

Hezbollah:
A Regional Armed-Non State Actor

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Abstract

This thesis examines Hezbollah's transition into a regional armed non-state actor (ANSA). Specifically, how did this transition happen? To unpack this puzzle, this thesis studies Hezbollah's maneuvers in multiple theatres: Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, and focuses on its operations in Syria. The civil war in Syria, this thesis considers, and its spillovers across the region, was the conduit for Hezbollah's transition. It argues that its engagement in Syria's turmoil was a war of necessity. More importantly, three variables underpinned the transition: Hezbollah's sectarian mobilization and instrumentalization of its sectarian identity, the shift of into a quasi-army mixing between classical and guerilla tactics and formations, and its embed as a partner in the axis that now extends from Beirut to Tehran, via Damascus and Baghdad. Hezbollah intervened in Syria to prevent the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime and emerged triumphant on the regional scene. That said, the year 2018 provided a set of conditions, impossible to reproduce, that allowed Hezbollah to reach its apogee on both the domestic and regional theatres. In sum, the implication of this thesis to the field is straightforward: ANSAs are playing prominent roles in the regional order in the Middle East, and Hezbollah, for instance, has helped tilt the power balance during Syria's civil war in favor of the regime and its main regional partner, Iran. Further, it added to the sectarianism debate arguing that Hezbollah instrumentalized its sectarian identity and adopted a sectarian mobilization policy for what was in fact a regional geopolitical contest.

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Abbreviations

ANSA	Armed Non-State actor
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
FPM	Free Patriotic Movement
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IDF	Israel Defense Forces

IJO	Islamic Jihad Organization
IR	International Relations
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
MOC	Military Operation Center
MP	Member of Parliament
NDF	National Defense Forces
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSA	Non-State Actor
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PNA	Palestinian National Authority
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
STL	Special Tribunal for Lebanon
PR	Proportional Representation
STV	Single Transferable Vote
YPG	People Protection Units
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution

UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
VNSA	Violent Non-State Actor
YPG	People Protection Units

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Focusing on the Middle East has its own particularism, providing rich and eloquent material for researchers and never failing their academic journeys. It is “the chrysalis of three of the world’s great religions”, the land of the holy wars where empires have risen and fallen, the region where “every form of domestic and international order has existed, and been rejected, at one time or another” (Kissinger, 2014, p.96). Raymond Hinnebusch (2015) opined that “the Middle East is arguably the epi-center of world crisis, chronically war-prone and the site of the world’s most protracted conflicts” (p.1). Of course, conflicts are not an exclusivity for the Middle East but the latter has always been volatile and

seldom stable. Amid a changing world order throughout the 20th century, the region has endured seismic ordeals such as the Tripartite Aggression War conducted by Israel, France and the United Kingdom (UK) against Egypt, the Lebanese civil war, and the first and second Gulf Wars. Among the myriad events that engulfed the 20th century Middle East, three were paramount to the regional order: World War I and its aftermath, namely the Sikes-Picot agreement and the de facto states that were implemented; the 1948 declaration of the State of Israel and the ensuing Arab-Israeli wars; the Islamic revolution in Iran and its regional implications.

A pray for domestic, sub-regional, regional and international powers and competing ideologies and agendas, there is no room for harmony in the Middle East and any peace process is bound to fail. As the 21st century opened with the draconian 9/11 bloodshed culminating in the 2003 Iraq invasion by the US and the Arab Uprisings less than a decade later, the Middle East will likely remain unstable in the foreseeable future. These latter events caused the biggest waves of unrest with short and long-term ramifications. Not only did they destabilize the region, but also led to the resurface of sectarian identities and tensions. The rise of sectarianism, according Morten Valbjørn & Raymond Hinnebusch (2019), is a vital topic in the study of the modern Middle East. The power vacuum caused by the decrease in states' influence made them prone to contestation between regional powers hoping to fill the void and tilt the balance of power in their favor. Pursuing an increasingly assertive foreign policy, these powers instrumentalized sectarian identities and adopted a sectarian mobilization agenda in a biting game to limit the influence of their rivals: While Sunni regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported Sunni groups, Iran sponsored Shi'a factions.

This situation deepened the Sunni-Shi'a schism and the confrontations in countries such as Iraq and Syria were falsely framed as sectarian while it was in fact a geopolitical contest driven by the interplay of domestic, regional and international rivalries and sectarian relations were one among an array of factors that exacerbated the conflict, namely driven by the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry. Haddad (2020) stressed that "the intersection of sectarian identity and Arab-Iranian rivalry has seen regional strategy instrumentalizing markers of sectarian identity to foster sectarian solidarity and mobilization by portraying geopolitical issues as existential threats confronting all Sunni and Shi'a (p.116)." Moreover, the post-Saddam Iraq and post-Arab Uprisings environments witnessed the unleash of terrorist groups stretching from Abou Mos'ab al Zarkawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq to Abou Bakr al-Baghdadi's Da'esh or the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria. In fact, the Arab Uprisings, a groundswell of rebellions that engulfed North Africa and the Middle East since the end of 2010, were expected to bring change, democracy, peace and economic prosperity, but instead, they brought more instability, authoritarianism, starvation, calamity and anarchy.

Having said that, Marc Lynch (2018) argued that the traditional powers in the Middle East are barely operative. States' weakness and failure shifted power to a new operational level which functions through "influence peddling and proxy warfare", and regional powers delved into alternative encounters: the proxy confrontations.¹ These dynamics provided more room for the rise of armed non-state actors (ANSAs) which have thrived in the Middle East since the 20th century and helped shape the regional order. For

¹ Lynch, Marc (September 2018). The New Arab Order. Retrieved from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-08-13/new-arab-order>

instance, the US and its Middle Eastern allies adopted a proxy confrontation agenda to counterbalance the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s by supporting Islamist fighters who later formed al-Qaeda. Subsequently, the latter marked the US as its primary target and executed a lethal attack on 9/11/2001 killing thousands of Americans. Next, George Bush's administration launched a campaign against al-Qaeda by invading Afghanistan and later on Iraq in order to remove Saddam Hussein's regime. Furthermore, in 2014, a group of terrorists occupied vast territories in Iraq and Syria and announced the reign of Da'esh (ISIS). The emergence of a Sunni jihadist organization that spread hatred against all sects, including Sunnis who refused to obey it, and butchered people for apostasy facilitated the mobilization of fighters to join anti-ISIS armed groups. These were mainly Shi'a groups who formed al-Hashd al Sha'bi (Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF), with the assistance of Iran, and to a lesser extent, Hezbollah, to prevent ISIS's forays. These groups were predominantly Shi'a but they were also joined by Christians, Yazidis and Turkmen (Dylan O'Driscoll and Dave van Zoonen, 2017, p.37). In the ensuing months, ISIS's mischief-making took the world's attention and pressed the US and its western allies to train, arm and equip the Kurds, namely the People's Protection Units (YPG), in Iraq and Syria in order to fight ISIS on the ground. Moreover, it established an international coalition which focused on launching aerial attacks on ISIS.

The point to make here is that states contesting for international and regional influence have adopted a proxy warfare paving the way for the emergence of ANSAs. Not only does such support provide regional gains, but it also gives the sponsor states more room on the negotiation table and for plausible deniability had any covert operation been discovered. And as shown above the rise of ANSAs and their margin of maneuvers were

paramount to the regional balance of power, sometimes more than states. Therefore, this thesis will tackle the role of perhaps one of the most iconoclastic and important ANSAs in the Middle East, Hezbollah. While it will examine its role in the Lebanese theatre, it will focus on its operations in Syria during the civil war. It will elaborate how Hezbollah played a major role in tilting the power balance during the Syrian conflict by helping prevent the close collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Most importantly, it will unpack how Syria's conflict, a war of necessity for Hezbollah, has transitioned it into a regional ANSA.

It is necessary to mention here that on 16 February 1985, in its open letter addressed to the world, Hezbollah officially announced itself a resistance, not only against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, but also of Palestine (Joseph Alagha, 2011, p.5). This group of fighters adopted a sectarian mobilization agenda by instrumentalizing its Shi'a identity and sect-specific symbols. Then, Hezbollah had emerged as an organization bellicose and eager to fight the Israelis through guerilla tactics – hit-and-run with small units. In the ensuing decades, the Lebanese organization witnessed intellectual, military and political transformations. First, Hezbollah grudgingly realized the inconveniency of creating an Islamic State in a multisectarian society such as Lebanon and therefore, from rejecting the Lebanese system and debunking it, Hezbollah caved to the status quo. As this leitmotif became obviously doomed, Hezbollah sought to adapt by pursuing an "openness policy" and decided to run for the parliamentary elections in 1992 on cross-sectarian lists (Alagha, 2006, p.169). Second, during that decade, Hezbollah faced two major clashes with the Israelis: The July 1993 Operation Accountability and the April 1996 Operation Grapes of Wrath; which it endured and gained further credibility among the Lebanese citizens. On 25 May 2000, Israel departed from South Lebanon and Hezbollah

was credited for the liberation although other groups had also fought the Israelis in earlier stages. Third, the departure of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) from Lebanon in 2005 pressing Hezbollah, for the first time, to participate in the government to fill the power vacuum left behind. Forth, the 33 days of war in 2006 against Israel making it an essential military force and a player in the regional order. Fifth, and most important, Syria's civil war that embedded Hezbollah as a partner in the axis that extends from Iran to Lebanon, via Syria, and more recently Iraq, and shifted it into a regional ANSA.

By and large, Hezbollah's fate is pegged to Iran and the latter's sponsorship is paramount for the former's endurance. This relationship is mutually beneficial: Hezbollah implements Iran's agenda and provides it with regional leverage and in return, Iran helps Hezbollah stand against Israel and amplify its domestic, and more recently, regional clout. In conjunction with Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah spearheaded the bolster of Palestinian factions since early 1990s, and in post-Saddam Iraq it participated in assisting and training Iraqi Shi'a groups, such as Badr Organization in order to fight the US and increase Iran's influence. This role was followed later by the formation of the PMF after ISIS' emergence in 2014. In 2012, as Syria was disintegrating into chaos and while the opposition fighters were closing up on Damascus, Hezbollah's highly equipped and well trained fighters started their gradual engagement in their bid to prevent the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime. "The intervention", Saouli (2019) emphasized, "was gradual and dictated by the changing military balance on the ground. The weaker the regime and the higher the threat of its fall became, the more Hezbollah stepped in to fill the void and to offer the necessary backing" (p.190).

At the outset, Hezbollah's sectarian identity and discourse served as a mobilizational tool for what was in fact an intervention in a geopolitical confrontation that risked tilting the power balance in its rivals' favor. Fanar Haddad (2020) argued that "religion as doctrine is not needed to make 'religious conflict'; it is far more likely for such conflicts to be driven by religion as identity—in other words, religion less as a metaphysical truth and more as a marker of group solidarities and group boundaries" (p.51-52). Therefore, doctrinal truth does not explain the causality of the conflict, but Hezbollah's politicization of sectarian identity and sect-centric symbols and sectarian mobilization policy were needed to justify its intervention. While Haddad (2020) stressed that "political instrumentalization of sectarian identities is not always malign nor is fostering division always the aim" (p.97), Hezbollah participated in deepening the Sunni-Shi'a schism and in parallel, was demonized by its Sunni rivals.

In June 2013, Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, raised the stakes by accusing foreign powers of conspiring against the "axis of resistance" –Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and other pro-Iran factions. "Wherever we must be," Nasrallah underlined, "we will be"². By other words, this was a green light to unleash Hezbollah's fighters all over Syria. Pursuing an increasingly offensive policy, Hezbollah's troops helped tip the power balance in Assad's favor and their intervention proved to be a game changer. Further afield, this discourse provided an evidence that Hezbollah's primary motive was to defend its geopolitical interest in Syria but the sectarian card was merely a mobilizational tool at the outset. The conflict has also shifted Hezbollah into a quasi-army that mixed between

² Middle East Observer. (20 June 2013). "Hezbollah's Nasrallah on Syria: wherever we must be we will be". Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUkKcEfDehI>

guerilla and classical army formations and tactics, and embedded it as a partner and a decision-maker in the axis. These factors were key to Hezbollah's increasing influence and its transition into a regional ANSA during Syria's cataclysmic conflict.

This paper will unpack an era in Hezbollah's history that witnessed major shifts extending from 2004-05 until the 2018 Lebanese parliamentary elections. During this period of time, Hezbollah has enmeshed itself in regional tumults from Damascus to San'a, through Baghdad and Jerusalem, accelerating its shift to a regional ANSA. The paper will tackle these events along with an explanation of Hezbollah's emergence, but will primarily focus on its engagement in Syria's civil war. In February 2010, Assad held a presidential dinner in the presence of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then Iran's president, and Nasrallah. As matter of fact, Nasrallah's presence among two presidents was a recognition that Hezbollah has become a partner and a decision-maker in the axis even before the beginning of the Syrian conflict. However, the civil war was the turning point in this partnership and provided a damning proof that it is a partner rather than a surrogate for both Iran and Syria. More to the point, in order to explain Hezbollah's transition into a regional ANSA, three factors will be emphasized: The instrumentalization of its sectarian identity, the transformation into a quasi-army and its partnership in the axis and participation in the decision-making process.

Palpably, Hezbollah has become one of the most effective ANSAs in the Middle East. The overarching aim of this thesis is to survey Hezbollah's transition into a regional ANSA and present Hezbollah as a case study to stress that ANSAs are key to the regional order. For our purposes, it will focus on Hezbollah's political and military role in Syria's conflict. The paper will elaborate how sectarian identity and mobilization were deployed

as a tool in the geopolitical contest on regional canvas. The conflict was a war of necessity for Hezbollah as it risked losing a strategic ally had Assad's regime collapsed. Christopher Phillips (2018) argued that "Hezbollah faced a grave, even existential threat should Assad be toppled. Syria provided it with strategic depth, including the essential supply to Iran, and legitimacy: The Syrian-Iranian alliance was presented as part of a wider resistance on behalf of all Muslims and Arabs against Israel and the West. Like Iran, it feared a Sunni-dominated regime emerging in Damascus, but with further domestic reason: it might shift Lebanon's delicate sectarian balance in favor of Sunnis, at the expense of the Shi'a and Hezbollah" (p.157). This thesis will emphasize that it is likely that the chaos in the Middle East will endure and peace is hardly reachable, namely because sectarian relations are a central driver of political contest and sectarianism will not end in the 21st century.

1.2 Research questions

This thesis is guided by the following question: What effect did the Syrian conflict on the transition of Hezbollah into a regional ANSA? While exploring this question it will offer a short history, not only about the emergence of Hezbollah, but most importantly of the rise of the Shi'a in Lebanon. This is necessary so that readers do not misstep this rise by confining it to the establishment of Hezbollah. The paper will explain Hezbollah's relationship vis-à-vis Iran and then move to scrutinize the former's operations on the domestic theatre, stretching from its emergence in 1982 to the first transition, dubbed "infatih policy". For our purposes, it will explain the international pressure that pushed towards implementing the 1559, a United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) demanding the departure of all foreign forces from Lebanon and the disarmament of all

militias –in reference to Syria and Hezbollah, respectively, and the subsequent assassination of Rafik Hariri, former Prime Minister, followed by mass demonstrations demanding the departure of the SAA from the country. Granted a mandate over the country since the 1989 Ta'if agreement that ended the civil war's hostilities, Syria withdrew from Lebanon in 2005 leaving behind a power vacuum that Hezbollah had to fill. These events marked the beginning of a new political order in Lebanon and a new era, stretching from 2004-05 to May 2018, which this thesis will study.

Further afield, on the regional level, it will unpack Hezbollah's operations in Palestine, Iraq, Yemen and most importantly, Syria. The engagement in the Syrian conflict enmeshed Hezbollah in a geopolitical contest that was the conduit of its transition into a regional ANSA. In fact, if anything, ANSAs have become unavoidable political and military players in the Middle East regional order and therefore this thesis will examine Hezbollah as a case study to provide in-depth understanding and analysis about the skyrocketing clout of one of an array of ANSAs in the region. That said, it will emphasize that Hezbollah's transition was paralleled with its operations in conjunction with other major regional powers, chiefly Iran and Syria. Its engagement in the latter's chaotic civil war in 2012 was a choice of necessity to undermine would-be regional threat had Assad's regime collapsed. This transition was driven by three main variables: Hezbollah's sectarian mobilization and instrumentalization of sectarian identity, the tilt into a quasi-army and its partnership in the axis. This somewhat imposed Hezbollah as a regional ANSA that cannot be overlooked by Middle East scholars, journalists, and even casual observers.

It is necessary to mention here that the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 has encouraged it to adopt a foreign policy of power projection. More to the point, one of its primary successes was the establishment of Hezbollah. "Understanding the impact of state sponsorship on the decision-making of non-state armed actors is among the most important issues to scholars of security studies" (DeVore, 2012). The Iran-Hezbollah relationship has been mutually beneficial. While Naim Qassem (2005) argued that Hezbollah detected an opportunity to strengthen its ties with Iran upon its foundation in order to gain support and achieve its purpose and aspiration (p.235), Iran benefited from this relationship to increase its regional clout through Hezbollah's proxy roles. DeVore (2012) stressed that the organization's decision-making was directly and indirectly shaped by Iran due to the sponsorship of the latter. Jordan Schachtel (2015) also argued that "Hezbollah has 80000 missiles" that it could unleash into Israel if Iran is attacked by the latter. That said, it is hard to escape the fact that Hezbollah will retaliate if Iran came under attack.

Generally speaking, proxies receive aids, funds and training to serve directly and indirectly the interest of the country that is offering them support. Devore (2012) claimed that "governments seek to have foreign policy interests through their relationships with armed non-state actors". The Iranian strategy, he pursued, is to use Hezbollah as a proxy as "they convinced the party to include high value targets on the hit list and attack the enemies". Shoghig Mikaelian and Bassel Salloukh (2015) argued that Iran was balancing against the US and Israel's threat by using its proxies, chiefly Hezbollah. Moreover, Scott Stewart (2010) reasoned that Iran used Hezbollah and its other proxies in Latin America to threaten the US. As a matter of fact, people related to Hezbollah were arrested in

numerous countries in south America and southwest Asia. Indeed, the US department had always claimed that Hezbollah is directing cells in Latin America, Africa, Europe and Asia (Masters Jonathan & Zachary Laub, 2014). “On 17 March 1992, Hezbollah operatives supported by the Iranian Embassy in Buenos Aires attacked the Israeli Embassy in that city with a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device killing 29 people and injuring hundreds more” (Stewart, 2010). “Hezbollah’s outside branch is accused of staging a number of attacks against Jewish targets, most recently against Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria on 18 July 2012” (Mikaelian & Salloukh, 2015). These indictments were valid, however, Hezbollah has matured and rationalized. Therefore, it has undergone a behavioral change in the 1990s and such activities started waning.

Furthermore, as will be explained in chapter 3, Iran was not the key drive behind the emergence of Shi’a activism in Lebanon. Rather, it exploited the rise of the Shi’a to organize a group of zealous Islamist fighters under one organization which came to be known as Hezbollah. Suffice it to say here that the ground was fertile for the emergence of such an Islamist jihadist group, especially after the Israeli invasion and decades of marginalization of Shi’a rural areas. Of course, from Iran’s side this was the perfect opportunity to expand its regional influence. Thereafter, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries marked serious attempts to create what was called a Shi’a Crescent from Tehran to Beirut. Iranian ambitions had been confronted by regional powers, however. Further afield, the post-2003 Iraq and post-Arab Uprisings environment has witnessed further implementations of sectarian identities deepening the Sunni-Shi’a split and causing a blood bath in many Arab countries. For our purposes, Hezbollah has politicized its sectarian identity and played the sectarian card for what was in fact a geopolitical

contest. Chaos in the Middle East seemed to have served Iran and Hezbollah as they both became operational in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen trying to take the lion's share of the political vacuum in these collapsing states. Tilting the regional power balance in its rivals' favor, namely Saudi Arabia, would have weakened Tehran and by it, Hezbollah. With time, "Hezbollah has transformed itself from a little-known, secretive apparatus founded by Iran's Revolutionary Guards into one of the most powerful non-state domestic actors in Lebanon and a major player in the regional politics" (Shoghig Mikaelian and Bassel Salloukh, 2016).

The biting game between Iran and Saudi Arabia increased in 2012 with Iran sending its proxies to protect Bashar al-Assad's regime from collapse, and the Revolutionary Guard assuming a new role in Syria (Salloukh, 2014). At the outset, Hezbollah's units, in tandem with Iraqi and Afghani Shi'a groups such as *'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq*, headed to protect Sayyida Zeinab's Mosque, a Shi'a Iraqi shrine in Damascus' suburbs, against the attacks of Sunni Islamist factions which pledge to destroy it once captured. This was paralleled with their assertive engagement on the Lebanese-Syrian borders to defend Shi'a villages which were under attack by rebel groups. These sectarian bickering provided Hezbollah with the perfect justification and helped it adopt a sectarian mobilization agenda ahead of its full-scale intervention in Syria's conflict. This does not mean, however, that the conflict was driven by sectarian identity or sectarian truth was a key driver. Rather, these were merely a mobilizational tool to serve their geopolitical agendas. The discourse, however, changed over time and Nasrallah argued that "Hezbollah's activities in Syria are meant to ensure that Islamic State's leader Abu Bakr

al-Baghdadi will not repeat in Lebanon what he did in Iraq”³. This is plainly not the case, however. Hezbollah engaged before the emergence of ISIS and the mayhem it spread across the region but from Hezbollah’s supporters point of view this was a pre-emptive measure that proved to be righteous. Used as a route to transfer weapons from Tehran to Beirut, it became clear that Iran could not afford losing Syria to its political rivals and risk a flip in the regional balance of power in its rivals’ favor. In June 2013, after Nasrallah’s reverberating speech stressing that “wherever we must be, we will be”⁴, a new military and political balance was put in place. From that moment onwards, Hezbollah’s fighters increasingly spread all over Syria helping the SAA recapture areas that had been lost to the opposition.

