty rather than Lebanese sovereignty.

Interestingly, Hizbullah does not elaborate on the ironic fact that Hizbullah and the United States in some way are allies in the Syrian War. Given that the U.S. is engaged in the international coalition against IS, the two have a common enemy. This is a point which does not fit in the anti-imperialist narrative of Hizbullah. As a comment on the issue, a Hizbullah supporter points instead to the inconsistent strategy of the Western powers, which in his eyes is contradictory:

*Because the biggest enemy of France and the French people, French society, and the biggest enemy of peace in Europe, is Daesh [IS]. And Hizbullah is the leading, most efficient power on Syrian soil fighting Daesh. So, how ironic, oh, what an inconsistent policy that actually considers Hizbullah as an enemy and its intervention in Syria as illegitimate* (Nashabe 2016).

Hizbullah is often mentioned as a threat to national "sovereignty." It has been a recurrent theme in public discourse since fall 2016, parallel to the increasing influence of Hizbullah on national processes. The Secretary General of the 14<sup>th</sup> of March Movement, Farès Souhaid, warned

towards the end of December 2016 against the increasingly dominant role of Hizbullah in Lebanon (L'Orient-Le Jour 2016b). Referring to the latest development in Lebanon, including the formation of a new government, the discussions on the new election law, and the military activities of Hizbullah, Souhaid termed the group "an organization that is similar to an independent mini-state."<sup>5</sup> Souhaid called Hizbullah's current position in Lebanese politics a "stranglehold"<sup>6</sup>, and said that the "Lebanese have given up their national sovereignty to the benefit of the Party of God." The statements of Souhaid express worry about Hizbullah's increasingly dominant role in Lebanese political life and the failure of guarding national sovereignty. An underlying notion in Souhaid's comments is that Hizbullah has ambitions that are contradictory to those of the Lebanese state, and that it is a threat to national interests.

#### **4.2. Safeguarding the Nation**

Hizbullah uses the topos of safeguarding in its Syria-discourse, with the underlying warrant: there is a threat against us, and we need to combat it. Hizbullah's discourse frames the need to keep fighting in Syria as a necessity, not only for the Syrian people, but also for the Lebanese. Hizbullah talks of a "pre-emptive war" (Hizbullah member 2016) as a necessary move. The rationale which is presented in the discourse is that the terrorist groups which operate in Syria, with IS and Jabhat Fatḥ al-Sham as two main examples, should be eradicated before they reach Lebanon. A Hizbullah member, for example, highlights this topos: "We are defending ourselves, not Assad. If Daesh comes to Lebanon it [the country] will collapse very fast. We are fighting a pre-emptive war" (Hizbullah member 2016). By downplaying the alliance with Assad and stressing the need to protect the country, Hizbullah is seeking to rationalize the intervention in Syria in a way that will appeal to larger segments of the Lebanese population who are not supportive of the Assad regime.

Protecting Lebanon and the region from the terrorist groups was during the fall of 2016 Hizbullah's main justification for its intervention in Syria. The rationale was consolidated as the extremist groups gained ground in Syria (Calabrese 2016). By emphasizing the cruel and barbaric methods of the group, their violations of the religion of Islam, and the threat against the region, Hizbullah is establishing the terrorist groups in Syria as its main enemy parallel to Israel.

---

<sup>6</sup> In the article, Souhaid uses the French word "mainmise".

The discourse of Hizbullah refers to armed groups in Syria, mainly IS and Jabhat Fataḥ al-Sham, by the Arabic adjective *takfīriyya*. The verbal noun *takfīr* means to declare someone an apostate, in other words, a Muslim who forsakes his religion (Hunwick 2012). When representatives of Hizbullah refer to the opposition in the Syrian Civil War, they usually refer to the *takfīriyyīn*. They describe them as being “drowned in bloodshed and factional and sectarian sensitivities”, they have “no control, they do not have any reference to any authority” (Nasrallah 2016b), and they are often referred to as “terrorists” or “wahhābists.”

Although Hizbullah works hard not to be portrayed as a sectarian movement, its labelling of the opposition as *takfīriyyīn* has the opposite effect. Hizbullah applies the highly pejorative term to all opposition groups indiscriminately, without making any attempts at classifying the opposition movements. This has contributed to the increasing sectarianization of the Syrian war (International Crisis Group 2014, 5,15). As explained by the International Crisis’ Group’s report on Hizbullah’s intervention in Syria (2014):

*Indeed, the takfiri slur has proved to be a double-edged sword for Hizbollah, serving not only to rally its supporters but also, as part of an escalatory dynamic, to motivate its opponents and exacerbate sectarianism among the Syrian armed opposition. By 2013, such rhetoric had become the principal means through which both sides legitimised their actions, dehumanised their opponents and appealed to their bases amid a marked intensification of violence* (International Crisis Group 2014, 5).

Thus, Hizbullah’s discursive practice on this issue has also contributed to sectarianize the discourse of the opposition groups, which has intensified the conflict. This has in turn has also escalated sectarian discourse and tension in Lebanon. A Sunni cleric in Tripoli called for “jihad” against Hizbullah (al-‘Arabiya 2013a). The same did Aḥmad al-Asir, a Salafist cleric based in Saida up until 2015 when he was detained because of charges of violence and forming a terrorist organization (Bassam 2015). The discourse has given rise to an increased Sunni-Shi‘a-tension within Lebanon, and led to violent fights between anti-Assad Sunnis, pro-Assad supporters, and the Lebanese Army, especially in the city of Tripoli (Sorrentini 2016).