The twenty first century provided a set of conditions, surely impossible to reproduce, that allowed Hezbollah to increase its influence domestically and regionally. With the unfolding of Syria’s conflict in 2018, Hezbollah had emerged as a regional ANSA. Rather than offering a history of the events that led to this transition, this thesis will answer questions such as: when and why did Hezbollah shift to a regional ANSA? Under what conditions did this transition occur? What was Iran’s role in this shift? Was Syria an opportunity that the organization had long awaited or was it an unescapable confrontation? What about Hezbollah’s military arsenal? How did Syria’s civil war establish it as a quasi-army? What effect did the rise of sectarianism have on the organization? How and where did it instrumentalize its sectarian identity and adopted

³ “Nasrallah: Hezbollah Fighting in Syria to Prevent Zionist, US Hegemony”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 11 March 2014.

⁴Al-Jazeera. (2013) Hezbollah leader vows to continue Syria fight. Retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/20136141719617527.html>

sectarian mobilization agenda? How did it become a partner in the axis? Will Hezbollah limit itself to Lebanon in the future?

1.3 Map of thesis

Chapter 2 will start by locating this thesis within a theoretical framework. It will argue that various organizations have undergone a transition but each in its own terms and conditions. For that it will give many examples of organizations that experienced these transitions such as Hamas and Fatah. Then it will tackle the literature vis-à-vis Hezbollah. It will debate the previous works that have focused on Hezbollah who mostly focused on its emergence, confrontations with Israel, its first transition in the 1990s and its engagement in the Lebanese systems. However, although some works were exceptional and mentioned Hezbollah's regional role, this chapter will emphasize that the work in this thesis is original as it will focus mainly on Hezbollah's regional maneuvers with minor interest in the Lebanese theatre. It will also assure that ANSAs, such as Hezbollah, are playing vital roles in the Middle East regional order and more attention should be given to these actors. The chapter will end by explaining the methodology that this thesis will adopt which is a qualitative methodology and use primary and secondary resources such as online database, in-depth interviews and field work. This theoretical chapter will locate this thesis within the literature before delving into studying Hezbollah in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 will address the rise of the Shi'a as part of the emergence of Islamism in the Middle East following the demise of Pan-Arabism. In parallel, a small Shi'a community was spreading across Lebanon and participating in the political activism. From this background, namely spearheaded by al-Da'wa party and the less religious Amal

movement, Hezbollah surfaced. Its emergence and maneuvers will be tackled in this chapter, along with its allegiance to the *wilayat al-faqih*, a religious concept implemented by Ayatollah Khomeini after the triumph of the 1979 revolution. In coordination and bolster by the IRGC, namely the Quds Force, Hezbollah was established to fight against Israel's occupation in Lebanon. The relationship between Iran and Hezbollah is fourfold, as this chapter will show: religious, political, military and financial. The Lebanese organization's labeling as terrorist or resistance will be elaborated and both points of view will be attempted. The point of this chapter is to shed light to key moments in the history not only of Hezbollah but also to the rise of the Shi'a.

Chapter 4 will study the maneuvers of Hezbollah in the Lebanese theatre from 2004 until 2018. But first, it will explain Hezbollah's "infitah policy" during which the soft-liners prevailed within the organization leading to the subsequent participation in the Lebanese parliamentary elections. Then, the chapter will unpack the fears of a conspiracy against Hezbollah following the assassination of Rafik Hariri, former Prime Minister, whose murder was later attributed to Hezbollah. Moreover, it feared of the full implementation of the 1559 United Nations Security Council Resolution which tacitly demanded the withdrawal of Syrian troops and the disarmament of Hezbollah. These transformative domestic events pressed Hezbollah to engage in the cabinet in 2005, the first post-Syria withdrawal cabinet. The chapter will also tackle the "Memorandum of Understanding", an agreement signed by Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's secretary general, and Michel Aoun, then leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and later president. This was few months prior to the 33 days' war in July 2006 between Hezbollah and Israel. It will be highlighted how Hezbollah conducted a cross-border raid and

kidnapped two Israeli soldiers, and killed 6 others, hoping to exchange them for the remaining inmates in Israeli prison. Israel, however, retaliated fiercely and hostilities gradually disintegrated into a full-scale war during which Hezbollah, unexpectedly, proved its ability to play a key role in altering the balance of power in the region.

Consequently, the chapter will elucidate the political stalemate that engulfed Lebanon from 2006 until 2008 dividing the country along the dichotomy of 8 March alliance –pro-Syria, and Aoun’s FPM, vs 14 March alliance – anti-Syria. This political deadlock was paralleled by demonstrations and a sit-in in Beirut by Hezbollah and its allies demanding the resignation of the pro-west government. On 7 May, clashes erupted between both sides and Hezbollah fighters and their allies, quickly took Beirut. The wound was sealed by Qatari mediation in what called the “Doha agreement”. The chapter will then elaborate about the presidential election which brought Aoun to the highest position in Lebanon and the offensive dubbed “En ‘Odtom ‘Odna” (if you’re back we’re back) by Hezbollah on the Lebanese-Syrian borders. The chapter will conclude by unpacking the 6 May parliamentary 2018 elections which leveraged Hezbollah and its allies by securing the majority of the seats. These rising clout of Hezbollah on the domestic scene was coupled with its increasing regional influence. More to the point, the interplay between the domestic and regional theatres was necessary for Hezbollah’s transition into a regional ANSA.

Chapter 5 will analyze Hezbollah’s maneuvers beyond the Lebanese theatre. It will first unpack its proxy role vis-à-vis Iran in Palestine and Iraq. The Palestinian portfolio is Hezbollah’s *raison d’être* but without Iran’s bolster, it would have not been able to provide the Palestinian factions with the support they need. It will argue, however, that Palestinian

factions, which happened to be Sunnis, are partially part of the axis because the pressure that burdened them during the rise of sectarianism amid Syria's civil war distanced them from their allies in the axis. It will examine Hezbollah's proxy role in post-Saddam Iraq where it executed Tehran regional agenda by helping establish Shi'a ideological replicas under Iran's supervision. Above all, it will emphasize Hezbollah's engagement in Syria's civil war which was a war of necessity. In its bid to prevent the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Hezbollah intervene in Syria through al-Qusayr, on the Lebanese-Syrian border, and Damascus's suburbs. It justified this engagement by a sectarian narrative pledging to protect Lebanese Shi'a villages in al-Qusayr's countryside and Shi'a shrines in Sayyida Zeinab, few kilometers from Damascus. This chapter will maintain that this discourse helped exacerbate the Sunni-Shi'a schism which was also fanned by the emergence of terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State (ISIS).

Gradually, Hezbollah troops spread across Syria, from Dar'a and Quneitra in the south, all the way up to Deir ez-Zor in the northeast and Idlib in the northwest and Aleppo, through inland provinces, namely Rif Dimashk, Homs and Palmyra. During these battles, Hezbollah units, backed by springs of ammos and artillery, adopted a carpet bombing policy that rained rebel held areas with barrages of bombardments and followed later by waves of fighters. This chapter will elaborate these confrontations and argued that Hezbollah became a quasi-army that mixed between guerilla and classical army tactics and formations. Moreover, it will indicate that Hezbollah became a partner and a decision-maker in the axis that extends from Beirut to Tehran, via Damascus and Baghdad, from ground offensives, to operations rooms all the way up to the leadership level. The analysis of these variables will culminate with a conclusion that Hezbollah has transitioned into a

regional ANSA which participated in tilting the balance of power in Syria's in the favor of Assad and his allies. It will then conclude by briefly tackling Hezbollah's proxy role in Yemen where it helped Iran implement its regional agenda by supporting the Houthis against the Saudi backed regime hoping to counter-balance Riyadh on the its borders.

Chapter 6 will resume the key features that were the conduit for Hezbollah's transition to a regional ANSA. First, it will argue that Hezbollah leapt into Syria to prevent the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, its strategic and long-term ally. Syria was the harbor of its weapons en route from Iran to Lebanon and losing it would have tilted the balance of power in its rivals' favor. Therefore, this chapter will emphasize that Syria's civil war was a conflict of necessity that Hezbollah was forced to conduct to guarantee its endurance. In fact, it was a geopolitical confrontation between domestic, regional and international powers on Syria's soil during which Hezbollah transitioned to a regional ANSA. The transition was shaped by three variables: Hezbollah's exploitation of its Shi'a identity, the military confrontations that transitioned it into a quasi-army, and its transformation to a partner and decision-maker in the axis. Hezbollah used a sectarian narrative to justify its intervention by pledging to protect the Sayyida Zeinab's mosque – a prominent Shi'a shrine in Damascus's suburb, and the Shi'a villages on the Lebanese-Syrian border, namely al-Qusayr. However, it will emphasize that this was merely to mobilize its Shi'a entourage and fighters to implement its regional agenda. This intervention placed Hezbollah in a new battlefield different than the one it was accustomed to in Lebanon and against a new foe. In order to adapt, it had to mix between guerilla and classical warfare tactics with large army formations and top-notch units and emerged as a quasi-army. During these confrontations, Hezbollah embedded itself as a

partner and decision-maker in the axis that now extends from Beirut to Tehran, through Damascus and Baghdad. However, it will highlight that within the axis, Syria was not Iran's ideological replica but they shared the same regional agenda.

Chapter 7 will conclude by summing up the argument of the thesis. It will resume Hezbollah's new posture in the regional scene and tackle the alterations in the regional order in which Hezbollah took part. It will emphasize that the changing balance of power in the Middle East provided a fertile ground for NSAs to thrive and expand their influence. However, among all ANSAs, Hezbollah played the most crucial role in the Lebanese theatre and beyond. Furthermore, it will argue that Hezbollah participated in deepening the Sunni-Shi'a schism, namely through its participation in Syria's civil war, a rift that will not end in the 21st century but on the contrary will be the tool of new confrontations as it was in Iraq, Syria and other Arab countries. It succeeded in its bid to prevent the collapse of Syria's regime, spearheaded by Bashar al-Assad, and embedded itself more in the axis that now extends from Beirut to Tehran, via Damascus and Baghdad. Nevertheless, it will mention the nuance between Syria and Iran, who shared a similar agenda in Syria but do not share the same Shi'a dogma. It will unpack Hezbollah's personnel arguments vis-à-vis their future roles and endeavors and will close with stressing that eliminating Hezbollah will be the hardest milestone for its rivals amid the regional chaos.

2 Conceptual framework and methodology

2.1 Theoretical emphasis

Organizations, and sometimes statecrafts, find themselves compelled to undergo certain transitions, and most of the time, these changes happen as part of a changing policy in order to adapt to a new set of rules and are also connected to geopolitical

alterations. The overarching aim of this chapter is two-fold. First, it will provide examples of organizations that experienced transitions but each in its own terms. Second, it will provide Hezbollah's transition with a theoretical framework within the literature. Michael Boning (2011) in his book entitled *The Politics of Change in Palestine: State Building and Non-Violent Resistance*, assessed the transitions underwent by both Hamas and Fatah factions at critical crossroads during their political itineraries. Accordingly, Boning stressed that "Hamas, like many social institutions, has undergone dramatic change in recent years, partly influenced by outside factors and partly reflecting internal responses to external developments." Hezbollah's transitions were indeed influenced by both factors but were more severe tilts than Hamas's due to the multisectional Lebanese society and the confessional system. Bringing the discussion back to Boning's argument, he said that Hamas is an organization in transition that has indirectly and gradually denounced the 1988 Hamas Charter that was considered radical and has adopted a policy of "political pragmatism" by accepting the two-state solution. It has started, according to Boning, operating within the political spectrum as an opposition to Fatah, and then became a political party within the Palestinian Territory rather than a radical opposition, and then in a final shift it became a de facto government in the Gaza Strip. Boning emphasized that "a variety of originally 'radical' political organizations have ultimately followed a path of reform that began with practical steps on the ground as opposed to abstract changes in theoretical orthodoxy." This is exactly true not only in the case of Hamas but also Hezbollah, and more precisely, in regards to its engagement in the electoral elections in 1992. This participation came after years of appeal to the establish an Islamic State. In comparison with Hamas' adaptation, Hezbollah too didn't dispel its aim but gradually

modified its political stance as a first step of reform. This was followed by further pragmatic steps which will be elaborated in chapter 4 but will not be focused on.

Boning (2011) focused on the Gaza Strip saying that ruling in this area, transformed “parts of Hamas from violent resistance movement into a de facto state actor charged with administering a ‘real existing’ political entity”, and this change have had ideological ramifications with “an open-ended process of transformation.” Hezbollah has accomplished a further change when it got involved in the 2005 government for the first time and started acting as part of the political spectrum. This was due to a changing domestic and external political factors that Boning had applied on Hamas as mentioned above. This 2004-05 shift, along with Hezbollah’s transition into a regional ANSA during Syria’s civil war fall into the open-ended process of transitions that Boning mentioned. Boning (2011) maintained that Hamas is undergoing a transition from a movement to a state actor. This is not the case for Hezbollah, however. Rather, it has been engaged in the Lebanese system since 1992 and its operations beyond the Lebanese theatre, namely in the Syrian conflict, transitioned it to a regional ANSA. Hamas is the best example to compare with Hezbollah as both have experienced transitions on the political and military levels.

Gordon Peake (2003), in “From Warlords to Peacelords”, explained how the warlords in Afghanistan became part of the political scene and held key positions in the government in the wake of the US invasion. These local leaders helped fighting the Taliban and the new formed government “was dependent on leaders undergoing the transition from warlord to peacelord” in collaboration with the international community, chiefly the United Nations (UN). Peake concluded that these warlords became peacemangers instead of

peacelords; then recovering from a war is even more challenging and the transition in such communities is a harder task that needs even more effort. Therefore, NSAs are prone for changes in certain political contexts that shape the dynamics of these transitions. The Kurds, however, provide a prominent example in this matter.

Gareth Stansfield's (2003) book, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political development and emergent democracy*, illustrates the development of the political system of Iraqi Kurdistan. It is necessary to mention Stansfield's book to create a theoretical framework for the transition that Hezbollah has undergone, but the core of his work has a different approach of that adopted in this thesis because Hezbollah has not changed from a guerilla or resistance movement to a party ruling or controlling a de facto state, but to a regional ANSA. Moreover, Hezbollah has experienced a transition from guerilla, but to become part of the state rather than "the state" or the "de facto state" as he mentioned. However, both the Kurdish parties –Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and Hezbollah have endured transitional periods but each in its own terms. Stansfield (2003) argued that geopolitical realities have galvanized additional development of the situation among the Kurds: "The change in the global and regional geopolitical system at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s presented an unprecedented opportunity for the Iraqi Kurds to seize the initiative" (p.12). The core argument of Stansfield (2003) is derived from the lack of political science literature, as he said, vis-à-vis "the development of a political grouping from that of a guerilla movement to a political party". In particular, he focused on the geopolitical rather than ideological aspects of a revolution based on "the theory of the insurgent state" and its close relativity with "the de facto state of Iraqi Kurdistan" (p.16).

The abovementioned examples provide a general theoretical framework. However, the closest groups to Hezbollah that witnessed transitions are the paramilitary Shi'a groups in Iraq. Not only were these Shi'a but also many were loyal to Iran and swearing allegiance to *wilayat al-faqih*. Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabbar (2017) in "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future" studied the policy shift vis-à-vis paramilitaries and how such groups were accepted by, for instance former prime minister and leader of al-Da'wa party Nouri Maliki, who had previously refused the establishment of armed groups. This shift was mainly triggered by the rise of ISIS and the mischief-making it created. Further, "one domestic political factor", Mansour and A. Jabbar argued, "that led to the emergence of paramilitaries in Iraq was the failure of state building in the security sector amid the rise of the Islamic State". Since 2013, Maliki allowed seven groups, under the banner of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), to operate in Iraq. This was the first transition of these groups into what became legal armed forces, the PMF. In 2014, with the ISIS take-over of Mosul, thus controlling one third of Iraq's territory, "Maliki signed an official decree to form the Commission of the PMF". This of course was also legitimized by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's edict to volunteer in order to fight ISIS. The point to make out of these facts is to explain how these groups transitioned into legal armed forces fighting under the umbrella of state but with large autonomy from it. Furthermore, similar to the case of Lebanon, the emergence and the embrace of the PMF by the Iraqis was due to the facts on the ground and the chaos that was engulfing the country. Hezbollah's increasing support among the Lebanese citizens was underpinned by its fight against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. This is clearly not a comparative study. Suffice it to say here that these groups have undergone transitions legitimizing their work. Of course, this

is not the case for Hezbollah as it has only been recognized as a resistance operating completely out of the state's reach. But both Hezbollah and many PMF factions are part of *wilayat al-faqih*, operate in tandem with the IRGC and rely on Iran for backup.

In the early 1990s, Hezbollah has altered from a mere guerilla group fighting against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon to a Lebanese party participating also in domestic politics. This transition was crucial to the survival of Hezbollah and its adaptation with the Lebanese system. However, the transition that it experienced during Syria's civil war is different and on a larger scale with much bigger roles. In fact, while the first transition was an adaptation, the second was a necessity as will be explored throughout this thesis. Moreover, they were both triggered by the interplay of domestic and regional factors and alterations. Hezbollah, a unique regional ANSA, now operating in multiple theatres beyond its state of origin, is luring journalists, scholars, and researchers interested in the Middle East. Most importantly, the engagement in the Syrian conflict has shed light to the central role that Hezbollah played in altering the power balance and to the insurmountable role of such ANSAs superseding the power and geographical boundaries of these states.

2.2 Literature review

The understanding of Hezbollah stems from its deep-rooted Shi'a identity, its relationship with Iran, its military challenges against Israel, and more recently, its engagement in Syria's civil war. This work, however, will focus on its involvement in the Syrian conflict, but will also, to a lesser extent, tackle its history and religious allegiance to Tehran. Before all this, one should recognize that the rise of Hezbollah is part of a larger increase of Shi'a influence in the Middle East after decades of marginalization. The upsurge of the Shi'a had previously occurred during the rule of the Safavids, when Shah

Ismail rose to power in 1500, and in two years' time he expanded his reign and implemented Shi'ism as the official faith (Hamid Dabashi, 2016, p.11). The second whopping role came with the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, where Ayatollah Khomeini rose to power and implemented an Islamic State, considered fundamental, according to Genieve Abdo (2017), and causing a threat to other Shi'a trends, namely the clerical establishment in al-Najaf, Iraq (p.20). "Khomeini's vision, the senior-most religious jurist, or *faqih*, [Khomeini and later on Khamenei], was duty-bound to assume political and executive authority, the *velayat* (or *wilayat*), in place of Iran's corrupt and westernized secular rulers" (Abdo, 2017, p.20). However, the *wilayat al-faqih* was not bound to geographical borders, but the *faqih* has power over the *umma*, or nation, of which Hezbollah and other Shi'a factions were part. Rodger Shanahan (2017) explained that the word Hezbollah is mentioned in various Qur'anic verses promising those groups a direct pass to heaven. More importantly, Shanahan referred that it is used to refer to "group of believers engaged in a common struggle, rather than an organized political entity". This common struggle is described by Khomeini as oppressors [the West and Israel] and oppressed [depends on the arena, but namely the others]. A further explanation of *wilayat al-faqih* and Khomeini's Islamic views will be provided in chapter 3. With the unfolding of the regional events, from the Arab-Israeli wars, to the post-Saddam Iraq and the Arab Uprisings, it has become clear that the role of armed non-state actors (ANSAs), chief among them Hezbollah, is growing.

This thesis hopes to provide a compelling emphasis vis-à-vis Hezbollah, with a focus on its transition into a regional ANSA during Syria's civil war. This literature, however, is emphasizing major works about Hezbollah before explaining the detailed target of this

work: First, it will underline the new alerts lunched by mainstream scholars regarding the necessity of shedding more light to these NSAs. Second, it will provide some data about non-state actors (NSAs), namely violent NSAs, and locate Hezbollah within the literature. Third, it will get into the debate on sectarianism which will also be detailed in chapter 6. Fourth, it will divide the earlier works about Hezbollah into two parts: In the first section it will tackle books that are now old fashion but were significant at earlier stages; in the second it will offer new works that have been more academically important and offered new frameworks. Fifth and finally, it will conclude by explaining the scheme that this thesis will adopt and how it will provide original work about Hezbollah through primary and secondary resources.

In a liberal world where boundaries became superficial, transnational groups' effectiveness is growing, among them are NSAs. International Relations (IR) theories have ignored the role that NSAs, namely ANSAs, played in inter and intra-state relations. Nevertheless, these actors started taking attention in the field of IR and a variety of scholars started recognizing their role. Whether a politician, statesman, scholar, researcher or even observer, one cannot ignore ANSAs when studying the Middle East because in the 21st century, some of these organizations are appealing more attention than states. Even staunch realists like Stephen Walt have altered their primordial thoughts and accepted the role of ANSAs: "All you have to do is think about terrorist organizations equipped with biological weapons or nuclear weapons; they could do extraordinary levels of damage; far more than any non-state actor could ever have done in the past" (2009). More importantly, Henry Kissinger (2014) in *World Order* avowed to the role that jihadist groups, both Sunni and Shi'a, are undermining the states' role and putting the latter and

its armed forces in jeopardy (p.7). Kissinger blamed the decline in states legitimacy – more precisely Westphalian states, over their territory and the chaos in Middle Eastern states, such as Iraq and Syria, for the increasing influence of “non-state entities such as Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, ISIL [ISIS] and the Taliban” (p.142). Kissinger argued that “if order cannot be established, vast areas risk being opened to anarchy and to forms of extremism that will spread organically into other regions” (p.145). This argument is plausible, and the establishment of Hezbollah, or at least its endurance, would have been impossible if Lebanon was a strong state, or even restored in the post-civil war. But one must pay attention to a key confession between the lines that Kissinger stated, and that is his acceptance that these ANSAs are playing crucial roles in changing not only the power balance, but the de facto Westphalian states.

In the conclusion of his book, Kissinger poses the following challenge: “A reassessment of the concept of balance of power is in order”. He considered, however, that the replacement of the old world order is yet to be determined depending on the “conception of the future” (p.371-372). Kissinger is clearly addressing here the West hoping for better governance and cooperation, but amid these challenges that he posed, ANSAs, and their sponsor states, of which he mentioned Iran through his book, would disagree on such endeavor because their role would flicker and even demise in such world order. These ANSAs would definitely sabotage and co-opt any attempt to jeopardize their role, who for instance, is becoming more expansionist and regional, such as the case of Hezbollah. Raymond Hinnebusch (2018), *The International Politics of the Middle East*, challenged the realist view of “Cohesive Westphalian states” considering that states in the Middle East are divided to the extent that there is no unique foreign

policy that represents the national interest of each of these states. Hinnebusch added that neo-realists' assumption that the international behavior of the states is delineated by inter-state relationships is misleading since trans-state identities are ignored (p.2-3). Trans-national identities in the case of this work are sects, of which falls the maneuvers of Hezbollah's Shi'a identity. In fact, while realism totally ignores NSAs, liberalism and constructivism provide a better explanation. Liberalism provided enough space to emphasize about the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and leading institutions such as the United Nations (UN). But constructivism, according to Hinnebusch (2018), covered the functionality of sub- and supra-state identities with state identity (p.3). Michael R. Pompeo (2018), US secretary of state, argued that "the emergence of al-Qaeda, cybercriminals, and other dangerous entities affirmed the threat of NSAs".⁵ This clear avowing by a US statecraft can added to the aforementioned works, thus raising the necessity of bridging the gap between IR theories and ANSAs by shedding more light on the lack of attention given to the latter.

Hinnebusch (2018) argued that "if there is one thing that distinguishes the Middle East system it is the powerful role of non-state identities" (p.5). Hezbollah, represent an NSA, specifically ANSA, that represent an Iran-led non-state Shi'a identity that extends beyond the Westphalian state boundaries. Hinnebusch maintained that the chaos exacerbated in the region gave trans-state Islamist movements more room to maneuver, mobilizing further support and fragmenting the regional order (p.7). What is important here is that Hinnebusch underscored the crucial role that these movements, whether for the

⁵ "Confronting Iran: The Trump Administration Strategy", on November/December 2018. Foreign Affairs. Retrieved from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-10-15/michael-pompeo-secretary-of-state-on-confronting-iran>

best or worse, are playing in altering the regional order. Hinnebusch (2018) emphasized that supra-state public arena was revived in the 1990s, and the public discourse of the axis represented by former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Syria's president Bashar al-Assad, and Hezbollah's secretary general Hassan Nasrallah, has been prevailing in the 2000s against the US and its allies (p.275). In fact, both alliances have not been prevailing against each other, but the axis was filling the vacuum created by the US agenda, namely the Iraq invasion, and gaining leverage against the gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia. Through time this Iran-Saudi Arabia regional geopolitical confrontation turned sectarian, and while both Iran and the US shared hegemony and dominance in countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, the Saudi influence was decreasing in the region. Hinnebusch (2017), however, astonishingly concluded: "The MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region has been described as a graveyard of IR theories, since none seems to adequately capture its dynamics" (p.293). Certainly, this was the most accurate description of the relationship between IR theories and the Middle East and a reminder of the new awareness of prominent scholars, such as Kissinger and Walt, vis-à-vis the increase of the ANSAs' influence. Indeed, the dynamics of the regional order in the Middle East differ from other arenas and IR theories have remained confined by narrative cul-de-sacs that have provided little studies about ANSAs. Therefore, the latter, namely Islamists driven by ideology, have been able to play a flamboyant job that straddled the geopolitical fault-lines in the region.

There are nowadays abundant studies about NSAs, and some have tackled violent non-state actors (VNSAs), which we will elaborate below. That said, many have branded Hezbollah a VNSA, but this thesis will categorize it an ANSA that for sure uses violence

for political ends but also has ministers in the Lebanese cabinets and Members in the parliament. Kledja Mulaj (2010) argued that NSAs, mainly economic, have received more attention in IR than VNSAs (p.1). To comprehend regional and world politics, analyzing VNSAs is becoming more necessary since the security environment started to be influenced by the power of these groups (Mulaj, 2010, p.2). Moreover, she contended that the strength of VNSAs is fresh. People around the world are affected both directly – the 9/11 attacks on the towers of New York and the Pentagon, and indirectly – the spread of news and videos of any occurrence through the internet or networks (p.2). So social media was the most effective tool that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) used to spread its ideology and fear and attract jihadists from all over the world. Hezbollah, for example, has built its own chain of media that includes a TV channel and social media channels, and transmitted this strategy to other allied NSAs, such as the Houthis in Yemen. Hezbollah focuses on filming its operations to gain more trust and honesty among its supporters and foes.

Mulaj (2010) defined VNSAs as “non-state armed groups that resort to organized violence as a tool to achieve their goals. State/non-state divide is not necessarily clear cut, given that VNSAs not only operate in opposition to, or cooptation with, a state or states, but often also exist in a dependent relation to the state in term of support, benefits and recognition” (p.3). In fact, in strong states that have full authority over their territory, the emergence of these actors is nearly impossible. Mulaj (2010) differentiated numerous branches of these groups that use violence for political purposes: National liberation movements; insurgent guerilla bands; terrorist organizations; militants in weak states; and mercenary militias. She placed Hezbollah under the umbrella of insurgency and defined

it as explained by James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “A technology of military conflict characterized by small, lightly armed bands practicing guerilla warfare from rural areas” (p.4).⁶ However, this is an underestimation of Hezbollah’s role, capabilities and maneuvers. Mulaj’s book is published in 2010, which means prior to the Syrian civil war that further changed the face of Hezbollah. Following its full-scale engagement in Syria, its military tactics evolved and Hezbollah became a quasi-army merging between guerilla and classical warfare tactics and mostly operating with large army formations. Therefore, if it is to be framed in the pre-Syrian war engagement, it would have been better placed on the crossroads of two offshoots: national liberation movements and insurgent guerrilla bands. This thesis, however, will emphasize that Hezbollah does not fall under any of these categories, but Syria’s conflict was the conduit that shifted it into a regional ANSA.

Natasha Ezbrow (2017), in *Global Politics and Violent Non-State Actors*, debated that VNSAs can be distinguished by their activity and inspiration. So she therefore detailed five key characteristics: First, their primary motivation, observing whether they are politically or economically driven, their political ideology, their vision towards the status quo, their ambition to hold lands and their will to engage into the pre-existing political system or do they seek to change it. Second, methods of achieving their goals and whether they aim to attack civilians or state’s military. Third, their organizational structure, its hierarchy, its sophistication and ways of recruitment. Fourth, the group’s resource of funding. Fifth, the group’s impact, its power, its control of territory, its legitimacy, its popularity and its influence of the state and society (p.37). Ezbrow (2017), specified in

⁶ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, ‘Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War’, *American Political Science Review*, Vol.97, No. 1, February 2003, pp.75-99, at p.75

her book a chapter for each type of VNSAs: Insurgencies, terrorist organizations and terror networks, warlords and marauders, organized crime and gangs and private security companies and paramilitary units. For every category, she attributed the five elements that were mentioned above.

Ezbrow discussed in chapter 11 entitled “Moderation and politicization”, political parties with violent wings arguing that some groups have both political and militant wings. The political wing participates in activities, offer services to the public such as education and healthcare, and “plays by the rules of the game” while the military wing conducts violent acts to serve its political belief and ideology (p.168). Ezbrow (2017) emphasized that the case study of Hezbollah presents a violent group that forms a political party participating in the parliamentary elections and naming ministers in the Lebanese government (p.177). However, the differentiation of Hezbollah’s military and political wing is somewhat imposed by countries and diplomats that are keen to maintain a line of communication with Hezbollah. It is just a game of terminologies to find an excuse as they might be present in places with ministers or MPs from Hezbollah. Anyhow Ezbrow’s classification is not valid anymore and fails to provide a compelling categorization that can be adopted vis-à-vis Hezbollah as its role after the Syrian conflict is not the same anymore. That said, this study will adopt a straightforward hypothesis: Hezbollah shifted during Syria’s civil war into a regional ANSA.

Troy Thomas, Stephen Kiser & William Casebeer (2005), in *Warlords Rising: Confronting Violent Non-State Actors*, defined VNSAs as a “non-state organization that uses collective violence” and influence their environment and are influenced by it (p.9). They considered that VNSAs are illegitimate for states since the aims and purposes of

both sides are contradictory (p.10). Though Thomas et al.'s (2005) argument is valid for a most VNSA/ANSAs, yet Hezbollah proved it wrong. For many Lebanese, namely the anti-Hezbollah, as the interviews in this thesis will show, consider Hezbollah a militia that cannot coexist with a strong state. They perceive that Lebanon's foreign policy agenda must be in the hands of the government only and Hezbollah's is undermining the authority of the polity. However, Hezbollah survived even in the post-civil war Lebanon for political and strategic geopolitical calculations of countries that had the upper hand in the country, namely Syria, and later on, Iran. Consequently, Lebanon's government considered Hezbollah a legitimate resistance against Israel by using the "Army-People-Resistance Trilogy" in the consecutive governmental statements thus legalizing Hezbollah arsenal; at least until further notice. Hezbollah has always adopted a conspiracy theory discourse to undermine his rivals and garner support. With many endeavors to alter this Trilogy by Hezbollah's foes, it remained unaffected but has undergone minor verbal modifications that kept Hezbollah's arsenal legal. Although this intra-Lebanese disagreement fluctuates depending on the domestic, regional and international situation, it has not been a concern for academics and scholars. But one mounting scholarly debate is sectarianism.

Sectarianism itself has been the most dangerous trend in the Middle East since the 2003-US invasion of Iraq. This, however, does not mean that sectarianism is new, but resurfaced due to the geopolitical contest in the region. Chapter 5 will unpack the sectarian mobilization and instrumentalization of sectarian identity by Hezbollah and chapter 6 will focus on this issue. Suffice it to mention here to mention two samples. The best work vis-à-vis sectarian conflicts is the book edited by Nader Hashemi & Danny Postel (2017), where many prominent scholars have contributed: *Sectarianization:*

Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East. Hashemi and Postel (2017) traced back the origins of the Sunni-Shi'a schism, which dates to the disagreement among the successors of the Prophet. The focus of the authors is to negate the mainstream discourse that relate every conflict in the Middle East to sectarian tensions. Although they admit the presence of this split, they argue that sectarianism is just an instrument for geopolitical agendas, generated by the US invasion of Iraq and the Arab Uprisings and driven namely by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Throughout the book, many case studies were considered, such as the conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. They held Hezbollah, of course, responsible, alongside Iran, for part of this wrongly framed sectarian conflict, or better said, the Sunni-Shi'a schism. The book is indeed mesmerizing and offered a new academic perspective and original work.

On the contrary, Geneieve Abdo's (2017) book, entitled *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni divide*, contradicted Hashemi and Postel's work and criticized those who view the conflict in the Middle East as non-sectarian. Abdo recognized the geopolitical conflict that exacerbated the Sunni-Shi'a rift, but also considered that this conflict is not new and guides many conflicts in the region. Abdo, however, exaggerates in her explanations of this conflict, because as Hashemi and Postel maintained, the Sunni-Shi'a schism is being flamed by the geopolitical confrontations. But also the latter simplified this conflict to this geopolitical battle more than necessary. In fact, it is true that sectarianism was always a motive and this can be documented through the 16th and 17th century Iran, where the Pahlavis adopted Shi'ism as the official creed of their realm, not for their religious belief, but most to counter-balance the Sunni Ottoman Empire. However, Abdo fell for tiny mistakes for those who are not

experts in Lebanon. First, she misallocated some areas few times, which appeared a lack of knowledge not a writing or printing mistake. Second, she argued that Hezbollah has lost support among the families of its fighters killed in Syria. In effect, this a complete misleading argument because those families always appear before cameras proud of the sacrifices of their sons, and there is not a single leak of information or interview that a family has rebuked this death. However, as will be shown in chapter 5, some interviewers maintained that some, inside Hezbollah and Shi'a in Lebanon, were hesitant about this battle where they would be confronting Arabs instead of Israelis for the first time. This internal debate emerged because Hezbollah supported the Uprisings in Egypt and Libya, and now took a decision to defend Assad's regime. Abdo, as her counterparts, said that Hezbollah borne a big part of the brunt of the conflict, namely through its intervention in Syria's civil war. Therefore, both books blame Hezbollah, along with Iran, directly and indirectly to take part in deepening the Sunni-Shi'a schism. The academic debate among scholars is thriving, but these two books offered examples of both opinions vis-à-vis sectarianism. Other works about Hezbollah will follow, however.

One of the reliable contributions about Hezbollah is Judith Palmer Harik's book (2005), in *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*, who maintained that a group of Shi'a who split from the then dominant Amal Movement were focused on the struggle against Israel. These men, fitted Iran's foreign policy agenda and therefore a deal was bargained between Tehran and Damascus each for its own geopolitical advantages: Syria sought to defend its own interests in Lebanon while Iran wanted to create a bridge with a wider Arab and Islamic community. Some of them, Harik pursued, had already proved their eagerness to fight and ability to deliver in previous operations they executed for

Iran's favor. They shared the same goals of the Islamic revolution, and were consequently supported by the IRGC to establish an organization with a local leadership that was willing to combat against Israel (p.39). This narrative was outspoken by all scholars studying Hezbollah and also articulated in the interviews that will be provided in chapter 3. Moreover, Harik (2005) highlighted that a deal has been arranged between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government under Syria's supervision in which Hezbollah had to abandon its radical belief so it could participate in the political system. In return, "The Party of God's jihad activities against the Israelis would receive official authorization to continue by virtue of the government's recognition of the armed struggle as a national resistance." (p.47). In fact, this bargain occurred in the post-civil war era when all militias handed their arsenals to the government, and in parallel, an internal shift was undergoing that ended with the prevail of the soft-liners allowing more pragmatism and adaptation in the de facto state of Lebanon.

Harik (2005) argued that for Arabs and Muslims, Hezbollah is a legitimate resistance group (p.7). During the last decade of the twentieth century, Hezbollah's support increased among Arabs and Lebanese. "This was especially true after Israel bombed a UN bunker where civilians had taken refuge in Qana on April 18, 1996, killing 106 people" (Deeb, 2006). Harik (2005) claimed that a local newspaper ran a poll before the 1992 elections concluding that the majority of the respondents considered Hezbollah a resistance and distinguished it from other militias that participated in the Lebanese civil war (p.50). However, since 2003, with the rising tension between Iran and Gulf countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah was considered Iran's proxy and threatened the peace in the Middle East. Besides, its take-over of Beirut in 7 May 2008 after a political standoff

with its foes, created animosity and deepened the Sunni-Shi'a rift. This was grafted with the retroactive murder of former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri, who Hezbollah was officially accused of killing by the Special Tribunal of Lebanon (STL). Details about these events will be tackled in chapter 4, however. Thereafter, the 2010 Arab Uprisings inflamed a new geopolitical confrontation plagued with a second sectarian wave. What helped mobilize Sunnis against Hezbollah and the Shi'a as whole was Iran's expansionist agenda and its participation, along with Hezbollah, to prevent the collapse of the Alawite Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. So this engagement discredit Harik's label of Hezbollah as a resistance group, because it is now operating beyond Lebanon's theatre in the favor of the interest of the axis that extends from Tehran to Beirut, via Damascus and Baghdad.

When it comes to understanding the organization from the inside and their core beliefs – that is if one considers that it is honest and reliable information, Naim Qassem's (2005) work is essential. One of the founders of Hezbollah and deputy secretary general, Qassem traced in his book entitled *Hizbullah* the relation between the group who later formed Hezbollah's leadership and Iran, back to the demonstrations that took place in Lebanon after the success of the Islamic Revolution "under the banner of "Supportive Committees to the Islamic Revolution in Iran", a movement which eventually led to communication with the pillars of the young Islamic government in Iran". Qassem assured that prior communications have only been clerical rather than political and that this incident was the first connection with Tehran's political leadership (p.18). This was confirmed with the interview with Hezbollah's minister: "We had Islamic mentalities and orientations and we were operating under a secretive party called 'Al-Da'wa Party' and

with the emergence of the Islamic Iran we sought to further our relation with them not the other way around”.⁷ Although both Hezbollah leaders confirmed narrated the same story, it does not mean that Iran was not interested. On the contrary, it was concerned with the power projection of its ideology based on *wilayat al-faqih*, and has therefore found in the Lebanese Shi’a the perfect opportunity to implement its geopolitical plan. The relationship was mutually beneficial and more related to the broader rise of the Shi’a in the Middle East. This was of course amid the increase of Islamist movements in the region after the collapse of Pan-Arabism.

Qassem (2005) explained *wilayat al-faqih* as follows: The Prophet is the Messenger of God who introduced the holy principle of Shari’a. After the Prophet come the infallible Imams, from Imam Ali ibn Abi Taleb to Imam al-Mahdi. In the absence of the infallible Imam, the public needs to acquire guidance to apply the Shari’a in society (p.51). Khomeini considered, according to Qassem, that it is illogical that God has limited his holy message of Islam to Prophet Muhammad and his successors. Based on this view, he considered that there must be a “Wilaya” to guide Muslims until the appearance of al-Mahdi. The Jurist-Theologian’s authority is thus a continuation of the rule of the Prophet and the infallible Imams. *Waliyy al-Faqih* is considered the arbitrator who shapes jurisprudence while waiting for the appearance of Imam Al-Mahdi. His geographic and spiritual authority is not limited to a territory. “The degree of authority awarded to the Jurist-Theologian is obviously high, for he is entrusted with implementing Islamic jurisprudence, guarding the Islamic structure, undertaking political decisions of considerable weight and bearing on the nation’s overall interest” (p.54). Everyone who’s

⁷ Interview with author. On 12 September 2018.

under the umbrella of the *Wilaya* is committed to the custodianship of the Jurist-Theologian. Moreover, issues of war and peace are in the hands of the Jurist-Theologian (Qassem, 2005, p.53). One of Hezbollah's main objectives: "The legitimate leadership is designated to the Jurist-Theologian who is considered to be the successor to the Prophet and the Imams. The Jurist-Theologian draws the general guiding direction for the nation of Islam. His commands and proscriptions are enforceable" (Qassem, 2005, p.19). Although Hezbollah is part of the *wilaya*, the organization have developed a relationship of mutual trust that allowed it to have more autonomy. Qassem (2005) opined that this relationship is beneficial for both sides with full autonomy in the fieldwork (p.237). In fact, through time, Hezbollah has proven to function in tandem with the IRGC and for the interest of the axis as will be shown throughout the thesis.

Qassem (2005) put the relation between Hezbollah and Iran in the context of a cooperated alliance, a shared belief in the jurisdiction of the Jurist-Theologian, mutual Islamic principles, and an identical political vision with respect to Israel's confrontation and the world superpowers' hegemony (p.236). This is the common narrative that Hezbollah has adopted to justify this cooperation, but with the *modus operandi* and events that came up later, chiefly the Syrian civil war, it seemed that Hezbollah is part of a grandiose plan that the axis is implementing and this was a mere discourse contradicted by the facts on the ground. Qassem (2005) highlighted that all Lebanese parties maintain foreign connections, however, Hezbollah's link with Iran is not a leader-follower relationship. Tehran's support for Hezbollah comes in the context of resisting Israel and US hegemony in the region, thereby making the alliance beneficial for Lebanon. Furthermore, Iran backed other resistance movements in the Muslim world such as the

Palestinian resistance (p.238). Qassem was hence trying to detract Iran's sectarian label by saying that it backed Sunni Palestinian groups rather than only Shi'a factions such as Hezbollah. Catherine Bloom (2010) argued that Iran does not control or direct Hezbollah. Similarly, Lara Deeb (2006) argued that "this relationship does not mean that Iran dictates Hezbollah's policies or decision-making". The choices and decisions of Hezbollah are taken autonomously and in accordance with the organization's understandings regarding Lebanon as well as its benefits within the Lebanese theatre of operations (Deeb, 2006). In fact, Hezbollah is clearly a partner and its fate is pegged to Iran's. Most importantly, Syria's civil war reinvigorated the relationship between Hezbollah, Iran, Syria, and Iraqi Shi'a factions and made it a partner and decision-maker in the axis rather than a subordinate. This outcome contradicts Qassem's narrative for two reasons: first, Hezbollah functioned as an Iranian proxy in Iraq and Yemen; second, even though it played a leading role in Syria's civil war, its extended role in theatre beyond Lebanon cannot be possible without the daily cooperation with the SAA and Iranian commanders operating in Syria, and also without their approval. Therefore, Hezbollah operated in tandem with the IRGC and for the benefit of the axis. Although it might be inescapable to engage in Syria because of the geographical proximity, similarly to most Lebanese parties and groups, needless to wonder about the interest of Lebanon in participating in the Iraqi and Yemeni conflicts.