In general, sectarianism and foreign alliances colors much of Lebanese political life and public discourse, also on the topic of Syria. The Lebanese Sunnis are connected through tribal



affiliation as well as having political and financial bonds to the Gulf. Because of these foreign alliances to two competing regional powers, Iran for the Shi'a and Saudi-Arabia for the Sunnis, the Lebanese Sunnis are reluctant to surpass this sectarian division. This division is sharpened by Hizbullah's emphasis on the Shi'i character of the resistance (Tohme 2016), or by its branding of the opposition groups in Syria as "wahhābists". The Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) decision to classify Hizbullah as a terrorist organization in March 2016 is a proof that the relationship between the two political and sectarian poles has aggravated as a result of the involvements in the regional conflicts (al-Jazeera 2016).

While Hizbullah attacks the opposition for its barbaric practices, the atrocities of the Syrian regime and its allies are not countered or addressed in Hizbullah's discourse. A Hizbullah party member even claimed that "the Shi'a never killed any innocent people. Hizbullah never killed any innocent" (Hizbullah member 2016). The party's discourse creates an "us-against-them" dichotomy, similar to the one the party used to have against Israel.

In this way, Hizbullah is trying to appear as a national movement which acts as the defenders of a unified Lebanon. The movement does this by presenting the Syrian scenario as if there are only two options: that the terrorist groups take over Syria, or that the regime and its allies reestablish peace and stability. "Us or chaos" seems to be Hizbullah's mantra in its discourse. Hassan Nasrallah even said that all the armed opposition forces in Syria are with IS or with Jabhat Fath al-Sham (Qanṣuh 2016). By characterizing the extremist groups as uncivilized and barbaric, and without making any references to other opposition groups, Hizbullah splits the Syrian and the regional scene into two poles:

*If we quit, the Syrian Army quits, the Iraqi Army quits, the [Iraqi] Popular Gatherings quit, the Yemeni Army quits, and the [Yemeni] revolutionary committees quit, Daesh will gain victory here and there and everywhere. What would be the fate of our peoples, governments, and region then?* (Nasrallah 2016a).

This main argument for the military involvement in Syria builds on Hizbullah's already existing discourse on the legitimization of its institutions and militia in a national perspective. Hizbullah's critics, meanwhile, argue that the party has built a state within a state which undermines the Lebanese state, while Hizbullah argues that these measures are necessary as long as the state is weak. While the critics argue that keeping the militia is illegitimate and a

danger to peaceful coexistence, Hizbullah claims it is taking the necessary measures in a country that lacks a strong, well-functioning and accountable state. It plays on the common conception that its militia is better equipped and better trained than the Lebanese army. The party argues that the militia and its institutions should be considered as a complement to the Lebanese state, not a competitor to it. In Naim Qassem's words: "There is no conflict between state and resistance; the resistance's objectives, to defend the land and to confront the occupation serve the interests of the state's interests in a very fundamental way" (Qassem 2010, 53).

Not only does Hizbullah's discourse emphasize the need for its militia to remain in Syria. It also claims it is simply irresponsible to withdraw: "There are people in Lebanon who tell us that we need to withdraw from Syria, they call on us to withdraw from the battle. For what reason are we to do so? Is it for ISIS and An-Nusra to gain victory?" (Nasrallah 2016a)<sup>7</sup>.

Hizbullah's discourse on the intervention in Syria can also be considered a way of bolstering its image as an active resistance movement. Hizbullah's consolidation of the image of a new enemy could be considered a way of strengthening the idea of the need of Hizbullah in Lebanon and as a justification for why it needs to keep its arms. As explained by Hove (2004), the movement needs to maintain the military side of image in order to not lose the status as the victorious resistance movement, which made it popular in the Arab world in the aftermath of the Israelis' retreat from South Lebanon in 2000.

Hizbullah's safeguarding topos has been reproduced by the party's allies within Lebanon. One example is the new Lebanese President Michel Aoun, elected October 31, 2016. President Aoun's first speech in parliament as an elected president represented a continuation of Hizbullah's discourse. In his speech, President Aoun emphasized the need for stability in Lebanon, to stay out of the regional conflicts, and called for foreign policy free from foreign control and which strives to pursue the common interests of all Lebanese. He also mentioned the need to continue the "resistance" against Israel and their occupation of Lebanese soil, thus legitimizing the military activities of Hizbullah against Israel (Aoun 2016).

---

<sup>7</sup> My own modified translation of al-'Ahd's translation (as there is a mistake in this one).

Aoun's speech on stability and regional conflict was ambiguous, and may be comprehended in two ways. It can be understood as a call for Hizbullah's withdrawal from Syria to shield Lebanon from the conflict, and to prevent a further polarization of Lebanese politics. However, the speech could also be understood as a support for Hizbullah's intervention. Aoun's talk on security measures rhymes with Hizbullah's discourse on its involvement in Syria, applying some of the same code-words, such as "pre-emptive" measures against "terrorism" (Aoun 2016).