Amal Saad-Ghorayeb's book entitled *Hizbullah: Politics & Religion* and published in 2002 reasoned that Hezbollah rose during the 1980s for its kidnapping of more than 80 westerners during the Lebanese civil war and for that, the organization was classified a terrorist movement. As mentioned in her introduction, Saad-Ghorayeb sought to alter the

discussion to a new level by examining “the political mind of Hezbollah” (p.3). Then, Hezbollah had been leading the geopolitical scene since the 2000 Israeli withdrawal and the discussion suggested by Saad-Ghorayeb was original. The latter also studied Hezbollah’s political transition clashing with the Islamic principles. The diversion in Hezbollah’s domestic vision has truly clashed with their previous dream of implementing an Islamic state. Furthermore, she assessed the socio-economic and political factors that the Lebanese Shi’a have endured. So according to Saad-Ghorayeb (2002), the politicization of the Shi’a was threefold: first, in the pre-1975 era, affected by the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and wave of Arab nationalism, the Shi’a started joining political parties such as al Ba’ath, the Nasserites and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); second, another period started in 1975 with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war which mobilized the Shi’a who held arms and payed high numbers of fatalities; third and most importantly, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon that led to the rise and ‘Islamicisation’ of the Lebanese Shi’a (p.7-12). These timeframes are indeed plausible, but as the interviews throughout this work will show, although the Israeli invasion increased the momentum of the ‘Islamicisation’, the latter started beforehand through al-Da’wa party, a secret Islamic and cross-border party masterminded by the Iraqi cleric Muhammad Bakir al-Sadr and guided in Lebanon by Muhammad Mahdi Shamseddin and Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah.

Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) emphasized that Hezbollah started as a resistance without any relation or coordination with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard. It was not until the Israeli invasion when Iran seized the opportunity to shape Hezbollah’s organizational body (p.14). This is indeed a diversion of the facts for Iran played a key role in shaping

Hezbollah since day one. Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) examined the influence of *wilayat al-faqih's* authority on Hezbollah's political ideology, saying that if the *faqih* announced a *fatwa* to pursue the war against Israel even after its withdrawal, Hezbollah would be obliged to obey. In a separate work, Saad-Ghorayeb (2012) claimed that Hezbollah's organizational status and its presence as a Shi'a Islamic organization is derived from the *Faqih* and this dedication to the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* mainly comes in a religious context and it does not mean an unquestionable loyalty to Iran. That said, these two discourses seemed contradictory. For a matter of fact, Hezbollah is part of the *wilaya* and cannot reject obedience, but Iran gave Hezbollah plenty of room to maneuver and with time, it became a partnership rather than a master-subordinate relationship.

Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) defended Hezbollah's use of violence by unpacking Khomeini's explanation of two categories: the oppressors and the oppressed. Characterized in the latter, and classifying Israel and the West under the former, Hezbollah justified its use of violence (p.16-25). In fact, the narrative became a tool that Hezbollah used to justify its intervention that serves its geopolitical interest and that of Iran. Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) argued that the Tai'f agreement and the end of the civil war pushed Hezbollah to participate in the Lebanese parliamentary elections as a step towards the organization's accommodation with the system (p.25-29). This remained within the usual debate that most scholars have tackled as mentioned above. This engagement declared the birth of Hezbollah's political wing; but to be clear, this accommodation does not mean that Hezbollah has annulled the possibility of implementing an Islamic state; it has only postponed it until further notice. Moreover, Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) quoted Nasrallah when tackling the influence of Iran on the

organization saying that the decision-making of the organization emerges directly from the Lebanese leadership, and that the territory that Hezbollah is aiming to liberate and is defending is Lebanese not Iranian. Nasrallah stated that despite of the benefit that Iran or other countries might accomplish from the results of Hezbollah's wars, this "does not detract it of its nationalism or Lebanonism" and if given the choice to choose between Lebanese and Iranian interests, Hezbollah will not hesitate to choose Lebanon (p.83). In fact, in the ensuing years, this discourse had become null and void because Hezbollah started fighting within a broader context and in theatres beyond Lebanon. Had it maintained its position ante by only fighting Israel, this argument would have been plausible.

At some point, it becomes obvious that most of the work vis-à-vis Hezbollah is concentrated on the same timeframes and topics. Although Joseph Alagha (2006) in *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program* tried to add a new framework, it was not that original. With time, not by weakness of his book but caused by Hezbollah's new shifts, his argument is not plausible anymore, or at least ancient. Alagha tackled the history of Hezbollah and its creation, and like Harik and Saad-Ghorayeb, he framed the organization's ideological shifts between 1991 and 2005. Alagha stressed that based on the Tai'f agreement, March-April 1990, the Lebanese government asked for the disarmament of the militias. However, Hezbollah threw a campaign of public relations in the country that managed to classify Hezbollah as an Islamic Resistance that was permitted to keep its arms and pursue its fight against Israel (p.150). In fact, the legalization of Hezbollah arsenal remains until this moment a key debate among anti- and pro-Hezbollah Lebanese groups and citizens. The organization's

foes have continuously accused it of being Iran's puppet and insisted on its disarmament. But Alagha didn't reckon that this was a simplification of the accurate cause that allowed Hezbollah's endurance and that is the Syria-Iran deal that was bargained for the benefit of both allowing its maneuvers against the Israelis.

Alagha (2006) emphasized the '*Infitah*' policy (openness) by mentioning the participation in the elections arguing that Hezbollah is not offering itself as an alternative to the state. Even though it is an Islamic movement, it is also "a nationalist-patriotic Lebanese political party". Hezbollah tried to "Lebanonise" itself by creating the "Multi-confessional Lebanese Brigades to fight Israel on 3 November 1997 attracting youth across sectarian spectrum" (p.169). However, this dished out propaganda has merely survived for two decades and proved controversial. Hezbollah is a jihadist organization that abides by *wilayat al-faqih* and consider itself part of a wider *umma* or nation, and in further stages the facts on the ground showed Hezbollah's determination to preserve the Shi'a. This sectarian identity that Hezbollah has clearly showed during Syria's civil war will be elaborated in chapter 5 by uncovering damning evidence of this purpose. After all, sectarian rhetoric is Hezbollah's martial tradition, and without it wouldn't be able to mobilize more people and garner support among the Shi'a. Furthermore, Alagha (2006) stressed that Hezbollah is Lebanese and has domestic and regional interests with the backing of Syria and Iran in its genuine right for resistance. Further, Hezbollah benefits from the convergence of its interests with that of Iran and Syria to regain the Palestinian land (p.172). This relationship that has given birth to Hezbollah has gradually developed and when Assad's regime was teetering on the brink in 2012, Hezbollah rushed ahead to prevent its collapse. Consequently, Hezbollah was protecting its geopolitical interest and

that of Iran by safeguarding the route from Beirut to Tehran, via Damascus and Baghdad. So what Alagha mentioned is not valid anymore and Hezbollah's operations are not concentrated against Israel but it became a regional ANSA operational beyond the Lebanese theatre. Further, the dichotomy of autonomous vs proxy is imaginary. Hezbollah is part of the axis and acts for the benefit of the latter, namely Iran, while also taking into consideration domestic calculations.

Hezbollah's political and ideological transformation, according to Alagha (2006), has passed by three phases: "Exclusivist religious ideology" from 1978 until 1985; "More encompassing political ideology" from 1985 until 1992; and "The down to earth-political program" starting in 1992 (p.191). In effect, the first two phases can be merged into one phase that includes the formation of Hezbollah and its confrontation with Israel. The second phase that started in 1992 ends in 2004. Thereafter, this thesis will tackle the phase from 2004 onwards with a focus on its role beyond the Lebanese soil, namely Syria. In a very exceptional conclusion, Alagha (2006) highlighted that Hezbollah's pragmatic speech and the changing political statements of its leaders fall under what is called "*maslaha*" (interest), therefore following the jurisprudential philosophy and this is to avoid the emergence of Shi'a Salafism and extremism. He considered that indirectly and under the "Middle Eastern theory which says: the enemy of my enemy is my friend", Iran and Hezbollah are serving the United States' interests through stopping the spread of Salafism. Even though the US administration seems to endorse the disarmament of Hezbollah and considers it a terrorist movement, however, it prefers that Hezbollah maintains its arms and protect America's interest from the revival of Sunni fundamentalism (p.219-220). One can build on this conclusion to argue that it doesn't

seem that the Shi'a are being targeted but on the contrary, their influence is growing every time chaos engulfs a country and they are dividing the pie of hegemony in these countries with the US of which Lebanon and Iraq offer two obvious examples.

Augustus Richard Norton (2007), *Hezbollah: A Short History*, focused as mentioned in its title on the history of the organization and its origins but he had not much to offer. He argued that the politicization of the Lebanese Shi'a since the 1950s was a "conjuncture of social facts, regional conflicts and domestic policies". Like his counterparts, Norton referred to the same reasons that were mentioned above as cause of the Shi'a's rise, yet with more details since he focused on the historical events rather than any theoretical framework, i.e. he traced back their connection to Ayatollah Muhammad Baqer al-Sadr of al-Najaf, the links to al-Da'wa party who was the foundational element of the Shi'a, and he gave attention to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon like all other scholars (p.11-41). These were common to all authors and even in his conclusion, Alagha (2007) contended that Lebanon's political system has proven once more that is ruled by consensus between all parties and that post-2006 war Lebanon will need to mend ties between political rivals to avoid chaos (p.157-158). Academically, there was nothing original about Alagha's work and even in the new edition, he was just narrating events that he missed in the first edition without deep analysis.

One of the most informative books is *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* by Nicholas Blanford (2011) who narrated the history of Hezbollah by explaining the origins as well as the Shi'a roots of the organization, and emphasized the marginalization of the Shi'a in the Lebanese political system, the importance of faith for their partisans, the mechanism of recruitment of the organization, and the

unwillingness of the leadership of the Shi'a Amal Movement to face the increasingly oppressive Israeli operations during the invasion of Lebanon. Moreover, in his book, Blanford detailed the confrontations between Hezbollah and Israel especially in the 1990s and the 2006 July War. Though Blanford's book is not academic, however he was able to get in contact with Hezbollah fighters and gather a wide range of information about their thoughts and personal experiences in an informative work. These works were all focused on Hezbollah's emergence, its causes and the confrontation with Israel, but some researchers had dedicated their work in other directions as will be shown below.

For example, Robert Baer (2015), former CIA affiliate who worked on hunting late Imad Moughniyeh, then Hezbollah's prominent military apparatus leader, dubbed his book *The Perfect Kill*. The book was also narrative and not academic but Baer (2015) told his story of trying to hunt Moughniyeh and in his lines, one would understand how Moughniyeh, and by it Hezbollah, are not a mere guerilla group or insurgency, but strategic and have the capability to deliver. "When the pickup finally came parallel with the embassy's covered portico, it abruptly drove through a gap in the oncoming traffic and headed up the embassy's semicircular driveway. When it came to a short flights of stairs leading to the front entrance, it exploded. The embassy's center collapsed like a failed wedding cake" (p.23). Baer (2015) accused Moughniyeh of masterminding all these operations against the US and westerners for Iran's favor. One other informative book that has been useful to this work was Muhammad Mohsen's (2017) book *Wahm al-Houdoud: Ma'rakat al-Qusayr [Border Illusion: Qusair Battle]*. Mohsen is a reporter for al-Mayadeen channel who covered Hezbollah's early involvement in Syria, precisely in al-Qusayr, a region that converges with the Lebanese border. Mohsen astonishingly

provided details about the confrontations, exact numbers and was in direct contact with Hezbollah fighters. Baer, Blanford and Mohsen's books offered original primary material, and for this they stand out as excellent.

Other scholars and analysts have published works about Hezbollah, some were academic and constructive and some were lunched with an obvious bias. Daniel L. Byman and Bilal Y. Saab (2014) suggested in "Hezbollah in a Time of Transition" that the organization still depends on Iran's support and looks for strategical and religious guidance from Ayatollah Khamenei (p.4), but it gained autonomy and became a partner rather than a proxy (Byman, Daniel & Saab, Bilal, 2014). This thesis will focus on this exact transition that Hezbollah has undergone and how it became a partner in the axis. A wide range of pundits framed Hezbollah as a proxy or even a marionette for Tehran. Although it played a proxy role in certain theaters of operation like in Iraq and Yemen, visualizing the Hezbollah-Iran connection as a servant-master relationship is, both an underestimation of Hezbollah's role and a superficial attestation centered on political allegations. Zayn Knaub (2013) argued that the ideological momentum of Hezbollah is the creation of its proxy-relationship with Tehran and that the Faqih's order to Nasrallah is "inherently divine and intertwined within the fabric of Hezbollah". Similarly, Kip Whittington (2012) emphasized that "conventional wisdom among scholars suggest that Hezbollah, acting as an Iranian proxy, will retaliate against Israel" and that the Lebanese organization will "undertake military action" against Israel if it pursued a policy that damages Hezbollah's "vital geostrategic interest— Primarily regime change in Iran". To be sure, Hezbollah, under Nasrallah's leadership and throughout Syria's civil war, has developed to a regional ANSA and partner in the axis. It became a quasi-army merging

between guerilla and classical warfare tactics, and exploited its endemic sectarian identity in the region as this thesis will emphasize; therefore, as a partner in this axis, Knaub's claim is accurate and Hezbollah loudly expressed that any attack against Iran will ablaze the region.

Some scholarly works are distinguished for their contributions in terms of methodology and academy. One book is *Hezbollah: From Islamic Resistance to Government*, co-authored by James Worrall, Simon Mabon & Gordon Club (2016) who related the emergence of Hezbollah to social movements theories: The relative deprivation theory and the resource mobilization theory. The former stressed that grievance and deprivation lead to social movements while the latter maintained three characteristics: political environment, mobilization structure, and ideology (p.22-26). In fact, the social movement theory is applicable on Islamic activism, therefore on Hezbollah but this thesis will not delve into this frame of work. But it is valid to say that Hezbollah's emergence, endurance and mobilization is based on these dynamics and three factors are applicable can be applied: Identity, agency, and urgency. In 2011, the attempt to murder the Israeli Consul in Turkey. In 2014, security agencies in Peru thwarted an attempt to target Jewish and Israeli interests (Worrall et al., 2016, p.66-67). These attacks, if true, occurred in delicate times. Had Hariri been really killed by Hezbollah, it would be a retaliation against his tacit galvanization of the 1559 UNSCR that was targeting Hezbollah and Syria. Although the Special Tribunal officially blamed Hezbollah, the latter has denied these premises. As long as the axis remains solid, targeting Hezbollah and minimizing its influence seems the hardest milestone for its rivals.

Worrall et al. (2016) stated four waves of terrorism quoting David Rappaport and placed Hezbollah within the Religious Wave that was sparked by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran (p.12-15). Theoretically and factually, Hezbollah was the outcome of this Religious Wave and Iran's power projection throughout the Middle East. But the root causes of this emergence are much deeper, date back to the pre-1979 Revolution era and are more related to the rise of the Shi'a as part of the rise of Islamic activism. However, Worrall et al. (2016) described Hezbollah's uniqueness and its label as terrorist by major Western countries while being admitted as a resistance by the Lebanese government and supported by the majority of Shi'a. Hezbollah, they argued, does not fit terrorism characteristics even though it uses political violence (p.15-18). Indeed, these labels are terminologies used to undermine states or non-state actors that opposes the western camp and stands as a bulwark against its foreign policy plans. For example, anti-Israel and US authoritarian regimes, such as Iraq's Saddam Hussein, had been labeled non-grata regimes, while pro-US authoritarian regimes, such as Egypt's Husni Mubarak regime, had been pleasantly accepted. Therefore, labeling actors depends on the geopolitical stances of individuals, groups and states. Hezbollah's labeling has therefore been at the discretion of each state.

Worrall et al. (2016) maintained that while Iran and Syria played a key role in establishing Hezbollah, saying that the latter is a proxy that functions as a subordinate for Tehran is an oversight of the organizations' autonomy (p.114); and with the growth of Hezbollah's autonomy from Iran, tension rose between both sides (p.128-129). However, this is a misleading argument because Hezbollah's fate is pegged to Iran and its survival would be murkier without Tehran's support. The relationship is a two-lane route with a

shared destiny and deep religious belief under *wilayat al-faqih*'s authority, and Syria's civil war brought them closer to each other. Moreover, facts on the ground provided compelling proofs that in the battlefield, they fight as one entity with mutual trust. In chapter 4, they described Hezbollah as socio-political actor who's shaped by these realms and acted in conjunction with both. They argued that Hezbollah's future is associated with its interaction with its social environment and its domestic and external political alliances (Worall et al., 2016, p.110-111). This approach is plausible and plausible if one wants to understand Hezbollah's dynamic.

Worrall at al. (2016) underscored the post-Arab Spring era, Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian war and its new position among other states and groups in the Middle East. They mentioned Hezbollah's gradual intrusion in Syria and Nasrallah's arguments defending their involvement, in addition to the geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia that pushed the latter and its allies to face Hezbollah considering it as the former's proxy. More than that, they emphasized the rise of sectarianism caused by the Syrian civil war that pushed Hamas to oppose Hezbollah's standing with Bashar al-Assad. Hezbollah sought to unite all Arab sects after the upsurge of the Islamic State in 2014 considering that it is a takfiri threat to everyone that opposes it, not only to Shi'a or other minorities (p.131-148). However, the sectarian splits and geopolitical stances prevented such endeavors. They concluded that Hezbollah's new challenge will be adapting within the Sunni surrounding after all these incidences while keeping its resistance face against Israel (p.151). This analysis is genuine, but even though Hezbollah's discourse will always seek to prove that its main focus is against Israel, it became clear that its priorities fluctuate depending on the events and interest of the axis. When Assad's collapse was

imminent, Hezbollah rushed headlong and fought in Syria. This was a double-edged sword, undermining Hezbollah's Sunni support, but protecting its regional depth and geopolitical interest.

In 2019, Adham Saouli published a book entitled *Hezbollah: Socialization and its Tragic Ironies*, in which he focused on Hezbollah's socialization throughout its history and how the events shaped its identity. Saouli described Hezbollah as a 'politico-religious' group driven by war-making, and without it, it would be stripped of its identity and significance. He considered that the overlap of politics and religion shaped the organization's motives and behavior. Furthermore, Saouli explained that Hezbollah acted pragmatically in many occasions by overcoming the social and political restraints. Furthermore, he exploited the ideological and political behavior of Hezbollah and its hybrid nature and conceptualized it as an armed political movement that was shaped by a socialization process. Saouli has taken a new academic approach in addressing Hezbollah and his argument about the socialization of the organization is original. In his words, "this study has drawn on the rich intellectual tradition of Historical Sociology". The latter, Saouli pursued, "locates actors (such as Hezbollah) within the context; it attempts to understand the genesis of actors, their motivations and the constraints and opportunities they face as they try to realize their goals" (Saouli, 2019, p.214). Saouli's framework has indeed created a new perspective for the study of Hezbollah.

Saouli (2019) argued that "there is a strong, organic religio-political connection between Hezbollah and the Wilayat al-Faqih in the Islamic Republic" and that even though Hezbollah abides by the broad political strategy implemented by the Faqih, nonetheless it has a wide margin of freedom (p.150). Hezbollah's freedom of maneuver has been

confirmed even by its foes that have been interviewed for the purpose of this paper. Whereas the margin that Saouli described is true in Lebanon, it has restrictions elsewhere. And the freedom that Hezbollah enjoys is not unquestionable but on the contrary, in some arenas, as this thesis will prove, Hezbollah functions on the Iranian clock, namely in Iraq and Yemen. Furthermore, in Syria it operates in conjunction with Iranian and Syrian forces, but as a partner not a subordinate. Saouli's emphasis that on one hand Iran's bolstering has been vital and effective on Hezbollah's war-making and on the other Hezbollah represented a strategic presence for Tehran in the Middle East, is valid. Although Saouli addressed a timeframe that matches the one addressed in this study, however the purposes, the aims and the approach are different. But, of all the works done about Hezbollah, Saouli's academic contribution has been the most original.

Writings prior to the Arab Spring were confined to the scrutinization of the emergence of Hezbollah, the impoverishment of the Shi'a in Lebanon and their marginalization and rivalry with Israel. Researchers focused on the Lebanese-Israeli conflict, Hezbollah's integration into the Lebanese system and the dichotomies of resistance vs terrorist and autonomous vs proxy. While such arguments were either too ancient to speak about or falsifying such as for instance speaking about the dichotomy of autonomous vs proxy because this misleads the readers into an argument that does not exist as Hezbollah and Iran share the same destiny, the overarching aim of this study is to produce a comprehensive understanding of Hezbollah's transition into a regional ANSA. The contribution to make here is that this transition was driven by the interplay of three variables during Hezbollah's war of necessity in Syria: First, sectarian identity that served as a mobilizational tool; second, its transformation into a quasi-army mixing between

guerilla and classical warfare tactics; third, its partnership in the axis and participation in the decision-making process from ground offensives to operation rooms. This thesis will adopt “the axis” terminology to feature the alliance/partnership between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Iraqi factions, the Houthis, and to a lesser extent, Palestinian armed groups. Above all, it will be opined that Hezbollah played an “all-in” card in its bid to prevent the collapse of the Assad’s regime risking to tilt the regional power balance in its rivals’ favor. With the de-escalation of the Syrian conflict in 2018, the regime survived and Hezbollah emerged triumphant from the regional turmoil.

2.3 Methodology

A qualitative research approach will be conducted to elucidate when, why and how was Syria’s war a platform for Hezbollah to present itself as a regional mobile ANSA. Usually, qualitative methods aim to answer questions about the “what”, “how,” or “why” of a research phenomenon rather than “how many” or “how much” (Brikci, Nouria & Green, Judith; 2007). Through the analysis of a case study, Hezbollah, this research will highlight the importance of ANSAs in world politics. It will elucidate how the Lebanese organization played vital and decisive roles in the region and became an effective military power politicizing its Shi’a sectarian identity to implement its geopolitical agenda. “Qualitative researchers routinely build on their in-depth knowledge of cases to gain further insights about causal process, which among other things can improve causal inference by suggesting important missing variables” (Gerardo Munck, 2004, p.120).

Alexander George and Andrew Bennett (2005) argued that a researcher chooses case studies as a precise feature of a historical episode rather than the event itself (p.18). Four major characteristics make case methods credible and give them advantage in

testing hypotheses and developing theories: “their potential for achieving high conceptual validity; their strong procedures for fostering new hypotheses; their value as a useful means to closely examine the hypothesized role of causal mechanisms in the context of individual cases; their capacity for addressing causal complexity”. By other means, case studies allow scholars to study the theoretical concept they intend to measure, they help identify new variables and hypotheses during the research and field work by interviewing experts, historians and participants. Moreover, single case studies measure a variety of intervening variables and perceive aspects that stimulated the causal mechanism and study the complex interaction (George and Bennett, 2005, p.19). Gerardo L. Munck (2004) contended that qualitative researchers observe indications about causal activities that generated the outcome giving credibility to the tested hypotheses (p.110). Furthermore, Munck (2004) considered that single case studies can be used for the assessment of theories (p.116), which is the case in this research that is shedding light to the importance of ANSA in IR.

This thesis will use primary and secondary resources such as online database, in-depth interviews and field work where necessary. Secondary resources are necessary and cannot be abandoned in any research. However, Katherine M. Blee (2002) emphasized that interviews give access to scholars to understand the incentives and perceptions of social movement participants more than documentation and secondary resources (p.93). In-depth interviews give space to the informant to reveal supplementary material and nuanced answers making these interviews “a complex array of data” useful to challenge or support a theory (Munck, p.116). Bert Klandermans and Suzanne Staggenborg (2002) stressed that in-depth interviews are essential in evolving theoretical

paradigms, they measure motives, life histories and decode complicated phenomena (p.XV). These interviews, will be semi-structured rather than structured. In this type of interviews, the interviewer will conduct face-to-face interviews with one person, or can be conducted by other methods such as phone call, mail or self-administrated questionnaires (Blee, p.100). He will be guided by prearranged questions, yet he has the flexibility to deviate based on the collaboration of the informant. Semi-structured questionnaires are valuable for understanding social movement mobilization from different standpoints, more precisely that of the movement's actors (Blee, p.92).

The existing international relations theories are a necessity to the understanding of world politics. But the role of NSAs, namely ANSA, have been undermined by most of these theories. Consequently, this this will focus on the role of ANSAs in regional politics and IR. Therefore, it will analyze Hezbollah as a case study by focusing on its role in Syria and how the necessity to engage in the Syrian conflict has transformed it into a regional ANSA by the interplay between three variables: sectarian mobilization and the instrumentalization of sectarian identity, the shift into a quasi-army and its embed as a central partner in the axis. This research will study Hezbollah's operations on the domestic and regional theatres from 2004-05 until the Lebanese parliamentary elections in May 2018. It will emphasize how Hezbollah, one among an array of ANSAs, has used the sectarian card into what was a geopolitical contest rather than a sectarian conflict and has emerged from Syria's tumultuous civil war a regional ANSA and a key player in the regional order.

3 Background, Emergence and Religious and Political Allegiances

3.1 Introduction

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's *waliyy al-faqih* (Guardian of the Jurisprudence) opined: "Take heed, our capacities are not merely those things we possess domestically, we also have important capacities outside the country; we have supporters, we gave strategic depth ... in some cases because of Islam, in others because of language, and still others because of the Shi'a religion. These are the country's strategic depth; these are part of our capabilities; we must use all our capabilities" (Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2017, p.129). From the core of this mentality, Hezbollah was hence produced. Hezbollah, indeed, embodied the rise of Islamism that replaced the flickering Pan-Arabism since the end of the 1960s. Backed by Iran, and Syria to some extent, Hezbollah emerged amid Lebanon's civil war, and not only endured in the post-war era, but proliferated. Its *raison d'être* was its struggle against Israel's occupation of Lebanon, promising to pursue the fight until the full liberation of both Lebanon and Palestine, and the annihilation of Zionism. Adopting an assertive policy on the domestic and regional levels, Hezbollah further increased its influence. In 1992, Hezbollah's political wing was formed through its participation in the parliamentary elections declaring its new *infatih* (openness) policy. In 2000, Hezbollah was accredited for the withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from southern Lebanon.

This chapter will unpack the rise of the Shi'a which is necessary to understand the root causes of Hezbollah's emergence and its obedience to *wilayat al-faqih* (The Guardianship of the Jurisprudent) –a religious belief implemented by Ayatollah al-Khomeini in Iran after the successful revolution in 1979 to guide Islamic *Umma* (Nation).

Hezbollah's loyalty to Lebanon became a subject of doubt because of this doctrinal creed. Blamed, by most western and more recently Gulf Countries, for conducting local and international operations against civilians and military personnel, and destabilizing the region and executing attacks of Iran's behalf, Hezbollah is listed as terrorist. Though, for Hezbollah, and many of its supporters, these accusations are void and based on false premises and political stances.

3.2 Historical Background

With the demise of Pan-Arabism that was mainly marked by the defeat of the charismatic Egyptian leader Gamal Abdelnasser in the 1967 war against Israel, a new transnational doctrine amplified, Islamism. It is hard to escape the sense of defeat among Arab masses who were dealt an immense blow by the 1967 defeat but also by the failure of their nation-states in the post-colonial era to achieve economic prosperity and secure better livelihoods for citizens. Islam is the solution, many Arab Muslims believed. That said, for our purposes, "Hezbollah", Aurelie Daher (2019) argued, "is generally defined as an Islamist organization" (p.8). This was further emphasized by Hezbollah's deputy head of political relations: Hezbollah is a jihadist ideological movement that intervenes in politics.⁸ It started operating in 1982 and in the ensuing years, it secretly executed operations against Israel and other western targets. It was officially launched on 16 February 1985 by a statement it dubbed "Open Letter", right after the withdrawal of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) from Sidon, south Lebanon (Joseph Alagha, 2011, p.15). The rejection of Israel's occupation was its first motive, but Islam, was the conduit which it used as a "guarantor of the legitimacy of the principle cause" (Daher, 2019, p.8). One

⁸ Interview with author. On 8 September 2018.

should state here that Hezbollah was neither the only Lebanese armed group that launched operations against Israel nor the first. Anti-Israel parties and armed groups such as the Socialist Party and the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP) had begun this campaign earlier.

To bring the discussion to the point, it is too narrow to scrutinize Hezbollah without understanding the overall posture of the Shi'a and their rise. Initially settled in Jabal Amil, southern Lebanon, and in the Beqaa Valley, eastern Lebanon, the Shi'a were politically and economically marginalized. Genieve Abdo (2017) contended that Shi'a in Jabal Amil and the Beqaa paid taxes but received few services in return with the former merely having paved roads and electricity (p.103). Nicholas Blanford (2011) seconded that the Shi'a areas weren't included in the blossom of the country. "In 1943", he argued, "there was not a single hospital in south Lebanon" (p.14). Augustus Richard Norton (2007) added that Shi'a lacked political influence in Lebanon due to impoverishment and underdevelopment (p.12). These cruel financial and economic conditions in their urban habitats pressed them to search for prosperity and better livelihood elsewhere; therefore, many journeyed to the peripheral neighborhoods of the capital, specifically al-Dahiyah al-Janoubiyeh (The Southern Suburb). Settling at the edges, they lived under the poverty line and moved to Beirut every day to work in factories or as service workers boasting a few to be middle-class (Abdo, 2017, p.103). Now at least, living in Beirut's suburbs shortened the distance with the booming city that was witnessing prosper during the 1950s.

Sectarian identity being the primary driver of politics in 19th century Mount Lebanon and Lebanon since its emergence in 1920, the Shi'a were sidelined on the political level.

Abdo (2017) emphasized that amid an Arab entourage dominated by Sunnis, who represented approximately 90%, the Shi'a were placed at disadvantage. They were persecuted and repressed across centuries at the hands of Sunnis and this sharpened their attitudes and cemented their Shi'a identity (p.12). This is plainly not the case and scholars such as Abdo provided simplistic explanations for sectarian dynamics. Here, she clearly pictures a Sunni-Shi'a animosity as if both sects were fighting for religious truths. Indeed, Shi'a were oppressed at a certain point in places such as Saudi Arabia where the Wahhabi doctrine prevailed spreading mayhem against Shi'a communities. However, this is an exception and generally speaking, sectarian contest was a secondary motive and sectarian identity was a mere mobilizational tool. For instance, as the Mamlukis were expanding along the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century, they confiscated the lands of the Shi'a and Nusayris (current day Alawites) for their blur stance vis-à-vis the Crusaders –expelled by the Mamlukis off Lebanon's coastline (Kamal Deeb, 2015, p.53), and in 1267, the Sultan prohibited the abidance by any creed that does not belong to the four Sunni *madhabs* (*Shafi'i, Hanbali, Maliki and Hanafi*) (Kamal Arzouni, 2010, p.143). The point to make here is that sectarianism does not give the ultimate explanation to the Middle East's chaos (Nader Hashemi & Danny Postel, 2017, p.6). Fanar Haddad (2020) argued that sectarian dynamics are driven by both religion and politics “with the balance between the two being dictated by context” (p.59). But the absence of a Shi'a identity or Shi'a-centric party, they joined secular parties that challenged imperialism, westernization and the local government such as the SSNP.

This status quo altered in mid-20th century that witnessed the rise of the Shi'a. Generally speaking, Tawfik al-Saif (2018) stressed that the sense of victimhood and

marginalization has changed over time into a quest in order to find a link between this deprivation on one side, and the sectarian and ethnic identity on the other (p.307). That said, in 1959, Moussa al-Sadr, an Iranian Shi'a cleric that traced back his origins to Jabal Amil, arrived to Lebanon at the age of thirty-one (Nicholas Blanford, 2011, p.15). 15 years later, he started marketing a new movement in Shi'a areas, namely the Beqaa and southern Lebanon, which he called *Harakat al-Mahroumeen* (Movement of the Deprived), with its armed wing called Amal (*Afwaj al-Moukawama al-Loubnaniyya* or Regiments of the Lebanese Resistance) –Amal became later the official name of the party. Al-Sadr led a dual confrontation: on one side, he was at odds with Shi'a feudalists in the south, namely al-Ass'ad family, and therefore challenged their political authority; on the other side, he galvanized Shi'a to resist all sorts of marginalization and deprivation. Further afield, al-Sadr started establishing institutions for the Shi'a, i.e. Jabal Amil Institute and the Supreme Islamic Shi'a Council. These establishments survived and are still playing important roles within the Shi'a community and the clerical leadership. In August 1978, al-Sadr traveled to Libya and never came back, and Mouammar al-Kaddafi, then Libya's President, was accused of kidnapping him. "Yet many Shi'a openly cling to the hope that Sadr is still alive and will one-day return" (Blanford, 2011, p.32). In 1980, Nabih Berri became the new leader of the Amal movement and played a cardinal role in pre and post-civil war Lebanon.

Besides, it is necessary to tackle al-Da'wa party which emerged as a clandestine Shi'a-centric organization and metastasized in the Shi'a areas across the Middle East. Al-Da'wa was led by Muhammad Bakir al-Sadr, a philosopher and Iraqi Shi'a cleric who was executed in 1980 by Saddam Hussein. In Lebanon, Muhammad Mahdi Chamseddine and

Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, were the main figures who spearheaded al-Da'wa in coordination with al-Sadr. Blanford (2011) stressed that secret equipped units, called Qassam, were established by al-Da'wa and frequently clashed with the Iraqi Ba'ath Party in Lebanon. Qassam fighters were also protecting key Da'wa figures who would later play significant roles in the formation of Hezbollah (p.35). According to Hezbollah's cabinet member who was previously part of al-Da'wa, "in Lebanon, each person in al-Da'wa had to join other Lebanese groups such as the Amal movement, "*al-Mabarrat al-Khayriyya*" (an Islamic non-profit organization to help the orphans) and other organizations. Al-Da'wa was indeed an Octopus placing each hand in a different group. I was close to Moussa al-Sadr and a military leader in Amal while my primary allegiance was to al-Da'wa party."⁹

Hezbollah's cabinet member explained that they were funded by al-Da'wa in Iraq. Moreover, he recruited youth fighters through a football club in al-Dahiyah which he used to approach them and at that time, he enlisted Mustafa Badreddeen, the successor of Hezbollah's head of security apparatus Imad Moughniyeh and his brother-in-law. They were both killed in Syria, the latter by an explosion in 2008, and the former in 2016 during the civil war. Additionally, Hezbollah's Minister traced back their demands to create an Islamic State to al-Da'wa party: "We were determined to create an Islamic Resistance and establish an Islamic State long before joining Hezbollah. However, this stance changed over time, and Hezbollah was convinced that it is impossible to implement an Islamic State in Lebanon. Though, if we were merged with other countries, Muslims would be a majority and an Islamic State would then be likely". This means that the implementation of an Islamic State was the desire of zealous Islamists prior to the

⁹ Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

establishment of Hezbollah, but also this desire somewhat endures waiting for better circumstances. Bringing the discussion back to al-Da'wa, its fighters were trained by Khalil al-Wazir, Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) military symbol and leader, alias Abou Jihad.¹⁰ Norton (2007) also stressed that Amal fighters were trained by Fatah, the dominant faction in the PLO (p.17).

Further afield, from 1980 until the invasion of Beirut in 1982, Iran was assisting the Amal movement. However, Berri took a decision not to fight the Israelis and he refused to fight even with Iranian assistance.¹¹ Amal's leadership informed its units not to challenge the IDF (Blanford, 2011, p.61). Blanford (2011) cited three key figures that split from Amal after this event: Hussein al-Mussawi, deputy leader of Amal; Ibrahim al-Amine, Amal's attaché to Tehran; and Hassan Nasrallah, later Hezbollah's secretary general (p.46). Interviewed by a Lebanese television channel in 1995, Nasrallah traced back the defection from Amal to the decision that was taken vis-à-vis the Israeli invasion, claiming that it was "more than a tactical misunderstanding."¹² Nevertheless, factions of Amal fought the Israelis in some areas in southern Lebanon and in Khaldeh, on Beirut's periphery, along with other factions, despite the decision of their leadership. The battle of Khaldeh delayed the advance towards the capital and caused heavy losses in the ranks of the IDF. According to a former militia leader who was injured while fighting the Israelis in Beirut, "there was a decision by Amal not to fight, yet in the south some members took individual choices to face the IDF. In Beirut, they officially informed us of their withdrawal,

¹⁰ Interview with author. 15 September 2018.

¹¹ Interview with author. 15 September 2018.

¹² "Interview with Nasrallah". by Joubran Toueini. On 24 September 1995. LBCI Channel. Retrieved from: <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/watch/37296/first-interview-with-sayed-hassan-nasrallah-in-19/en>

and therefore they shaved their beards and headed back to their villages. One Israeli tank was captured in the Battle of Khaldeh by “Al-Saika” (Thunderbolt), a pro-Syria Palestinian military group but Amal took it from them on their way back to Beirut’s suburb, al-Dahiyah”.¹³ In light of these events, Blanford (2011) argued that Iran realized that Amal was not the appropriate faction to help spreading the Islamic revolutions’ ideas in Lebanon (p.35). Had Amal movement’s leadership decided to fight against Israel, it might have prevented the establishment of Hezbollah. So Judith Palmer Harik (2005) maintained that a group of Lebanese Shi’a, some who were former Amal figures and determined to fight Israel fitted Iran’s foreign policy agenda as several had been previously tested by the IRGC through executing operations in its favor. Sharing the same goals of the Islamic Republic, it sponsored them and shaped an organization with a domestic leadership that would fight against Israel (p.39). Lebanon’s chaotic status and the collapse of state institutions during the civil war, made the war-prone country fertile for the thrive of armed non-state groups of different backgrounds and ideologies.

Al-Da’wa, however, was somehow a transitional organization for these Shi’a-centric fighters. In its constitution, it was stated that with the appearance of any Islamic State or leading Islamist figure they shall declare their fusion with it, and the subsequent emergence of the Islamic Republic in Iran was the perfect opportunity¹⁴. Besides, Muhammad Bakir al-Sadr stated: “melt in Khomeini as he melted in Islam.”¹⁵ In late 1980, the “Nonet Delegation”, a group of 9 individuals: three representing Amal Movement,

¹³ Interview with author. 18 September 2018.

¹⁴ Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

¹⁵ Hezbollah’s MP Ali Fayad. 3 January 2013.

<http://imamcenter.net/essaydetails.php?eid=89&cid=55>

three representing the Islamic Committees and three Tajammou' al-Oulama' al-Mouslimeen (The Gathering of the Islamic Clerics), traveled to Iran. In fact, the majority were secretly al-Da'wa¹⁶. Likewise, Blanford (2011) confirmed that the delegation, which he called "Manifesto of the Nine", included clerics who studied with al-Sadr in Najaf, and praised the establishment of a Lebanese Islamic organization swearing allegiance to Khomeini and his jurisprudence (p.46-47). Naim Qassem (2005), Hezbollah's deputy secretary general, traced back the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran to the demonstrations that took place in Lebanon after the success of the Islamic Revolution: "Prior to this development, there had been no connection with the Iranian Revolution, as such matters were in the realm of clerical issues" (p.18). By other words, Qassem tried to take responsibility for demanding the foundation of what became later Hezbollah. However, Hezbollah was not Iran's only ideological replica as the latter sought to expand from Afghanistan and Pakistan all the way to Lebanon in its bid to amplify its clout. As mentioned earlier, the personnel who later formed Hezbollah's leadership, were eager to create an Islamic group but this does dispel Iran's intention to increase its regional influence.

On this matter, Harik (2005) argued that as Syria sought to defend its own interests in Lebanon, Iran wanted to bridge the gap with a wider Arab and Islamic public. So the leadership of both countries bargained a deal allowing members of the IRGC to cross into Lebanon and establish a camp to train fighters Hezbollah fighters, but Syria controlled the timing of the raids against the IDF so that Israel and the US would well receive the message (p. 39). To be clear, Syria's regime wanted to exploit the emergence of

¹⁶ Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

Hezbollah for its own geopolitical agenda and as a leverage on the negotiation table. According to Blanford (2011), Syria didn't want Tehran to start a new fight with Israel that had proven costly to the Syrian army, yet it agreed to let them build a resistance force instead. In exchange, Iran would assist Syria with nine million tons of free oil every year (p.44). Therefore, Iran sent 1000 Revolutionary Guards to Baalbek in the Beqaa Valley to train a group of former Amal partisans who embraced *wilayat al-faqih's* doctrine (Shoghig Mikaelian and Bassel Salloukh, 2016) –which will be explained in the next section. IRGC members moved to Zabadani, a Syrian village close to Lebanon's borders and started infiltrating into the Beqaa Valley where they settled and started implementing Khomeini's ideas and beliefs among people. Hezbollah was hence born, and in the ensuing decades, it witnessed a variety of transformations and developments on the military, social and political levels.

Since then, Hezbollah has been held responsible of orchestrating many operations against western targets, chiefly Americans. Moughniyeh is accused of being the mastermind behind all the assaults conducted against western forces, including kidnapping foreigners and hijacking airplanes. However, Hezbollah denied all these accusations and Nasrallah said that the "Islamic Jihad Organization" (IJO) claimed responsibility for these assaults.¹⁷ Robert Baer (2015), a former CIA who failed to hunt Moughniyeh, believed that the latter organized the attacks under the name of the IJO (p.56), giving Hezbollah more room for plausible deniability. William J. Burns (2019) maintained that Iran bought arms from the US and helped releasing "the American

¹⁷ "Interview with Nasrallah". by Joubran Toueini. On 24 September 1995. LBCI Channel. Retrieved from: <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/watch/37296/first-interview-with-sayyed-hassan-nasrallah-in-19/en>

hostages by their Hezbollah captors in Lebanon” (p.35) –an operation that was later dubbed Iran-Contra. The point to be made here is that Hezbollah’s hostages release happened on Iran’s demand reflecting the relationship between both and providing a damning proof of Hezbollah’s role.

In fact, Hezbollah’s influence started increasing since 1983 in the predominantly Shi’a-inhabited south increasing the number of attacks against the IDF which started paying a high price in terms of casualties. At this state, as mentioned earlier, Hezbollah did not yet declare itself and was operating clandestinely. On 11 November 1983, a truck full of explosives blasted the Israeli headquarter in Tyre, south Lebanon, killing more than 70 soldiers. The executioner was Ahmad Kassir, a seventeen years old southerner and Moughniyeh’s best friend. Hezbollah would only claim its responsibility for the attack after the 1985 Israeli withdrawal from the area. Blanford (2011) stressed that according to Bilal Sharara, then a Fatah commander, Khalil al-Wazir provided Moughniyeh with explosives as he claimed of recruiting someone to execute a suicide mission against the IDF (p.53). Subsequently, the IDF retaliated to each attack by bombing Hezbollah’s camps in the Beqaa or by murdering the organization’s personnel. In 1984, Sheikh Ragheb Harb, a leading clerical figure within Hezbollah who was using his mosque to mobilize and recruit fighters for Hezbollah, was shot dead on his way home.

On 14 January 1985, Israel declared a three-stage withdrawal plan (p,67-69); which was planned to be completed by the end of June. On 16 February, one month after the declaration and Israel’s retreat from Sidon further south, Hezbollah announced its birth in a press conference in al-Dahiyah where it announced the “Open Letter”, a statement explaining its aims. “The chosen date was the first anniversary of the

assassination of Sheikh Ragheb Harb” (Blanford, 2011, p.71). The “Open Letter” addressed the following points and explained Hezbollah’s stance vis-à-vis each of these topics: “oppressors and oppressed; Islamic State; relations with Christians; anti-Zionism; Pan-Islamism; anti-Imperialism; and Jihad and Martyrdom” (Alagha, 2011, p.15). Qassem (2005) argued that the revelation lifted Hezbollah from a secret resistance movement prohibited from political and media exposure to a well-known political faction (p.98). Further afield, this was an alteration in the balance of power and in the ensuing months, Hezbollah’s influence increased paving the way for recruiting new fighters.