For some of Hizbullah's critics, the inauguration speech was interpreted as underlying support for Hizbullah and Iran's projects in the region, also in Syria. Hussain Abdul-Hussain (2016) interprets the speech as an announcement of Hizbullah's domination over Lebanese politics under the tenure of Aoun, as the title of his article indicates: "Aoun declares Lebanon's alignment with Iran, Hezbollah and Assad." The effort by Aoun to give a message of patriotism and national unity, similar to Hizbullah's own discourse, is rejected by the author, and referred to as "a mishmash of old chewed slogans" (Abdul-Hussain 2016). Additionally, Abdul-Hussain's analysis reveals a dissatisfaction with Lebanese post-war politics in general: a frustration over politicians like Aoun who use flowery rhetoric, talk of co-existence and unity, and refer to the Taif agreement, but without really acting on it. Abdul-Hussain points to the role of Hizbullah and Aoun as participants in this system, as actors with contradictory arguments who are influenced by foreign powers.

### **4.3. Cooperation and Dialogue**

Hizbullah's discourse on Syria is also characterized by an extension of its Lebanonized discourse in its promotion of values like cooperation, dialogue, and co-existence. With this strategy, the group strives to convey the image of itself as a moderate political player that is open to political solutions to the Syrian war.

Hizbullah argues that it was necessary for the group to enter the war in Syria due to the rebels' lack of will to find a political solution and make political agreements in the early stage of the conflict (National News Agency 2013). Similarly, Hizbullah claims in their current discourse on Syria that despite the will of the regime and its allies to work on a political solution, the rebels refuse to do so, because they wish to see the war continue, and because it is a part of the big American and Israeli plan for the region. In its discourse, Hizbullah argues that the regime has offered political solutions and negotiations, but that the rebels refused to participate in these,

forcing the regime and its supporters to defend themselves: “This is a permanent path, because all of us who are defending Syria in Syria, and defending the axis of resistance and the causes of the nation, look forward to a political solution. We do not aspire for more bloodshed; we rather aspire for a political solution” (Nasrallah 2016b). Hence, Hizbullah tries to reinforce its image as a democratic and diplomatic party that has resorted to intervene military as a last resort.

Along with promoting the need for fighting the “terrorists” with military means, Hizbullah’s call for a political solution intensified during the fall of 2016. In particular, the topos of dialogue was brought up in the context of the regime’s retaking of Aleppo in December. Nasrallah commented: “[...] the victory of Aleppo must open new horizons before political solutions and political settlements” (Nasrallah 2016d). Nevertheless, Hizbullah’s political opponents do not seem convinced of this motive. ‘Ali al-Ḥussayni, for example, argued in an article in *al-Mustaqbal* (2016) that the party is more concerned with gaining ground in Syria than with reaching a political settlement.

Also, Al-Ḥussayni noted that Hizbullah’s discourse is somewhat contradictory on this issue. While the party calls for a political solution, it also boast about its military victories. One example is found in a speech by Hassan Nasrallah in the aftermath of the regime and its allies’ retake of Aleppo: “this regime is present and strong, and active, and no one in the world can ignore it [...] Our front is advancing in a very sweeping manner. It advanced via its achievements and victories” (Nasrallah 2016d). This boasting attitude is similar to Hizbullah’s discourse in the context of the expulsion of the Israeli forces in 2000 and the victory in the war of 2006.

#### **4.4. Religion**

Hizbullah has also given religious justifications for its intervention in Syria. This rationale was used mostly in the first period of the conflict, when the involvement revolved mainly around protecting the Shi‘i holy shrines in Damascus. Hizbullah claimed that it was a religious duty to protect the shrines, which seemed legitimate for large segments of Lebanese Shi‘a (al-Monitor 2013). However, Hizbullah downplayed the religious topos as the party became more involved in the conflict and as the size and dominance of the extremist groups grew. The party understood that it needed a rationale that would appear more credible to a larger part of the Lebanese population.

Although religion is not the main topos in the discourse on Syria, it is still present to some degree. Hizbullah uses religion in its establishing of the extremist groups as a new national enemy. The rationale behind its religious justification is the need to protect the name of Islam.

Hizbullah highlights how the extremist groups misuse religion by being blasphemous and thus representing a danger to the name of Islam: "O Muslims and non-Muslims in the whole world! These atrocities have nothing to do with Islam" [...] "there is nothing called extremist Islam" (Nasrallah 2016d).

Hence, Hizbullah attempts to appeal to all Muslims, and non-Muslims by creating inter-religious unity through criticizing the extremist groups for exploiting religious feelings and presenting a distorted and incorrect picture of Islam. The party does this to raise its own credibility and image as a moderate islamist party which is open to pluralism but against extremism, and to reinforce the image of the extremist as the new enemy of the Lebanese that needs to be defeated.