Fresh recruits received intense trainings to defend their towns against any possible raids and conduct attacks against the IDF and the South Lebanese Army (SLA), a Brigade headed by general Saad Haddad that defected from the Lebanese Armed Forces at the beginning of the Lebanese civil war and was predominantly Christian. The SLA was assisted, backed and financed by the IDF and was continuously targeted by Hezbollah along with Israeli forces and headquarters. For instance, “On 2 January, 1987, Hezbollah launched an assault against SLA outpost on a hill overlooking the village of Braasheet in what was the first concerted attempt to storm and overrun a militia position” (Blanford, 2011, p.85). In effect, the IDF outmaneuvered Hezbollah, therefore, the latter couldn’t position in any location and used a guerilla tactic of hit-and-run hoping to overcome its enemy before retreating.

The rising influence of Hezbollah on the ground frightened the Amal movement, who was then the only power among the Shi’a. So while the hostilities of the civil war were at its end, Blanford (2011) opined that tensions increased between Amal movement and Hezbollah and it seemed that the clash became inevitable (p.87). Further afield, this

domestic rivalry was developing in tandem with disagreements between Iran and Syria who were sponsoring Hezbollah and Amal, respectively. In 1988, fights erupted between both parties starting with slight clashes in several southern villages and then gradually spread to al-Dahiyeh in Beirut's suburbs. Qassem (2005) claimed that Hezbollah sought a ceasefire and ordered its units to stop the fighting but when it felt that this is a "fight for existence", the leadership decided to restore the confrontations (p.101).

In January 1989, the most severe fights took place in Iqleem al-Tuffah hills in the south when Hezbollah launched an offensive against Amal strongholds in the area. This intra-Shi'a conflict was one of the fiercest intra-sectarian clashes during the Lebanese civil war. While Hezbollah was prevailing, the SAA intervened to prevent Amal, its main ally, from a total forfeit. This intervention balanced the flank between both sides, with a minor leverage for Hezbollah. The 1988 Shi'a–Shi'a confrontation, dubbed the "Brothers' war" was sealed two years later through a consensus between Iran and Syria. In November 1990, the so called Tehran-Damascus Agreement ended hostilities between the two Shi'a factions (Nicholas Noe, 2007, p.34). After almost two years of fighting, Qassem (2005) argued, consecutive meetings between Syria's foreign minister Farouk al-Shara' and his Iranian counterpart Ali Akbar Wilayati, were held and a compromise was reached with the presence of Nabih Berri, Amal's leader, and Subhi al-Tufaili, then Hezbollah's Secretary General: The immediate halt of hostilities and Hezbollah can freely operate in the south (p.102). Hezbollah's cabinet member considered, by and large, this fight as the most remorseful and darkest moment in the organization's history.¹⁸ In fact, if anything, Hezbollah's growth would have been more daunting and wouldn't continue to

¹⁸ Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

rise unabated in Lebanon militarily and politically without easing tensions among the Shi'a community. Intra-sectarian harmony was paramount to seek further domestic and regional influence. It is necessary to note here that in 1990, Lebanese foes agreed to end hostilities sealing the civil war –an agreement that was called the Ta'if agreement. The bargain was sponsored by regional and international states, namely the US, Saudi Arabia and Syria, giving the latter the upper hand in Lebanon for the next 15 years. With Syria's approval, the agreement legalized Hezbollah's resistance face and gave it the right to maintain its arsenal in order to fight Israel which was still occupying parts of the country.

Meanwhile, the schism within Hezbollah was deepening between Subhi al-Tufaili, a hard-liner and then recently elected Hezbollah's secretary general, and the soft-liners led by Abbas al-Mussawi and Hassan Nasrallah. Parallel to that, the more pragmatic and soft-liner Ayatollah Khamenei succeeded the late Khomeini as Iran's supreme leader. With Khamenei now in power, Iran's foreign policy became more lenient and therefore affected the prevail of the soft-liners within its Lebanese ideological replica, Hezbollah. In May 1991, al-Mussawi replaced al-Tufaili as Hezbollah's secretary general and adopted a new policy that was called "infithah policy" (Openness). In February 1992, al-Moussawi was assassinated by Israeli Apache helicopters along with his wife and 5 years old son. In response, Hezbollah fired Katyusha rockets for the first time into Israel. Following this event, Hassan Nasrallah was elected secretary general and followed the footsteps of his predecessor and idol. Blanford (2011) stressed that with Nasrallah in leadership, the organization's image started moderating (p.100). That year, Hezbollah participated in the parliamentary elections for the first time as part of the "infithah policy". Qasem (2005) acknowledged that the decision to participate was under discussion and al-Tufaili was

spearheading an anti-participation campaign as he considered that Hezbollah should not legitimize a non-Islamic polity (Blanford, 2011, p.100). Therefore, “the council [Hezbollah’s highest decision-maker committee] suggested that the mechanism for ultimate decision-making should go through a twelve-member delegation grouping the most prominent Hezbollah representatives, inclusive of Council members” (Qassem, 2005, p.187). However, the council voted 10 to 2 in favor of the participation in the elections.

In its electoral program, Hezbollah justified its participation by the following: its responsibility towards Lebanon’s oppressed citizens, the neglected rights and people’s trust in the party. “We made up our mind, relying on God, and decided to participate in electoral politics on the basis of a comprehensive political program, which our candidates are obliged to do their utmost best to put it into operation, asking our populace to support it and follow up on it” (Joseph Alagha, 2011, p.63-64). Furthermore, it enhanced its “infithah policy” by forming cross-sectarian alliances with Christian, Sunni and secular parties. Hence, Hezbollah won 8 seats and formed a parliamentary bloc of 12 members. This policy was a tacit acceptance of the Lebanese system and a major shift in Hezbollah’s modus operandi. Nonetheless, Blanford (2011) considered that the organization’s pragmatism since 1992 was to uphold its war against Israel rather than an ideological softness (p.102). To be sure, Hezbollah emerged as a sect-centric group and sectarian identity was the core machinery of mobilization and this ideology never changed. However, the alteration was based on the acceptance of the sectarian and religious diversity in Lebanon. In fact, if anything, Hezbollah became rational at this period of time.

Fighting to implement an Islamic State would have generated nemesis among other Lebanese sects and would have led to Hezbollah's demise.

The 1990s witnessed the harshest military confrontations with Israel: the 1993 Operation Accountability and 1996 Grapes of Wrath. From 1990 to 1992, the yearly death toll of Israeli soldiers didn't surpass two dozen. However, July 1993, witnessed several attacks inside the formerly declared "Security Zone" by Israel in southern Lebanon, killing 7 IDF soldiers. This was followed by firing numerous "Katyusha" rockets into northern Israel setting the ground for further confrontations. The then Israeli army chief of staff, Ehud Barak, stressed that a "broad operation" against Hezbollah was unavoidable and they might be sending Israeli forces north of the zone.¹⁹ Subsequently, on 25 July, the IDF launched a full-scale operation against Hezbollah that only endured 6 days before reaching a ceasefire. "Operation Accountability ended with a secret unwritten agreement brokered by Warren Christopher, the US secretary of state, in which both sides agreed not to target civilians" (Blanford, 2011, p.147). Norton (2007) stressed that the oral agreement that was established decreased hostilities (p.84) but the agreement which was written on paper wasn't really implemented on the ground and didn't prevent future confrontations within the security zone.

The oral consent, interrupted by violations every now and then, lasted three years. Blanford (2011) emphasized that Amnesty International declared that the agreement was broken 13 times by Hezbollah and 231 by the IDF (p.154-155). Following the assassination of a Lebanese civilian in April 1996, Hezbollah retaliated by firing rockets

¹⁹ "Clashes Intensify in Lebanon Zone", by Clyde Haberman. 23 July 1993. The New York Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/07/23/world/clashes-intensify-in-lebanon-zone.html>

into Israel. For the first time since 1982, the IDF responded by shelling al-Dahiyah, who was turning into one of Hezbollah's stronghold in Beirut's suburbs. Hence, the conflict escalated from both sides and the IDF launched a campaign against the Lebanese organization dubbed "Operation Grapes of Wrath". Blanford (2011) claimed that while Hezbollah's target was to preserve the ability of firing rocket salvos into northern Israeli villages, Israel's objective was eliminating Hezbollah. During the war, Israel attacked a UN base full of civilians killing 106 peoples (Norton, 2007, p.84). Following the massacre, Norton (2007) stressed, "then US Secretary of State Warren Christopher succeeded in persuading all sides to abide once again by the same rules that had been in place since 1993. This time, however, the agreement was committed to an unsigned piece of paper" (p.85). Blanford (2011) opined that the operation was a tripartite failure to Israel: diplomatic, military and political (p.175). Hezbollah was fighting in small groups through guerilla tactics against one of the strongest regional armies and therefore it was hard to escape the sense of triumphalism for Hezbollah and defeat for Israel's leadership who failed to accomplish the promised victory.

Undeterred and triumphant, Hezbollah pursued its military acts against Israeli forces in the ensuing years altering the balance of power on the ground. On 25 May 2000, without former notice, the IDF withdrew from Lebanon leaving its Lebanese informers and allies vulnerable. Blanford (2011) stressed that the IDF did not retreat under fire, and it was a wise decision by Hezbollah. This was followed by the escape of the SLA members along with their families through the "Fatima gate" on the Lebanese borders (p.275-276). Qassem (2005) argued that hopes of liberation hovered with the declaration of the political programs by the two runners for the Israeli prime ministerial position: Benjamin

Netanyahu and Ehud Barak (p.128). The point to make is that Ehud Barak had promised during his electoral campaign an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon within 12 months and when elected prime minister he had to implement his promised foreign policy agenda (Norton, 2007, p.88).

This departure did not seal the Israeli-Lebanese hostilities. First, Hezbollah's *raison d'être* is its pledge to liberate both Lebanon and Palestine and Israel didn't fully retreat from Lebanon as it kept the "Sheba'a Farms" under its control. The successive Lebanese cabinets avowed that Israel is, hitherto, occupying Lebanese territories and this provides Hezbollah with more room to maneuver. More to the point, Hezbollah can at any moment, initiate a war against Israel by claiming to recaptured an occupied land. Needless to say that Hezbollah might also declare a war if it finds it suitable for the regional agenda of the axis. From 2000 until 2004, nothing major occurred vis-à-vis Hezbollah's political or military activities. This section offered a history of the events that engulfed Hezbollah's emergence up until 2000. However, in September 2004, the United Nations Security Council adopted the 1559 Resolution which called for the withdrawal of the remaining foreign forces from Lebanon and the disarmament of all militias,²⁰ targeting Syria and Hezbollah, respectively. Prime minister Rafik Hariri was considered the Lebanese godfather of the 1559 UNSCR. On valentine's day 2005, a massive explosion targeted Hariri's convoy in Beirut killing him along with a dozen people. These two events, marked the beginning of a new phase for Hezbollah, which will be the focus of this thesis on both the domestic and regional levels.

²⁰ "Resolution 1559", on 2 September 2004. United Nations Security Council. Retrieved from: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1559>

3.3 The Nexus between Hezbollah and *Wilayat al-Faqih*

In 1979, Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini, an Iranian Shi'a cleric, presided over Iran's throne and declared the establishment of the Islamic Republic through implementing the theory of *wilayat al-faqih* (The Guardianship of the Jurisprudent). Neither this section nor the thesis will delve into the dynamics, events or history that led to the Khomeini's prevail among various actors which were all determined and participated in overthrowing the Shah, but books such as "*Iran Without Border*" by Hamid Dabashi (2016) explain these factors. Bringing the discussion back to *wilayat al-faqih*, Genieve Abdo (2017) emphasized that "the senior-most religious jurist, or *faqih*, was duty-bound to assume political and executive authority, the *velayat* [*wilayat*], in place of Iran's corrupt and Westernized secular rulers" (p.20). "In early 1970, Khomeini gave a landmark series of lectures in which he outlined his theories of an Islamic government, known as *wilayat al-faqih*. Khomeini postulated that the laws of a nation should be the laws of God, the Shari'a, and therefore those holding power should possess a full knowledge and understanding of the holy laws. The ruler of an Islamic state should be the preeminent *faqih*, or jurist, who must be obeyed because "the law of Islam, divine command, has absolute authority over all individuals and the Islamic government"" (Blanford, 2011, p.33).

The *wilayat al-faqih* theory, according to Qassem (2005), is as follows: The Prophet is the Messenger of God. He announced the holy principle of Shari'a and is chosen to ensure its implication by the nation. After the Prophet come the infallible Imams, from Imam *Ali ibn Abi Taleb* to Imam *al-Mahdi*. Their role is to explain the Message and its features. In their absence, the appliance of the Shari'a by the public needs to obtain guidance (p.51). This guidance is, therefore, spearheaded by the *waliyy al-faqih*

personified in Khomeini who was later succeeded by Khamenei. Khomeini opined that embodying the holy message of Islam to the Prophet and his heirs is irrational. Based on this opinion, he considered that it is necessary to implement what he called “*wilaya*” (Guardianship) to guide Muslims until the appearance of *al-Mahdi*. The *waliyy al-faqih*’s authority is thus a prolongation of the supremacy of the Prophet and the infallible Imams. *The Jurist-Theologian* is considered the sole authority with the legitimacy of shaping doctrine while waiting for the appearance of Imam Al-Mahdi. Neither geographical boundaries nor territory limits his spiritual authority over the Islamic *Umma*. “The degree of authority awarded to the Jurist-Theologian is obviously high, for he is entrusted with implementing Islamic jurisprudence, guarding the Islamic structure, undertaking political decisions of considerable weight and bearing on the nation’s overall interest” (Qassem, 2005, p.54).

Qassem (2005) argued that the *waliyy al-faqih* preserves and spreads Islam and brings the nation together (p.52). It is necessary to make attention to the world *Umma* or nation used here because despite the Shi’a identity that Iran’s *wilayat al-faqih* adopts to mobilize Shi’a across the Muslim world, it does not limit itself to the Shi’a community. This narrative brings Iran from a narrower Shi’a community to a wider Muslim community which includes the Sunni. More to the point, the Jurist-Theologian’s authority is not limited to any geographical boundaries. It is true, according to Qassem (2005), that Khomeini governs and leads the Islamic Republic in Iran, yet he monitors Muslims’ political agendas everywhere, from protection of foreign hegemony to the Israeli conflict in Palestine (p.55). Everyone who’s under the umbrella of the *wilaya* is committed to the custodianship of the *waliyy al-faqih*. However, Qassem (2005) stressed that every group’s specificity is taken

into consideration depending on the entourage and responsibilities (p.56). By other words, Iran does not control Hezbollah's day-to-day decision making. However, simply, there is no need to control day-to-day decision making as Hezbollah does not act against the benefit of Iran.

In its 1985 Open Letter, Hezbollah swore allegiance to the *wilaya*: "We, the sons of Hezbollah's *umma*, whose vanguard God has given victory in Iran and which has established the nucleus of the world's central Islamic State. Abide by the orders of a single, wise and just command represented by the guardianship of the jurist (*waliyy al-faqih*), currently embodied in the supreme Ayatullah Ruhullah *al-Musawi al-Khumayni* (Khomeini)... who was detonated to the Muslims' revolution, and who is bringing about the glorious Islamic renaissance" (Alagha, 2011, p.40). On another level, all Hezbollah members can turn into fighters if they are assigned with a "*taklif shar'i*" (legitimate assignment) by the *waliyy al-faqih* (Alagha, 2011, p.41) –a binding religious responsibility of being assigned to do a specified job; therefore, "*al-taklif*" is insurmountable. Hezbollah's leadership can mobilize its personnel whenever they see necessary based on this *taklif*. For example, in the parliamentary elections, Hezbollah can circulate a *taklif* to vote blindly for a certain candidate that the leadership nominates.

Furthermore, "Hezbollah's commitment to such jurisprudence is a link in the chain. It is work within the sphere of Islam's implementation, a behavioral given that is an integral part of the directives and rules drawn by the Jurist-Theologian. Following this main category come the tasks of administration and oversight of details and particulars; implementing procedures; daily political, social and cultural work; and jihad against Israeli invader, in all senses. Such responsibility is assumed through Party members elected

according to the internally adopted consultation system, and is headed by the Party's Secretary General. The setup earns its legitimacy through the Jurist-Theologian and thus receives the authority and accreditation necessary for it to perform its duties with a margin of maneuvering room left to the Party's leaders and consultations enabling them to decide and evaluate what is applicable and appropriate in their fields" (Qassem, 2005, p.56).

One Hezbollah fighter, killed in Syria in 2013, explained: "I write these words as my heart beats with love/passion for God and as it is craving for jihad to cleanse itself of this corrupt life and its embellishments and indulgences" (Adham Saouli, 2019, p.73). Hezbollah believes in what is called military jihad and its dual offshoots: "offensive jihad" and "defensive jihad". The former is only applicable with the return of al-Imam *al-Mahdi*, or the "awaited Imam", whereas the latter obliges Muslims to defend their territory against any occupation. Blanford (2011) contended that the call for "defensive jihad" relays in the hand of the Jurist-Theologian (p.107). Furthermore, Qassem (2005) argued that issues of war and peace are in the hands of the *waliyy al-faqih* (p.53). As Subhi al-Tufaili placed it, Khamenei gave the green light allowing Hezbollah members to run for parliamentary elections in 1992 (Blanford, 2011, p.101). Additionally, Naim Qassem maintained that the fighting against Israel since 1982 was religiously approved by Khomeini (Blanford, 2011, p.111).

This undermines Hezbollah's narrative of autonomy and contradicts Qassem's comment on the "specificity for every group". Consequently, key decisions, i.e. war and peace, need approval by the Jurist; yet, planning, executing and implementing don't need authorization. To this moment, Hezbollah managed to convince a wide range of people that it does not act on Iran's behalf. So far, it tries to justify every conflict by linking it to a

national security agenda or a mix of national and sectarian security dilemma. However, Qassem (2005) emphasized that the obedience to the *wilaya* does not prevent domestic relations with any Lebanese faction, nor prevent regional or international collaboration if needed. Moreover, Hezbollah's personnel are Lebanese and Islamic matters do not contradict the organization's interest on the national level. The corps of Hezbollah and Iran, he pursued, are not intertwined, yet they both commit to the command of the *waliyy al-faqih* whose power extends all over the Muslim world (p.56-57).

Nasrallah stressed that Hezbollah perceives the *faqih* as a religious symbol like any other sect recognizes its symbols.²¹ In fact, the *faqih* for those abiding by his rule, is similar to the Pope for Catholics, but with more political authority over his followers. Moreover, Hezbollah uses *the faqih* as a symbol as much as Imam Hussein and other figures as a mobilizational tool. Indeed, sect-symbolism is paramount for a sect-centric organization such as Hezbollah. The Hezbollah-*wilaya* relationship is indeed complicated, but Saouli best unfolded it. Although Hezbollah is committed to the *wilayat al-faqih*, Saouli (2019) argued, "it offers a framework of religio-political authority" (p.65). Therefore, he maintained that the organization's doctrine overrides the Lebanese national state and its religio-political authority separates it from the Lebanese institution and balance of power, but this does not strip it from its Lebanese identity and Arab origins (p.66).

3.4 Debating Hezbollah

Hezbollah stated in its 1985 Open Letter its determination to implement an Islamic State; an appeal that will never change but what changed is the persistence and

²¹ Interview with Nasrallah. Interview done by Joubran Toueini. On 24 September 1995. LBCI Channel. Retrieved from: <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/shows/en>

adaptation. Hezbollah recognized that such step is bound to fail in a multisectarian country such as Lebanon and pursuing this endeavor will impede its national progress on the political level. Further afield, it might create a sense of security dilemma for other sects and end up initiating a military conflict in the war-prone and fragile Lebanese polity. Interviewed in 1995, Nasrallah claimed that the implementation of an Islamic State is a purpose that endures; yet, rather than forcing Lebanese of other sects to live under the umbrella of such state, the only way to do it is through elections with the approval of the majority of Lebanese. “I mean the vast majority, not 51%”, Nasrallah said, “because if we have to force 49% of the people to live in such circumstances without their tolerance, it will never survive.”²² Regardless of Nasrallah’s statement and the high proliferation among the Muslims –both Sunni and Shi’a, causing demographical alterations, such state can never be implemented in a country cohabited by 18 different sects with western influence on their daily life.

Giving up on such ambitions, at least until further notice, was translated by a tangible shift: Hezbollah’s “*infitah* policy” that was mentioned earlier. The edict by Khamenei regarding the participation in the legislative elections “was affirmative, meaning that the establishment of an Islamic order in Lebanon was no longer viewed as an imminent political objective but only as a horizon” (Avon & Khatachadourian, 2012, p.41). Hezbollah’s Minister argued that instead of self-isolating, we adopted an agenda of political openness and participated in a system that we rejected for a while; and for this reason we are a “modern and distinguished Islamic party.”²³ One Lebanese Shi’a

²² Interview with Nasrallah. Interview done by Joubran Toueini. On 24 September 1995. LBCI Channel. Retrieved from: <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/shows/en>

²³ Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

politician close to Hezbollah, emphasized that they started as a radical and ideological movement attached to its devotions, but they then evolved to a realistic and pragmatic entity. They now better understand the environment, he pursued, and they recognize the unlikelihood of creating an Islamic State in Lebanon, hence they became a national party with an Islamic face.²⁴ The first transition has therefore occurred in the early 1990s and not only did they adapt, but they participated in the confessional system that they long refused. That said, there was no chance for survival without this necessary transitional period.