This topos has been brought up in the discourse by Hizbullah's political allies. The editor of al-Safir, Talal Salman, argued in an editorial that the war in Syria represents a danger to Islam. Commenting on a speech by Hassan Nasrallah, Salman contrasted what he considers as Hizbullah's noble fight in Syria, which he describes as "real jihad", with the extremist groups, which he argued have stolen the principles of the religion of Islam and misused them in order to gain power (Salman 2016). Additionally, Salman clarified that the warning against siding with the extremist groups, which in his reality means the entire opposition, "should not be seen in the context of the defense for the regime" (Salman 2016). Thus, Salman sought to portray the intervention as a religious duty, against what he sees as a barbaric opposition, who threatens to ruin the name of Islam by a bunch of "butchers."

Hizbullah also integrates Shi'i motives in its discourse on its resistance activities, the framework in which the intervention in Syria is placed. It compares the resistance fight with the struggle of the Shi'i sect throughout history. In the 'Ashura'-speech of 2016, Hassan Nasrallah said:

*In this country, we loved Hussein, we loved Hussein (peace be upon him), we knew Hussein, loved him, pledge allegiance to him in the resistance, did not abandon him in the field, and did not neglect any call for help or support. This country has proven that our men are Husseini, our women are like Zeinab [...](Nasrallah 2016b).*

This quote is one example of how Hizbullah decorates its discourse on the resistance fight with Shi'i references with the aim of strengthening its support among the Shi'a by appealing to their religious feelings. However, it contributes to enforcing Hizbullah's Shi'i character as a whole. Clearly, not everyone in "this country", Lebanon, loves Husayn, which underlines Hizbullah's difficulties in simultaneously reaching out to the Shi'a and the Lebanese in general, and which makes the argumentation that the resistance activities are national in their character, difficult.

#### **4.5. The Iranian Link Emphasized**

The topos of pre-emptive warfare has not been accepted by Hizbullah's critics. Instead, they highlight the topos of the Iranian connection. The rationale used by some of the opponents is that the intervention is a part of Iranian expansion in the Middle East.

Critics have long warned about Hizbullah's roots as an Iranian movement, and its regional interests. The discourse on Syria is a continuation of the accusations against Hizbullah that it serves Iranian interests, and that it is more concerned with its geo-political goals than with serving Lebanese interests.

Discourse in the Lebanese public sphere reveals that Hizbullah's military involvement in Syria has been regarded as a provocative act. One event which sparked controversy and put Hizbullah's intervention in Syria on the agenda in the Lebanon was the military parade in the Syrian city of Qusayr in November 2016. The parade displayed a Hizbullah that had transformed in terms of their military capacity. Pictures of the parade spread on social media and in the Lebanese and international press, showing Hizbullah's militia equipped with armoured vehicles, machine guns, and tanks (Rowell 2016c).

The parade was widely commented on in the Lebanese press. By its opponents, it was interpreted as a provocation. When commenting on the event, Ahmad 'Ayash (2016) in al-Nahar referred to "Hizbullah, which represents a army belonging to Iran." That the sentence was mentioned as a clause indicates that the author is so convinced of the fact that Hizbullah is an

Iranian party and that it does not represent Lebanese national objectives that he does not even bother to argue for it. He also talked of a movement as having an “Iranian project,” and highlighted the military parade as a confirmation of Hizbullah’s “regional identity” (‘Ayash 2016). In his view, the intervention in Syria is yet another act confirming that Hizbullah is an Iranian party.

#### **4.6. Questioning Hizbullah’s Lebanonization**

Voices critical of Hizbullah have warned against what they see as the lack of Hizbullah’s loyalty to Lebanon, and its motivations behind the Syria intervention. Ibrahim Ḥaydar in the Hizbullah-critical newspaper al-Nahar raised the question of the Lebanonization of Hizbullah in relation to this parade. He called the movement an “army” rather than a “militia.” He also emphasized the fact that the parade underscored that Hizbullah’s priorities were now in Syria and no longer in the resistance against Israel, noting that many Lebanese who supported the resistance against Israel, now oppose the Syrian intervention (Ḥaydar 2016).

Ultimately, Ḥaydar (2016) rejected Hizbullah’s effort to unite the intervention narrative with a national narrative: “but it [Hizbullah] risks what remains of its Lebanese nationalism because of goals which are further and further away, even further away than Aleppo!”. Here, the author conveys an image that is true for many Lebanese: the psychological distance from the Syrian war and the rejection of the need for any Lebanese to get involved in it. While the rationale behind the fight against the Israelis was accepted in Lebanon, as well as by non-Shi‘a in Lebanon and the region in general, the rationale for the intervention in Syria has been harder to swallow, even for many Shi‘a. As Nicholas Blanford observed about Hizbullah’s Shi‘a who are getting tired of fighting in Syria: “Some of them are saying, look. I’ll fight in Damascus, to defend Sayyidat Zainab, I’ll fight in Qalamoun and Qusayr, but I am not going all the way up to Aleppo to fight [...]” (Blanford 2016). There is, as Blanford confirmed, some opposition to the Syria intervention within Hizbullah as well as the Shi‘a community in Lebanon. This is not the main focus of this thesis, but it is something that should be further investigated in scholarship.