The examination of Hezbollah necessitates the understanding of this transition because the attacks that it was accused of conducting on Iran's behalf waned. While accused of orchestrating these attacks by Western countries but also fighting to liberate Lebanon from the Israeli invader, it created the dichotomy of terrorist vs resistance. The US, Canada, followed later by the United Kingdom, labeled Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. In the post-Arab Uprisings era and amid the rising rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Arab League, chiefly the Gulf Countries also labeled Hezbollah as terrorist. At the time of writing this paper, most European Union countries have differentiated between Hezbollah's political and military wings as it only categorized the latter as terrorist, but this can change at any moment. Some countries, however, such as Russia, China, Venezuela and Iraq, rejected this stereotype and maintained their relationship with Hezbollah. "Until al-Qaeda, Hezbollah had more American blood on its hands than anyone outside traditional war. In the eighties, Hezbollah blew up two of our embassies in Beirut; murdered the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chief there; and

²⁴ Interview with author. 9 September 2018.

truck bombed the Marine barracks near the airport, killing 241. They spread mayhem around the rest of the world, from Bangkok to Buenos Aires, from Paris to Berlin” (Robert Baer, 2014, p.xiii). As mentioned before, the IJO adopted all the kidnappings and the explosions that occurred during the Lebanese civil war. Western countries and intelligence agencies all relate this group directly to Hezbollah, yet without any tangible proof. Robert Baer (2015), former CIA, stressed that the Marine barracks blast in Beirut is only related to Imad Moughnieh, Hezbollah’s strongman, by rumors (p.34). “As we’d come to learn”, Baer (2015) stressed, “Hajj Radwan – Moughniyeh’s nom de guerre– headed the Islamic Jihad Organization” (p.71). Thus, he claimed that Moughniyeh used the name “Islamic Jihad” to cover the organization’s involvement (p.56). This rhetoric has been rejected by Hezbollah, and Nasrallah maintained that a jihadist movement existed back then dubbed IJO, not committed to Hezbollah’s leadership, claimed responsibility of all these operations.²⁵

Worrall & al. (2016) called Hezbollah the “A-Team of terrorists” and held it responsible for the suicide bombings that killed more than 300 French and US soldiers (p.1). Worrall & al. (2016) named 4 waves of terrorism and placed Hezbollah within the Religious wave (p.12). Although they accused Hezbollah of executing these operations, they argued that it is a nationalist movement with a wide range of supporters that participates in the Lebanese system. “The act of labeling, while providing a normative and punitive function, can also be counterproductive in discouraging and ending terrorism, especially when they have significant internal support” (p.18). Blanford (2011) claimed

²⁵ The Hunt. On 14 April 2015. AL jaded TV. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcW-kpEsmOA>

that Subhi al-Tufaili, Hezbollah's former secretary general, confessed that Hezbollah was responsible for the US marine barracks blast (p.59). On 4 July 1983, coming back from Syria, 4 Iranians of the diplomatic corps were arrested at a checkpoint controlled by the 'Lebanese Forces', then a Lebanese Christian militia that built relations with Israel. In response, Patriarch Elias al-Zoghbi along two other clergies, and David Dodge, President of the American University of Beirut, were kidnapped for an envisioned exchange (Dominique Avon and Anais-Trissa Khatchadourian, 2012, p.26).

However, Bassel Salloukh, a Lebanese academic and scholar, argued that the executioners are not known, because back then, there was many shadowy organizations, but Hezbollah was not operational as a party.²⁶ Although Hezbollah could have been operating under the name of the IJO, nothing tangible confirmed its involvement. Had Hezbollah truly orchestrated these operations, its behavior had clearly changed since the 1990s. The demise of such operations is linked to the "*infitah* policy" and its adaptation to the rules of the game, as mentioned earlier. At least, Hezbollah seemed to avoid targeting US citizens and focused on attacking Zionists, had it been behind these attacks. Hezbollah is blamed for conducting various attacks in foreign countries, i.e. Argentina in 1992 and 1994, against the Israeli embassy and the Jewish community, respectively. Furthermore, Hezbollah members have been detained for bombing attempts in countries such as Thailand, Uganda and Cyprus. It is important to mention here that Hezbollah was a tool for Iran's regional and international agenda providing it with leverage and at the same time, plausible deniability.

²⁶ Interview with author. 1 October 2018.

Amid these controversies, Baer (2014) best analyzed it by stressing that for Moughniyeh, and by it Hezbollah, the end justified the means. Moughniyeh kidnapped the CIA chief because he was looking for leverage on the negotiation table by pressuring western countries (p.40). The identity of William Buckley's kidnappers, Beirut's CIA chief, was completely unknown, but later, an Arab government informed the Americans that Moughniyeh was behind it (Baer, 2014, p.47). Blanford (2011) claimed that the CIA built a signal intelligence site during Lebanon's civil war at Sannine, one of the highest peaks in the country, where they were able to spy on Hezbollah. According to Blanford's source, "it was known that William Buckley was one of several western hostages then held at Sheikh Abdullah Barracks" (p.76) –a training sight for Hezbollah in the Beqaa mountains where they first settled and created camps alongside the IRGC personnel.

In 1985, a TWA plane was hijacked and driven to Beirut. The tacit purpose behind the hijack of the airplane was the exchange of prisoners, mainly Mustafa Badreddeen.²⁷ The latter was arrested in Kuwait for planning to blow the US and French embassies in parallel to the 1982 invasion of Beirut by the IDF. Of 17 Shi'a members arrested in Kuwait for planning attacks against Western embassies, two, Mustafa Badreddeen with a fake passport named Elias Saab, and another comrade, were directly related to Hezbollah's leaders Imad Moughniyeh and Hussein Mussawi, respectively (Blanford, 2011, p.73). However, the plan of prisoners' swap did not work and Badreddeen had to wait until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 to escape from prison. Worrall & al. (2016) confirmed that the plane and the abductions were both committed by Hezbollah for prisoners' exchanges

²⁷ The Hunt. On 14 April 2015. AL jaded TV. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcW-kpEsmOA>

(p.9). Some argue that were the planned explosions in Kuwait executed, it would have been an indirect message from Iran since France and the US were backing Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war. Theoretically speaking, this argument is plausible but there is no damning evidence to prove it.

However, the situation in Lebanon was/is complicated for normal observers and therefore, the understanding of Hezbollah's position needs further scrutiny. First of all, Hezbollah was not popular among Christians whose stance vis-à-vis Israel was normative and some of their prominent leaders have cooperated with it during the civil war. More to the point, popularity of a Muslim armed group such as Hezbollah among Christians was nearly impossible. Nevertheless, post-2000 Lebanon witnessed the thrive of Hezbollah among the Muslim community as it was the first actor to withstand Israel's plans in the region since the implementation of the Zionist state. Although Hezbollah had adopted a sectarian mobilization agenda and sectarian identity was paramount, it was popular among the Sunni community. However, when prime minister Hariri was assassinated in 2004, in parallel to the rise of the Sunni-Shi'a schism in Iraq, Hezbollah's image was becoming hollow. The eruption of the July 2006 war against Israel boosted Hezbollah once again as it stood as a bulwark against the IDF and emerged as a key player in the regional order. Subsequently, Hezbollah's flags rose in the streets of many Arab countries and in Sunni inhabited areas in Lebanon such as Tripoli further North. This short ecstatic moment of popularity collapsed when Hezbollah unleashed its fighters to capture Beirut. On 7 May 2008, clashes erupted in Lebanon and Hezbollah raided Beirut and overran its Sunni counterparts. The fights later spread to the Druze area in Mount Lebanon. These clashes will be detailed in chapter 4, but it is necessary to mention that for the first time,

Hezbollah fought against Lebanese political rivals since the clash with Amal in the civil war. These foes were predominantly Sunni and this standoff disarrayed Hezbollah of many supporters among non-Shi'a Lebanese and soured its relationship with most Sunnis who were outmaneuvered during the clashes. This was not a sectarian confrontation as the primary motive was political but sectarian tensions increased in parallel to the rise of Sunni-Shi'a bickering in the region, namely Iraq.

Hezbollah was further demonized among the Sunnis when it engaged in Syria's civil war to fight alongside the SAA in its bid to prevent the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, a strategic ally for both Iran and Hezbollah. The Syrian war, like the 7 May clashes, was a political conflict and sectarian tension was a key driver rather than a causal factor. But the conflict took the form of a sectarian war for the normal observer because sectarian discourse increased and it was wrongly argued that sectarian dynamics were wrongly driving the power dynamics in Syria. That said, Hezbollah was protecting its interest rather than the so called Alawite regime – a discourse adopted by the Sunni groups and clerics to mobilize Sunnis across the world in their fight against the regime. This culminated by calling the Party of God [Hezbollah] as the Party of Satan [*Hezb al-Shaytan*] by most anti-Assad Sunnis across the Arab world. A minority if compared with the Sunni Arabs, the Shi'a and by it Hezbollah, were always cautious vis-à-vis Sunni-Shi'a tensions. Nonetheless, when the war drums beat, it had no choice but to intervene to prevent the change of the regional power balance in its rivals' favor.

A Christian anti-Hezbollah former Member of Parliament (MP) described Hezbollah as a “representative of an overlap between a regional and domestic projects representing the Shi'a sect. It is a puzzled movement, illegally armed and commanded by

an external power, mainly Iran. Hezbollah is the child of the IRGC, and therefore Tehran controls its geographical presence and decision-making.”²⁸ To be more accurate, the Iran-Hezbollah relationship is deeper, and more strategic than this. To be sure, Hezbollah is not a puppet for Iran, but it is an ideological replica whose fate is pegged to Tehran and act as a partner rather than a surrogate. A spokesman of the “Lebanese Forces”, a far-right anti-Hezbollah party, defined it as a “political, military and intelligence apparatus that emerged during the Lebanese war after the PLO’s withdrawal from Lebanon and the first exported movement by the Iranian revolution outside Iran’s borders. It is an unusual organization that brought a creed –that of *wilayat al-faqih*, in tandem with a military role that the Shi’a were not historically accustomed to. With the end of the civil war, Hezbollah was supposed to submit its arsenal similarly to all Lebanese militias. Nevertheless, the changing geopolitical situation that hit the region with Kuwait’s invasion, pushed the US to authorize a full domination by the Assad regime over Lebanon. Thereby, this gave the green light to support Hezbollah as an armed resistance. As a Christian, it is hard not to suspiciously observe an armed movement. State-Revolution combination can’t work; therefore Hezbollah is a militia.”²⁹ Coming from an anti-Hezbollah Christian party, it should be mentioned that this view is acceptable as it is not bias and objective.

Controversially, a Lebanese Shi’a politician close to Hezbollah emphasized that the region witnessed the rise of multiple resistances against imperial hegemony, yet in the 70s Islamism progressed: “Islam is the solution”. The difference between Hezbollah and other Islamic factions, he maintained, is that its military accomplishments are

²⁸ Interview with author. 9 October 2018.

²⁹ Interview with author. 20 October 2018.

numerous, from liberating south Lebanon to facing terrorism in Syria. Hezbollah is new on many levels: hierarchy, military and politics; and the organization was smart enough to follow a different path than its previous revolutionary counterparts which raised the motto of “State vs Revolution”. Hezbollah only filled the vacuum left by the state instead of replacing it everywhere.³⁰ Al-Mayadeen channel reporter labeled it as a Lebanese party with both military and political wings representing an Iranian expansion in Lebanon. Domestically, Hezbollah proved its autonomy from Iran; but regionally, it is part of the Iranian camp and represents its interests.³¹ This is plainly not the case, however. Rather Hezbollah operates as a partner in the axis and namely, in tandem with Iran. Hezbollah’s Minister stressed that what was only an armed resistance, developed to a political party afterwards pledging to protect Islamic and Arab causes and bring Palestine back to its people.³² Similarly, Hezbollah’s deputy head of political relations said that Hezbollah is a Jihadi faithful movement involved in politics. “At the beginning, we refused the de facto narrative of the “undefeated Israel”, therefore, we started as a resistance to its occupation of Lebanon. We have faith in the Quran that stated: “if you support God, he will support you.””³³ Hezbollah’s former private universities spokesman argued that Hezbollah is an ideological organization that abides by a religious belief. Thus, injustice targets all sects, therefore collaborating with all sects is a necessity.³⁴ Therefore, it should be clear by now that Hezbollah’s situation in Lebanon depended on the events and it fluctuated over time.

³⁰ Interview with author. 9 September 2018.

³¹ Interview with author. 11 September 2018.

³² Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

³³ Interview with author. 8 September 2018.

³⁴ Interview with author. 5 September 2018.

Moreover, it was seen differently by each sect and group as it was praised by some and maligned by others.

On another disputable matter, Hezbollah's relationship with Iran has been under scrutiny narrowing the debate to proxy vs autonomous. In fact, Hezbollah has certainly been Iran's most valuable geopolitical asset in the region. As mentioned above, Hezbollah abides by the rule of *wilayat al-faqih* and its supreme leader who provides a religious and political umbrella for the organization. Saad-Ghorayeb (2012) argued that Hezbollah's dedication to the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* mainly comes in a religious context and it does not mean an unquestionable allegiance to Tehran. The status, Saad-Ghorayeb (2012) claimed, of Hezbollah and its existence as a Shi'a Islamic organization derives from the *faqih*. "The legitimate leadership is designated to the Jurist-Theologian who is considered to be the successor to the Prophet and the Imams. The Jurist-Theologian draws the general guiding direction for the nation of Islam. His commands and proscriptions are enforceable" (Qassem, 2005, p.19). Further afield, doctrinal affiliation was one factor, as Iran also supports Hezbollah financially, militarily and politically.

Iran spends large amounts of money on its foreign policy of which Hezbollah receives the lion's share. Roy Keyes (2016) estimated that after 2000, Iran increased its financing for Hezbollah to more than 100 million dollars a year (p.251), but these estimates are not necessarily precise because Hezbollah is known being reticent to reveal such matters. The Lebanese organization also receives money from Shi'a businessmen in Lebanon and foreign countries. However, the sanctions imposed by the US on many companies and personnel linked to Hezbollah seemed to have limited this income. But Nasrallah have repeatedly confirmed that the organization receives cash money from Iran

and these sanctions have not harmed Hezbollah's financial status.³⁵ Moreover, many Shi'a, according to Nasrallah, donate their "*khums*" to Hezbollah.³⁶ In Islam, "*al-khums*" (the fifth) or "*al-zakat*" is the obligation to donate every year the fifth of one's net profit to clerics or clerical institutions. Furthermore, Hezbollah is accused of collecting cash through money laundering and drug trafficking. Josh Meyer detailed how a campaign called Project Cassandra, launched in 2008, in a DEA facility in Virginia mapped Hezbollah's network with the assistance of various security agencies. He linked the organization's cocaine shipments and money laundering to a route they use to sell used cars from the United States to African countries, passing through South America and Europe and finally reaching the Middle East. Meyer opined that Hezbollah is rallying up to 1 billion dollars annually from "drug and weapons trafficking, money laundering and other criminal activities."³⁷

The political relationship is mutually beneficial for both sides as it allows Iran to have a footstep on Israel's northern border and therefore a geopolitical extension in the region, and in return, Hezbollah benefits from a regional partnership that provides it with a political umbrella. Saouli (2019) argued that Hezbollah presented a strategic presence for Tehran in the region (p.150). In fact, hoping to play a regional role, Iran reckoned that it has to hold the torch of the Palestinian cause. So they built a Lebanese Shi'a

³⁵ "Nasrallah: Hezbollah's budget is fully and directly through Iran". On 25 June 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoALpLpRpvo>

³⁶ Interview with Nasrallah. Interview done by Joubran Toueini. On 24 September 1995. LBCI Channel. Retrieved from: <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/shows/en>

³⁷ "The secret backstory of how Obama let Hezbollah off the hook", by Josh Meyer. Published on Politico. Retrieved from: <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2017/obama-hezbollah-drug-trafficking-investigation/>

organization with Islamist fighters who were keen to fight for the liberation of both Lebanon –then occupied by Israel, and Palestine. At the time, Lebanon was enmeshed in a devastating civil war and therefore the collapse of the state presented the perfect opportunity for Tehran to implement its regional agenda. This political relationship was cemented by the military cooperation between both sides. Iran trained and poured Hezbollah with weapons: from small and medium weapons to a large flock of heavy weapons. That said, Hezbollah is obviously Iran’s ideological replica and its ally and most important investment in war and peace. As mentioned earlier, the rise of the Shi’a in Lebanon began prior to the establishment of Iran’s Islamic Republic in 1979, and Islamist fighters were determined to resist Israel’s occupation. Therefore, it can’t be argued whether Hezbollah would have thrived without Iran’s backing which was paramount from the outset. Furthermore, the Shi’a in Lebanon might have remained in al-Da’wa and Amal had Iran not meddled. Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) opined that it would have taken much longer for Hezbollah to prevail the way it actually did without Iran’s support (p.14). Although Qassem (2005) argued that both sides profit from this connection with total independence in the work field (p.237), Hezbollah’s loyalty to Lebanon has always been under scrutiny.

While some pundits argue that Iran dictates Hezbollah, other scholars adopt a more lenient point of view. Qassem (2005) placed the relationship with the Iranian state in the context of an alliance. He opined that they both believe in the jurisdiction of the Jurist-Theologian, hold the same Islamic principles, and share the same political understanding vis-à-vis the hegemony of world superpowers and the confrontation with Israel (p.236). All Lebanese parties, Qassem contended, have built relations with foreign

states, however, Hezbollah's connection with Iran is not a leader-follower relationship. This alliance is beneficial for Lebanon because Iran supports Hezbollah and other Islamic movements such as Hamas in Palestine, in their battle against Israel and US hegemony (p.238). Daniel L. Byman and Bilal Y. Saab (2014) contended that Hezbollah looks for strategical and religious guidance from Ayatollah Khamenei (p.4). In fact, if anything, Hezbollah and Iran are partners on all levels: military, political and religious. Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) quoted Hezbollah's secretary general when talking about Iran's role apropos Hezbollah. In Nasrallah's argument, the decision-making of the organization emerges directly from the Lebanese leadership, and the territory that Hezbollah is aiming to liberate is Lebanese not Iranian. Even if Iran or other countries benefit from the outcomes of Hezbollah's confrontations, Nasrallah said, this "does not detract it of its nationalism or Lebanonism" (p.83). Nasrallah tries to provide here, a simple explanation and a justification by saying that the territory is Lebanese. However, the relationship is deeper and following Hezbollah's intervention in the Iraqi, Syrian and Yemeni theatres, such argument becomes invalid because the causal factors of these engagements are not within the frame of liberation anymore but falls in the context of a geopolitical confrontation, as will be seen throughout this paper.

Deeb (2006) emphasized that the organization's decisions are made independently and in accordance with the views of Hezbollah regarding Lebanon as well as its interests within the Lebanese politics. Therefore, Hezbollah's national interest does not clash with its devotion to *wilayat al-faqih*. Saouli (2019) underscored that Iran is Hezbollah's religio-political patron when it comes to its commitment to the *wilayat al-faqih*, but also an ally since the *faqih* gives it a wide margin of freedom (p.150). Saad-Ghorayeb

(2002) underscored that according to Nasrallah, if it had to choose between Lebanese and Iranian interests, Hezbollah will not hesitate to choose Lebanon's interest (p.83). Saad-Ghorayeb wrote the book in 2002. The point to make here is that at the time, Hezbollah was acting in Lebanon against Israel and it hadn't yet played regional roles. This somewhat poses many questions such as: What is Lebanon's interest in fighting or training the Houthis in Yemen? What is its interest in intervening in Iraq? In Syria, for instance, as we will see in chapter 5 and 6, Hezbollah justified the intervention as being a pre-emptive war to prevent the Lebanon from undergoing the same fate of Iraq and Syria, in reference to ISIS's invasions –an argument that that does not really explain the deployment of its fighters to Damascus. Worall & al. (2016) argued that numerous researchers conclude that Hezbollah is a proxy to both Iran and Syria, and is subject to their direct orders. Thus, regardless of the role that both countries played in the creation of the organization, Hezbollah functions autonomously (p.113-114). Moreover, Hezbollah's Minister, explained Hezbollah's independency from Iran by speaking about the 1983 suicide bombing against the IDF headquarters. "The suicide operation of Ahmad Kassir", he said, "that we take responsibility of, was not by any means orchestrated by the Iranians."³⁸

That said, many believe that Hezbollah operates beyond the Lebanese theatre for Iran's interest. Keyes (2010) emphasized that Iran and Syria consider Hezbollah as their proxy and their first line of defense against Israel (p.251). Furthermore, Ilan Berman, Vice President for Policy at the American Foreign Policy Council, said that Hezbollah is ready to act in case of the defection of the nuclear deal with Tehran (Sharp & Jense, 2012,

³⁸ Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

p.292). In a different article, Sharp and Jensen (2012) referred that Hezbollah sent a drone into Israel on Iran's behalf, and in any future conflict in Lebanon, "Iran's proxy, Hezbollah" will offer protection to the Christian community (p.334). However, providing such explanations shows a lack of knowledge vis-à-vis Lebanon's multisectarian society because Hezbollah will not be able to operate in non-Shi'a territories in case the country disintegrated into chaos. Accordingly, John Sullivan (2016) defined Hezbollah as a militia abiding by Iran's proxy role assigned to it (p.731). For instance, Rodger Shanahan (2017) argued that Hezbollah helped enforcing Iran's foreign policy agenda by fighting for its interests in Iraq and Syria. Many scholars and journalists take a bias position in this regard and this is the reason why their articles are not objective. This does not mean that Hezbollah does not take Iran's interest into consideration or act to implement Iran's agenda, but it is a partner not a mere proxy or subordinate as described by many casual observers and researchers alike.

Paradoxically, though ideologically dissimilar and deeply opposed to Hezbollah, a spokesman of the "Lebanese Forces" argued that Hezbollah is not directed by Iran, but on the contrary it takes its own decisions based on the benefits of the axis.³⁹ Coming from Hezbollah's rival, this approach overlaps with what this thesis hopes to offer by arguing that Hezbollah became a partner during Syria's civil war in the axis that extends from Beirut to Tehran, via Damascus and Baghdad. Fanar haddad (2020) emphasized that "Arab regimes and less charitable Arab voices tend to overstate the commonalities between Arab Shi'a and Iran and to exaggerate their potential to act as a vehicle for Iranian penetration of the Arab world" (p.212). For most of the work done vis-à-vis

³⁹ Interview with author. 20 October 2018.

Hezbollah, researchers have been confined to the dichotomy of autonomous vs proxy. However, this is not only a false and falsifying binary but also a misleading debate. Hezbollah's fate is pegged to Iran and the former does not act against the latter's interest. Hence, during Syria's civil war, Hezbollah acted as a partner and decision maker in the axis, namely in coordination with Iran and Syria.