Hizbullah’s main support base, the Shi‘a, tend to reproduce Hizbullah’s arguments and in this way accept Hizbullah’s narrative. Sayyid Ali Fadlallah, an influential Lebanese Shi‘i cleric, is one example of how the arguments of Hizbullah have been accepted. Although Fadlallah made clear that this is a political question and not a religious one, he commented on the issue

emphasizing the importance of safeguarding Lebanon, and the fear from the *takfirī*-groups, underlining that this is a fear shared by all Lebanese, not just by the Shi‘a (Fadlallah 2017). In this way, Fadlallah accepts Hizbullah’s topoi of safeguarding Lebanon in the cause of the safety of the nation, regardless of which sect one belong to. However, Fadlallah acknowledges the fact that the issue can lead to increased sectarian tension, an issue Hizbullah ignores in its discourse.

By ignoring the consequences of the sectarian dimension of the intervention, Hizbullah fails to convince a larger audience of the Lebanese of its rationale of intervening in Syria. The dynamics in the discourse remain mainly the same as before the intervention. The main fault lines in the public discourse are between those who support Hizbullah and those do not support them. AUB faculty member Hicham Tohme commented on the issue of whether Hizbullah has lost credibility after the intervention: “[...] you were either with or against from the beginning. You are still with or against – you just have one more story to tell, that’s it. A new example of the same old argument: That Hizbullah is a Shi‘i militia that doesn’t accept the Lebanese state, and it fights Israel and takes our country to war” (Tohme 2016).

#### **4.7. Destabilizing Domestic Political Processes**

Hizbullah’s intervention in Syria has also been criticized in terms of its repercussions on Lebanese politics. The critics of Hizbullah and its allies have claimed that the political situation characterized by a presidential vacuum and a non-functioning cabinet has been advantageous for Hizbullah. Hilal Khashan, an AUB professor in Political Science, is one of the voices who has been critical, pointing to the fact that Hizbullah’s discourse and behaviour don’t match on this issue: “[...]they never really wanted him [Aoun] to become president. They wanted to maintain the stalemate in Lebanon until the time arises for them to create a new political order in Lebanon” (Khashan 2016). According to Lebanese law, when there is no president at place, her power is transferred to the cabinet, in which a decision will depend on the approval of all ministers (Abou Zeid 2015). In this way, critics argue the group avoids being confronted with its presence in Syria and the issue of its militia by a president, as well as benefitting from a paralyzed cabinet which is unable to make decisions on controversial issues.

As many of Hizbullah’s critics see it, Hizbullah already has state-like mechanisms in place. Because of this, it prefers a weak national state which stays out of their affairs, like the Syrian



involvement. Additionally, accusing Hizbullah of being an Iranian puppet and criticizing its influence on domestic politics has been recurrent in the public discourse. Future Movement MP Ammar Hourri said in early January 2016 that "There is a clear intention by Hizbullah and Iran to disrupt everything in the country, not just (veto) a name or a candidate, but prevent the election of a president in Lebanon" (The Daily Star 2016a).

The election was considered by Hizbullah and its opponents to be a victory for the party, as Aoun is a close ally of Hizbullah. The alliance goes back to an agreement between Hizbullah and the Free Patriotic Movement in 2006, the so-called Memorandum of Joint Understanding. The understanding determined that the Hizbullah should not give up its weapons – rather, they should “be seen as part of an overall national defence strategy” (Qassem 2010, 32). The question then remains, what kind of attitude will Aoun have to Hizbullah’s militant role in Syria?

In February 2017, Michel Aoun came out with a surprisingly direct support of Hizbullah’s militia which caused reactions from its opponents in Lebanon. During an interview with the Egyptian channel CBC, President Aoun said that “as long as there are lands that are occupied by Israel, and as long as the Lebanese Army is not strong enough to combat Israel and to withstand it, we definitely feel the necessity of its presence, and it is complimentary to the Lebanese army, and it doesn’t contradict it”, and that “it [Hizbullah] is an essential part of Lebanon’s defense” (CBC 2016). Although the role of the Lebanese president in theory is limited in power, these statements of Aoun caused negative reactions within Lebanon. The fact that the president has adopted a Hizbullah-friendly discourse in which he approves of the importance of the militia and its national role shows another example of how the party has manage to convince its supporters.

## **5. Conclusion**

Hizbullah’s discourse on its intervention in Syria should be considered as a continuation of its Lebanonization line, in which Hizbullah considers the objectives of the group and its allies to rhyme with national interests. As I have shown in my analysis, the various topoi that are being used in the discourse on Syria are recurrent in the discussion on Hizbullah’s militia and its role in general – they are just applied to a new case. The movement still claims it is playing the role of national guardian, but this time against the threat from the terrorist groups, not Israel.

By portraying the intervention as a national obligation and taking, in its own view, a pro-active stance in protecting Lebanon from the extremist groups, Hizbullah seeks to portray itself as a national hero which once again is taking the responsibility of saving the nation from an outside enemy, like it did against Israel in 2000 and 2006.

In Lebanese public discourse, Hizbullah's justification intervening in Syria as serving Lebanese national interests has been reproduced and refused. As my analysis has shown, the general line is that those who used to be against Hizbullah, have gotten a new illustration of how the group is prioritizing their regional alliances and self-interests, while Hizbullah's support base and political allies accept Hizbullah's narrative and remain supporters of the party, at least in the public discourse.

The political divisions which are typical in Lebanon remain mainly the same in this discourse. Hizbullah draws a picture of the situation which is difficult to accept for those who are not already convinced of the party's way of seeing the Middle East reality: as a fight between the oppressors and the oppressed, the American alliance versus the Axis of Resistance.

Visibly, Hizbullah's discourse on its intervention in Syria has, among its critics, contributed to further questioning of the group's Lebanese image. The group does not succeed in portraying the intervention as necessary and as an indispensable act which serves the nation. Instead, anti-Hizbullah observers have interpreted the intervention as an Iranian act and a military expansion based on self-interest.

It appears like Hizbullah cares mostly about saving face for its own followers and to retain the support of its constituency in difficult times, which is crucial for Hizbullah's survival and power. In this regard, the group succeeds to a large degree.

In general, the public discourse on the intervention, both Hizbullah's discourse and the reactions, is an archetypal example of post-war Lebanese political debate and political dynamics in general. It is marked by sectarian tension, influences of foreign opposing alliances, and – to a large degree- the pro- and anti-Syrian division that has characterized the Lebanese political scene for many years, which many in Lebanon seem to be unwilling to go beyond.

Given the historical tight relationship between Lebanon and Syria, one would think that the Syrian uprising, the subsequent civil war, and Hizbullah's involvement in it would have a greater impact on the Lebanese public discourse and politics than what has been the case. Although sectarian tension and increased pressure due to the Syrian refugee crisis are two main issues, political dynamics remain mostly the same. As well, political discourse is dominated by the same topoi as before the Syrian crisis, just with new examples. What is clear, however, is that the stakes are higher and that the risk of further instability is more present than before. Discourse, especially along the lines of sectarianism and regional politics, has the possibility to intensify these tensions.

## 6. References

- Abdul-Hussain, Hussain. 2016. "Aoun declares Lebanon's alignment with Iran, Hezbollah and Assad." *NOW*, November 1. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/567474-aoun-declares-lebanons-alignment-with-iran-hezbollah-and-assad>.
- Abou Zeid, Mario. 2015. "Lebanese Presidential Elections." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, February 4. <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/02/04/lebanese-presidential-elections-pub-58965>.
- Alagha, Joseph. 2006. *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology. Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*. Leiden: Amsterdam University Press.
- . 2013. *Hizbullahs DNA and the Arab Spring*. New Dehli: KW Publishers.
- Al-ʿArabiya English. 2013a. "Lebanese Sunni cleric calls for jihad to aid Syrian rebels against Hezbollah." April 23. <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/04/23/Lebanese-Sunni-cleric-calls-for-Jihad-to-aid-Syrian-rebels-against-Hezbollah.html>.
- . 2013b. "Top cleric Qaradawi calls for Jihad against Hezbollah, Assad in Syria." June 2. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/06/02/Top-cleric-Qaradawi-calls-for-Jihad-against-Hezbollah-Assad-in-Syria.html>.
- Al-Hussayni, ʿAli. 2016. "حزب الله" في سوريا... "المكتسبات" قبل التسويات. *Al-Mustaqbal*, October 9.
- Al-Jazeera. 2016. "GCC declares Lebanon's Hezbollah a 'terrorist' group." March 2. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/gcc-declares-lebanon-hezbollah-terrorist-group-160302090712744.html>.
- Al-Jumhuriyya al-Lubnaniyya, Majlis al-Nawwab. 1989. وثيقة الوفاق الوطني - اتفاق الطائف. <https://www.lp.gov.lb/CustomPage.aspx?id=27&masterId=1>.
- Al-Khalij. "Civil War and Resistance." Interview with Hassan Nasrallah. *Al-Khalij*, March 11, 1986. In *Voice of Hezbollah. The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*, edited by Nicholas Noe, 23-33. London, New York: Verso.
- Al-Manar English. 2016. "Sheikh Qassem: Hezbollah Will not Leave Syria as Long as There Is Need to Fight Takfiris." October 19. <http://english.almanar.com.lb/70398>.
- Al-Monitor. 2013. "For Hezbollah, What is Victory in Syria?" June 7. Translated by Kamal Fayad. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/hezbollah-objectives-syria-war.html>.
- . 2016. "Hariri tribunal axes trial of slain Hezbollah commander." July 11. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2016/07/lebanon-hezbollah-trial-hariri.html>.
- Al-Nahar. 2016. "كتلة المستقبل": سياسة "حزب الله" تطيح بمصالح لبنان. October 13. <https://www.annahar.com/article/484227>.
- Aoun, Michel. 2016. خطاب القسم الذي تلاه رئيس الجمهورية العماد ميشال عون فور اعلان انتخابه في مجلس النواب. Speech, Beirut, October 31. [www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/News/Pages/Details.aspx?nid=23771](http://www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/News/Pages/Details.aspx?nid=23771).
- ʿAyash, Aḥmad. 2016. جيشان: الجيش و"حزب الله". *Al-Nahar*, November 26. <https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/502294>.
- Bassam, Laila. 2015. "Lebanon detains hardline Islamist cleric." *Reuters*, August 15. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-security-idUSKCN0QK09920150815>.
- Bernhardt, Florian. 2016. "Ḥizb al-Daʿwa al-Islāmiyya, Iraq." In *Encyclopedia of Islam, third edition*, edited by Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett

- Rowson, Brill. [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/hizb-al-dawa-al-islamiyya-iraq-COM\\_30500](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/hizb-al-dawa-al-islamiyya-iraq-COM_30500).
- Blanford, Nicholas. 2016. Interview by author. Beirut, November 4.
- Boukala, Salomi. 2016. "Rethinking topos in the discourse historical approach: Endoxon seeking and argumentation in Greek media discourses on 'Islamist terrorism'." *Discourse Studies* 18 (3): 249-268.
- Burr, Vivien. 1995. *Social Constructionism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Calabrese, Erminia Chiara. 2016. Interview by author. Beirut, October 25.
- CBC. 2016. لقاء مع الرئيس اللبناني العماد ميشيل عون | الحوار الكامل. Uploaded February 11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-OvtUjZDTs>.
- Chulov, Martin. 2016. "Fight for Aleppo is almost over – but a new chapter of misery begins." *The Guardian*, December 13. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/13/fight-for-aleppo-is-almost-over-but-a-new-phase-of-misery-begins>.
- Dragomir, Marius, Mark Thompson and Aboubakr Jamaï. 2012. *Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon*. London: Open Society Foundations.
- Fadlallah, Ali. 2017. Interview by author. Oslo, May 11.
- Faour, Muhammad A. 2007. "Religion, Demography, and Politics in Lebanon." *Middle Eastern Studies* 43 (6): 909-921.
- Ḥamada, Amira. 2017. "شعرتُ بأن حياتي توقفت هنا". هكذا تلقى صحفيو جريدة "السفير" اللبنانية خبر إغلاقها. *Huffington Post Arabic*, January 7. [http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2017/01/06/story\\_n\\_13993860.html](http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2017/01/06/story_n_13993860.html).
- Hamzeh, Ahmad Nizar. 2004. *In the path of Hizbullah*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Harb, Mona and Reinoud Leenders. 2005. "Know thy enemy: Hizbullah, 'terrorism' and the politics of perception." *Third World Quarterly* 26 (1): 173-197.
- Hashem, Ali. 2013. "Nasrallah on Syria: 'This Battle is Ours'." *Al-Monitor*, May 26. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/nasrallah-hezbollah-syria-speech-rockets.html>.
- Ḥaydar, Ibrahim. 2016. جيش "حزب الله" في سوريا بدل المقاومة... القصير قاعدة خلفية . والمعركة ما بعد حلب. *Al-Nahar*, November 20. [www.annahar.com/article/500035](http://www.annahar.com/article/500035).
- Hizbullah. 1985. "The Open Letter." English translation. <http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-organizations-and-networks/open-letter-hizballah-program/p30967>.
- Hizbullah member. 2016. Interview by author. November 13 and 24.
- Hove, Søren. 2004. "Hizbollahs irakiske profil?" *Babylon- Nordisk tidsskrift for Midtøstenstudier* 2 (2): 118-121.
- Hunwick, J.O. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Takfir." [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/takfir-COM\\_1154?s.num=149&s.start=140](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/takfir-COM_1154?s.num=149&s.start=140).
- Høigilt, Jacob. 2007. "Islamism, Pluralism and the Palestine Question: The Case of Hizbullah." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34 (2): 123-136.
- International Crisis Group. 2014. *Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward To Syria. Middle East Report N° 153*. Brussels. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/lebanon-s-hizbollah-turns-eastward-to-syria.pdf>.
- Jordheim, Helge, Anne Birgitte Rønning, Erling Sandmo, and Mathilde Skoie. 2008. *Humaniora. En innføring*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

- Jørgensen, Marianne and Louise Phillips. 2002. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. London, Thousand Oaks, and New Dehli: SAGE publications.
- Khashan, Hilal. 2016. Interview by author. Beirut, November 15 and 24.
- Khatib, Lina, Dina Matar, and Atef Alshaer. 2014. *The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication*. London: Hurst&Company.
- Kienpointner, Manfred. 1992. *Alltagslogik*. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommannholzboog.
- Kverme, Kai. 2012. "‘Han var vår lærer.’ Hizballah etter Fadlallah." *Babylon – Nordisk Tidsskrift for Midtøstenstudier* (1): 42-53.
- L’Orient-Le Jour. 2016a. "Le gouvernement Hariri voit le jour : voici sa composition." December 18. <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1023661>.
- . 2016b. "Souhaïd : Les Libanais ont renoncé à leur souveraineté au profit du Hezbollah." December 24. <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1025926>.
- Lynch, Colum. 2010. "Evidence links Hezbollah to Hariri Death." *Washington Post*, November 21. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/21/AR2010112103987.html>.
- Makdisi, Samir and Richard Sadaka. 2003. "The Lebanese Civil War, 1975-1990." *Lecture and Working Paper Series*, AUB, Institute of Financial Economics (3).
- Maktabi, Rania. 1999. "The Lebanese census of 1932 revisited. Who are the Lebanese?" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 26 (2): 219-241.
- Nashabe, Omar. 2016. Interview by author. Beirut, October 26.
- Nasrallah, Hassan. 2011. "Sayyed Nasrallah on the Ceremony for Consolidation with the Arab Peoples on 19-03-2011." Speech, Beirut, March 19. *Al-‘Ahd*, English translation: <http://www.english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=13713&cid=452#.WSq2tIVOIcg>. *Al-‘Alaqa al- I‘lamiyya*, Arabic original: <https://www.mediarelations-lb.org/article.php?id=6684&cid=94#.WG90MoVOKZ8>.
- . 2016a. "Full speech delivered by Hizbullah Secretary General, His Eminence Sayyed Nasrallah, on the Divine Victory Anniversary Ceremony held in Bint Jbeil on August 13, 2016." Speech, Bint Jbeil, August 13. *Al-‘Ahd*, English translation: <http://www.english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=34603&cid=570#.WPoEHP6weRs>. *Al-‘Ahd*, Arabic original: <http://www.alahednews.com.lb/128518/149>.
- . 2016b. "Sayyed Nasrallah’s Full Speech on the 10th of Muharram." Speech, Beirut, October 11. *Al-‘Ahd*, English translation: <http://www.english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=35411&cid=570#.WPomnv6weRs>. *Al-‘Alaqa al- I‘lamiyya*, Arabic original: <https://www.mediarelations-lb.org/article.php?id=14415&cid=124#.WS2REYVOKZ->.
- . 2016c. "Sayyed Nasrallah’s Full Speech on the Anniversary of Late Leader Mustafa Shahadeh." Speech, November 4. *Al-‘Ahd*, English translation: [www.english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=35725&cid=570#.WQCo5f6weRs](http://www.english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=35725&cid=570#.WQCo5f6weRs). *Al-‘Alaqa al- I‘lamiyya*, Arabic original: <https://www.mediarelations-lb.org/article.php?id=14420&cid=94#.WS2SSIVOKZ9>.

- . 2016d. “Sayyed Nasrallah’s Full Speech Addressing University Students.” Speech, December 23. *Al-‘Ahd*, English translation: [www.english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=36500&cid=570%20-%20.WNPkyP5-6Rs#.WS2TeYVOKZ9](http://www.english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=36500&cid=570%20-%20.WNPkyP5-6Rs#.WS2TeYVOKZ9). *Al-‘Alaqa al- I‘lamiyya*, Arabic original: <https://www.mediarelationslb.org/article.php?id=14434&cid=94#.WS2T9oVOKZ9>.
- National News Agency. 2013. “Nasrallah: for dialogue, political settlement to save Syria.” April 30. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/8444/Nasrallah-for-dialogue-political-settlement-to-save-Syria>.
- Norton, Augustus. 2014. *Hezbollah. A short history*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Qassem, Naim. 2010. *Hizbullah. The Story From Within*. Translated by Dalia Khalil. London: Saqi.
- Qanṣuh, Wafiq. 2016. نصر الله: الكلمة في سوريا للميدان. *Al-Akhbar*, September 27. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/265432>.
- Richards, David. 1996. “Elite interviewing: Approaches and pitfalls.” *Politics* 16 (3): 199-204.
- Rowell, Alex. 2016a. “Bombings in Lebanon since 2011.” *NOW*, September 1. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/535852-vehicle-explosions-in-lebanon-since-2011>.
- . 2016b. “Revealed: The MPs who aren’t voting for a president.” *NOW*, October 4. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/567391-revealed-the-mps-who-arent-voting-for-a-president>.
- . 2016c. “Hezbollah flaunts American equipment in Syria parade.” *NOW*, last update November 23. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/567500-hezbollah-flaunts-american-equipment-in-syria-parade>.
- Salman, Ṭalal. 2016. خطاب الحد الفاصل بين "الجهاد" والإرهاب. *Al-Safir*, August 15.
- Sorrentini, Anita. 2016. “Tripoli, the uncertain stability of Lebanon.” *Mediterranean Affairs*, 30 May. <http://mediterraneanaffairs.com/tripoli-the-uncertain-stability-of-lebanon/>.
- Sullivan, Marisa. 2014. *Hezbollah in Syria. Middle East Security Report 19*. Washington D.C: Institute for the Study of War.
- The Daily Star. 2016a. “Future MP: Iran blocking Lebanon presidential election. January 7. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Jan-07/330633-future-mp-iran-delaying-lebanon-presidential-election.ashx>.
- . 2016b. “Key Burj al-Barajneh attack suspect arrested by ISF.” January 11. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Jan-11/331216-key-burj-al-barajneh-attack-suspect-arrested-by-isf.ashx>.
- Tohme, Hicham. 2016. Interview by author. Beirut, October 25.
- Thompson, John B. 1990. *Ideology and Modern Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- US Department of Defense. 2010. *Unclassified report on military power of Iran*. [https://fas.org/man/eprint/dod\\_iran\\_2010.pdf](https://fas.org/man/eprint/dod_iran_2010.pdf)
- US Embassy Beirut. 2008. “LEBANON: PRINT MEDIA – NEWSPAPERS.” Wikileaks Cable 08BEIRUT334\_a. March 5. [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BEIRUT334\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BEIRUT334_a.html).
- Vitalis, Robert. 2006. “The Past is Another Country.” In *A Handbook for Social Science Field Research*, edited by Ellen Percman, 5-17. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Žagar, Igor Ž. 2010. "Topoi in Critical Discourse Analysis." *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 6 (1): 3-27.