3.5 Conclusion

The rise of Shi'a Islamism emerged prior to the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, but this event was paramount to further amplify the Shi'a activism in the Middle East and beyond. Therefore, Iran's revolution was not the causal factor of the rise of Shi'a armed groups in the region, but it was indeed Hezbollah's sponsor. It exploited its sectarian identity to further mobilize Shi'a fighters who were operating in Lebanon with parties such as Amal and al-Da'wa in order to help shape an organization under its influence. For its own security and foreign policy agenda, it worked in tandem with Syria to establish Hezbollah during the Lebanese civil war. Since its emergence in 1982, Hezbollah faced several political and military challenges that it all endured –until now. This chapter examined the history of the events that engulfed Hezbollah from its emergence until 2004-05, an era that also witnessed new transformative domestic and regional events for Hezbollah.

Moreover, the chapter unpacked the background of Hezbollah's figures and how they joined the group under Iran's supervision. It debated the binaries that engulf Hezbollah: terrorist vs resistance and proxy vs autonomous. The Lebanese organization has been accused of orchestrating and executing a variety of operations against western targets, an accusation that it dispels. While many states labeled Hezbollah as a terrorist

operating on Iran's behalf, others were more lenient. In Lebanon, the situation was more complicated as the acceptance or rejection of Hezbollah depended on the time and the point of view of each person or group. It was mainly driven by the political disputes and the subsequent sectarian dynamics which were always a key driver but not a causal factor. However, without hyperbole, Gerald Seymour (2015) best explains such dichotomies: "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" (p.78).

This chapter also focused on explaining the transition that Hezbollah has undergone in the 1990s when it adopted the "infitah policy" amid the prevail of the soft-liners within the organization. This era witnessed the beginning of its participation in the parliamentary elections as a sign of its adaptation to the Lebanese system and the multisectarian community. A key point that this section shortly examined is the *wilayat al-faqih* theory and Hezbollah's allegiance to it. Consequently, the discussion regarding Hezbollah's relationship to Iran has been put forth on the religious, political, military and financial levels. This chapter paved the way for further debates vis-à-vis Hezbollah. The next chapter will examine Hezbollah's maneuvers in the Lebanese theatre where it palpably became an insurmountable force and a prominent actor on all levels.

4 Lebanon: Hezbollah's Den

4.1 Introduction

When Lebanon disintegrated into the chaotic civil war (1975-1990), a myriad of armed factions emerged as new entities or armed wings of the existing parties. All groups, however, dissolved their militias and abandoned their arsenal, except for Hezbollah. Bolstered by Iran, and Syria to some extent, Hezbollah started operating by conducting operations against the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in the early 1980s and survived the

Ta'if agreement that ended the hostilities of the civil war by keeping its arsenal. Afterwards, it faced two full-scale wars: the 1993 Operation Accountability and the 1996 Grapes of Wrath. During both confrontations, the IDF hoped to annihilate the organization but failed to accomplish its endeavor. A decade later, in July 2006, Hezbollah confronted Israel once more but this time, the former was much stronger and imposed a new deterrence in the region. This new balance of power wouldn't have been achievable without the flux of weapons from Iran through Syria, bridging the gap between Tehran and Beirut.

This chapter will review the most significant events that faced Hezbollah on the political and military levels in the Lebanese theatre. As mentioned in chapter 3, Hezbollah started participating in the 1992 parliamentary election. It will examine this first transition by adopting what was called "*infitah* (Openness) policy" because it had refused for years the Lebanese confessional system and pledged the implementation of an Islamic state. This transition became possible in early 1990s due the prevail of the soft-liners within the organization such as its would-be secretary general Hassan Nasrallah. Instead of imposing such a doomed state, it kept its religious devotion to *wilayat al-faqih* but adapted to Lebanon's multisectarian community.

Then, it will trace Hezbollah's first engagement in the cabinet to fill the power vacuum after the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005. It will also tackle the memorandum of understanding signed by Nasrallah and Michel Aoun, then president of the Free Patriotic Movement and later President of the Lebanese Republic and the subsequent July war against Israel. Thereafter, it will illustrate the stalemate between Hezbollah and the government followed by the 7 May clashes in 2008 deepening the

Sunni-Shi'a schism. Doctrinal truth was not the reason behind this confrontation but it was framed as a sectarian standoff. The chapter then moves to explain the pressure put by Hezbollah to elect Aoun as president in 2016 as a payback for his political stances towards the Lebanese organization. The war against terrorist movements on the Lebanese-Syrian border, namely ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (previously al-Nusra), will also be examined. The chapter closes with a significant political transformation: the parliamentary victory in May 2018 by Hezbollah and its allies who secured the majority of the seats.

4.2 First Parliamentary Elections: *Infitah* Policy

Hezbollah emerged as a military organization in 1982 designed to curtail the Israeli aggressions against both Lebanon and Palestine and in parallel, to create an Islamic state in Lebanon. Therefore, it refused to participate in domestic politics considering the Lebanese government corrupt and despairing of any attempts to reform it (Augustus Norton, 2007, p.38). In the 1990s, along with the rising to power of the more moderate Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, a dispute arose between the hard- and soft- liners within Hezbollah. This disagreement culminated in a divergent point of views towards the participation in the 1992 parliamentary elections as the hard-liners refused to participate in a system they had long rejected. Therefore, a committee of 12 high-ranked figures was selected for a vote. The soft-liners prevailed by 10 to 2 and Hezbollah ran for elections.

According to Richard Augustus Norton (2007), this move was endorsed by Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, who was then Hezbollah's mentor and the first to argue that due to Lebanon's multisectarian society, creating an Islamic State is unlikely (p.99).

This transition was dubbed "*infitah* policy" through which Hezbollah opened up, and according to Norton (2007), participated along cross-ideological and cross-sectarian electoral alliances (p.99-100). Hezbollah was able to secure 8 Shi'a seats (Shoghig Mikaelian and Bassel Salloukh 2016, p.29), and formed a block of 12 members along with its allies. This was Hezbollah's finest moment. More to the point, 10 years of military struggles culminated in a political victory increasing its clout among the Shi'a. And in the ensuing decades, pursuing an increasingly assertive policy, Hezbollah continued to rise unabated on the military and political levels. This rise was coupled with further openness and acceptance of the status quo.

Naim Qassem (2005) contended that the organization's decision to run for elections was blurry, and therefore a choice was taken to establish a twelve-member committee that includes major Hezbollah representatives who will vote on the decision (p.187). Opposing the system, according to Qassem (2005), wouldn't give Hezbollah any political leverage, but on the contrary, outsiders lack the knowledge, and the organization's involvement would be a tool for achieving change (p.189). Qassem (2005) referred that 10 out of 12 members voted with the participation in the parliamentary elections, both as a necessity but also because it was in Hezbollah's best interest (p.194). The electoral platform did not include any religious themes, rather it called for battling economic shortcomings, discrimination, unemployment, and securing the country's frontlines (Joseph Alagha, 2011, p.64). So its new strategy was mainly focused on the deprivation of poor rural areas, namely the Shi'a areas such as al-Dahiyah, Beirut's southern suburb, a predominantly Shi'a inhabited area, by the government, and on the shortages in social services in these areas (Norton, 2007, p.107). However, after almost

three decades of Hezbollah's involvement in the Lebanese system and its eagerness for change, it has failed to accomplish any remarkable improvement and Lebanon and the Shi'a are still running short from economic prosperity.

That said, Hezbollah started establishing a chain of institutions responsible for providing social services in the Shi'a areas: al-Dahiyah, southern Lebanon and Beqaa. However, prior to its involvement in domestic politics in the 1990s, Hezbollah has been offering health services since 1983 (Judith Palmer Harik, 2005, p.83). In 1988, Harik (2005) argued, two institutions functioning under an Islamic umbrella were launched: *al-Rassoul al-A'zam* Hospital and mosque complex. Another foundation is the Martyrs Foundation "which pays all of the medical expenses for Hezbollah's wounded fighters and 70% of the wounded for civilians injured in fighting". These hospitals, located in the south and the Beqaa Valley, contain professional and well experienced employees. *Jihad al-Bina'*, a construction company created by Hezbollah, is responsible for infrastructural projects, and undertook the "installation of drinking fountains and decent toilets at public schools in the Dahiyah". Through *Jihad al-Bina'*, Iran funded an emergency water delivery that has been a permanent problem. Moreover, families of the martyrs have always been taken care of by providing education for their children and distributing books every year with discounted prices (p.83-86).

In fact, Lebanon is a failed state that was not only wrecked by the 15 years' civil war, but also by a clientelistic system that presses the population to ask for basic services or jobs from politicians who have access to state institutions. This system had long existed, and many casual observers and even researchers blame Hezbollah for state failure. However, this is not only a void argument, but false and falsifying either on

purpose or by lack of knowledge. The point to make here is that this clientelistic system and state failure pre-dated the civil war and Hezbollah, but the latter adapted to this status quo and became one among many actors who exploited it rather than seeking a total change. Salloukh and Mikaelian (2013) stressed that Hezbollah created a network of institutions ranging “from the reconstruction of houses destroyed by Israel, the provision of financial support and social services to the families of the injured and martyred Hezbollah fighters, and the provision of health services to the public, to the production of nonmaterial symbolic capital targeted at the party’s constituency” (p.523). These institutions were supported by Tehran hoping to help Hezbollah embed itself within the Shi’a community. Aurelie Daher (2019) disagreed on this matter saying that “contrary to the widely held theory, the Hezbollah social apparatus lay claim to having constructed a clientelized community network around the party that could guarantee continuity of its mobilization” (p.121). Indeed, this is paramount for Hezbollah and without these institutions and the support it offers to the Shi’a community, its popularity would be at risk. Nevertheless, this network, which was launched in parallel to the military confrontations against Israel, represents one layer of a multilayered mobilization, at its core lay the sectarian mobilization policy which Hezbollah had, and will always adopt.

By establishing these institutions, Hezbollah filled the gaps where the Lebanese government was absent. To compensate Hezbollah for the services it had been offering, voters pledged their votes to the candidates on its electoral lists. It was at that moment, that Hezbollah marked its first transition from a rejectionist Islamist military group to a more lenient Islamist party participating in the Lebanese confessional system. Adham Saloui (2019) argued that Hezbollah changed from “a narrow, revolutionary, ideological,

violent and Islamist movement in the 1980s to become a moderate and pragmatic political actor in the 1990s” (p.4). It was important to mention this stage in Hezbollah’s history so that one can understand the first step that it took towards opening-up to other Lebanese and to the world. When this transition happened in the post-civil war Lebanon, Syria had already gained the upper-hand in Lebanon. As explained in chapter 3, the Iran-Syria agreement had provided Hezbollah with more room to maneuver and allowed it to keep its arsenal and operate outside the control of the state, despite that all other armed groups gave up on their weapons. For more than a decade, Hezbollah’s political engagement was confined to the parliament but this situation has changed in the post-Syria withdrawal in 2005.

4.3 Post-Syria withdrawal: Into the Government

In 1976, one year after the eruption of the civil war, Syrian troops leapt into Lebanon’s quagmire. When the Ta’if Agreement –a consensus that ended the civil war, had been implemented, it loosened Syria’s control in Lebanon providing it with regional and international cover, namely by Saudi Arabia and the US. This culminated in Syria manipulating Lebanon’s domestic politics and foreign policy for the ensuing 15 years, in tandem with many Lebanese figures such as Rafik el Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, Nabih Berri. The acceptance to give Syria the upper-hand in Lebanon by Saudi Arabia and the US had broader regional causal factors. When the US sought to gather as much support as it could as a prelude for its offensive against Iraqi forces in 1991, who had captured Kuwait, Hafez al-Assad, then Syria’s president and father of Bashar, approved the deployment of US troops. At that moment, the US needed as much approvals by Arab

regimes as it can get for its operation. Therefore, as an endearment for this stance, the US accepted to give Syria the upper-hand in Lebanon.

These events were altering the regional order and Assad's regime knew best how to manipulate and exploit this geopolitical contest. However, while Hafez provided the US invasion with further Arab cover, Bashar did not only oppose the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, but engaged in counter-balancing the Americans, a policy that would cost him a geopolitical loss. Daher (2019) stated that "along with its involvement in Iraq, the US escalated its pressure on Syrian-Lebanese relations" (p.183). This was followed, Daher (2019) pursued, by a pressure from Jacques Chirac, France's president, who asked for a "road map" for both countries, and by the US House of Representatives which "passed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act" authorizing the imposition of sanctions against the Syrian regime (p.183). In fact, if anything, it isn't clear whether the US wouldn't have pressed a Syrian withdrawal had Assad agreed on the Iraq invasion because the regime was afraid to be next.

Bringing the discussion back to Lebanon, in the following year, tensions mounted in parallel to the regional winds of change, and new alliances were formed: Hariri and Jumblatt, along with Christian allies, started spearheading an opposition front against Syria. As a response, Syria's leadership sought to extend the presidency of Emile Lahoud, Lebanon's president and a close ally. The newly-formed opposition refused, and prime minister Hariri made no secret of his dissatisfaction, yet since Lebanon was merely a Syrian protectorate, Hariri unwillingly obeyed Syria's demand. Assad had informed Hariri that opposing the extension meant a direct challenge to him. This extension was opposed by western countries, namely the US, France, and the United Kingdom, but

“Damascus and Beirut turned a deaf ear” and Lahoud was granted a three years’ extension (Daher, 2019, p.183). On another side, for Hezbollah, Lahoud was an ally and an endorser of its military arsenal (Norton, 2007, p.125).

To make things worse, France and the US passed the 1559 United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR), asking indirectly for Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon and the disarmament of Hezbollah (Julia Choukair, 2005). Hariri refrained from forming a government raising the stakes in the country. More and more, Lebanon was teetering on the brink of further escalations amid a geopolitical confrontation on its soil that consisted of domestic, regional and international alliances on both sides of the political spectrum. Consequently, a pro-Syria government was formed and commanded by Omar Karami. Few months later, on Valentine’s day, February 2005, a huge explosion targeted Hariri’s convoy in Beirut killing him with more than 20 others. Accusing Syria for the blast, thousands of demonstrators took the streets of the capital and gathered in the “Martyrs Square” demanding an immediate withdrawal of the Syrian army. One month later, on 8 March, pro-Syria parties, spearheaded by Hezbollah, organized a demonstration they dubbed “Thank you Syria” refusing these accusations and accusing the west of conducting a conspiracy against Lebanon.

A Shi’a pro-Saudi journalist close to the Hariri family contended that the assassination orphaned the Sunnis by the murder of who can be called their godfather [in reference to Hariri], leaving a gap in the leadership of the Sunnis who became politically rudderless. The Syrian withdrawal, he followed, left a power vacuum in Lebanon and troubled the equilibrium between political rivals. In his view, the consensus between Syria and Iran was to divide the pie in Lebanon, and interestingly, Nasrallah declared

himself the heir of Syria even before its actual withdrawal. “In his speech on 8 March, Nasrallah thanked Hafez al-Assad for long-defending Lebanon against Israel, and thanked Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). While the latter retreated on 26 April, Nasrallah thanked Syria one month before its departure. In fact, he was announcing the end of the Syrian era and the beginning of the Iranian dominance over Lebanon.”⁴⁰ In response, anti-Syria parties prepared a demonstration 6 days later, on 14 March –commemorating a month since the death of Hariri. This deep disagreement and conflicting support divided Lebanese between two camps: the anti-Syria 14 March and the pro-Syria 8 March alliances. Under pressure, Karami delivered a speech in the parliament announcing the cabinet’s resignation. These standoffs were part of a broader geopolitical confrontation in the Middle East which changed the balance of power.

Although many Lebanese consider that their demonstrations against Syria’s presence in Lebanon have culminated in the withdrawal of the SAA, it is important to maintain that the opposition of Syria to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, as mentioned above, led to international pressures hoping to punish it for its regional anti-US stance. But of course, the mounting demonstrations and outrage by many Lebanese helped pressure Assad’s regime. After Syria’s withdrawal, Nicholas Blanford (2011) opined, Hezbollah’s political cover had vanished and it had no other choice but to “become more politically engaged to safeguard its own interests” (p.364). Palpably, this marked the beginning of new phase for Hezbollah, and under fears of crippling it from within the government, it decided to participate in Fouad Seniora’s cabinet, a pro-US prime minister. The aforementioned woes and the subsequent domestic and international struggle over

⁴⁰ Interview with author. 13 November 2018.

Lebanon catalyzed the need to a direct participation in Fouad Seniora's cabinet formed in 2005 (Krista E. Wiegand, 2009; Salloukh and Mikaelian, 2013).

This was considered Hezbollah's second engagement in the system and the first in the cabinet. Hezbollah's Lebanese private universities spokesman argued that with Syria's presence, the situation was under control, yet Hariri's murder was a conspiracy orchestrated to accuse Hezbollah by convincing the Sunnis that the Shi'a assassinated your leader. "We" [Hezbollah], he pursued, "had to put some domestic efforts to avoid internal calamity."⁴¹ Al-Mayadeen channel reporter seconded that the Syrian presence formed an umbrella for Hezbollah since the Ta'if agreement but the 1559 UNSCR was a direct challenge for Hezbollah forcing them to participate in the government to prevent being backstabbed by governmental decisions.⁴² Also, Hezbollah's deputy head of political relations emphasized that before the Ta'if agreement, the consecutive Lebanese governments were more westernized, namely through close ties with the US, but with Syria's presence, our back was protected. However, following its departure "we had to participate in the cabinet."⁴³

A Lebanese Shi'a politician close to Hezbollah considered that even though Hezbollah was qualified to play Syria's role and fill the vacuum, they hitherto refused it. "Their performance differed from that of Syria as they refused to dictate anyone nor forced anybody to commit to their decisions, not even their allies, and this was proven in many occasions."⁴⁴ Despite of the accusations that held Hezbollah responsible for controlling

⁴¹ Interview with author. 5 September 2018.

⁴² Interview with author. 11 September 2018.

⁴³ Interview with author. 8 September 2018.

⁴⁴ Interview with author. 9 September 2018.

key decisions in Lebanon, its behavior was different than that of the Syrians, and indeed, it avoided imposing its decisions on its allies when they dispute. For instance, Amal movement, its Shi'a ally, and the Free Patriotic Movement, its Christian ally, deeply disagree on internal matters but Hezbollah never insisted to mediate a long-term truce between both sides. Soft-power was always the norm, at least explicitly.

However, this point of view has been rejected by Hezbollah's rivals. A Christian anti-Hezbollah former Member of Parliament (MP) argued that after the Syrian withdrawal, Hezbollah sought to build its own plan by becoming an orphanage to pro-Syria parties in Lebanon and established the 8 March alliance.⁴⁵ Interestingly, a "Lebanese Forces" spokesman, a former militia and anti-Hezbollah party, framed the situation as follows: With the withdrawal of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon in 1982, Iran took a strategical decision to implement a strong Shi'a organization in Lebanon. In case Iran ever loses its regional impact, this organization can't be removed from domestic politics since its partisans are Lebanese. So with Syria's retreat, Hezbollah tried to fill the vacuum. Notably, Lebanese have always been ruled by many foreign forces such as the Ottomans; however, and proven by many failed experiences, it is impossible to accept the supremacy of any Lebanese counterpart. Gradually, Hezbollah realized that its priority was controlling Lebanon's foreign policy and key positions in the government rather than controlling others, and in that, they succeeded.⁴⁶ Similarly, Future Movement's deputy secretary general argued that although Hezbollah tried to play Syria's role, they did not succeed. There's a great

⁴⁵ Interview with author. 9 October 2018.

⁴⁶ Interview with author. 20 October 2018.

difference between Hezbollah and Syria, he said, while Syria was given a mandate over Lebanon, Hezbollah is a partner and therefore can't play the role of guidance.⁴⁷

After Syria's departure, Hezbollah sought to cement itself domestically. First, it tightened its relationship with the Amal movement, the other strong Shi'a party. The political consent and partnership between both sides would be called the "Shi'a duality." This step was paramount for Hezbollah because it hoped to secure its first line of defense: the Shi'a community; minimizing the possibility of any intra-Shi'a conflict. Second, it struck a deal with the Muslim leaders of the 14 March coalition in order to run for the parliamentary elections on consensus lists. The partnership was called the "Quartet coalition" and shaped by 4 major Muslim parties: Hezbollah (Shi'a), Amal Movement (Shi'a), the Future Movement (Sunni), and the Progressive Socialist Party (Druze). The Future movement, headed by Saad Hariri, son of late Rafik Hariri, the Progressive Socialist Party by Walid Jumblatt, a former pro-Syria Druze leader who changed positions and became the hawk of the anti-Syria 14 March alliance. "Nasrallah knew that this coalition will give the majority of the parliament to the 14 March alliance, but he explained to me that he had no other choice. Either we give them the parliament or they will accuse us of killing Hariri."⁴⁸ By other words, this short-term coalition was not meant to survive but was merely a political honey moon to avoid any confrontation.

Hezbollah's former private universities spokesman confirmed that through this coalition, Hezbollah hoped to overcome a political stalemate or military conflict.⁴⁹ Third, "in February 2006, it [Hezbollah] signed a memorandum of understanding with Michel

⁴⁷ Interview with author. 10 November 2018.

⁴⁸ Interview with author. 4 December 2018.

⁴⁹ Interview with author. 5 September 2018.

Aoun, a once-vociferous anti-Syrian Christian leader” (Blanford, 2011, p.364). Hezbollah was looking for a strong Christian ally for one obvious reason: a cross-sectarian alliance with the strongest Christian party will protect Hezbollah’s back in Lebanon and will ameliorate its international image. In fact, Aoun by its turn, knew that a quid pro quo with Hezbollah will be the fastest route to the presidential palace. More to the point, the relationship between Aoun and Hezbollah was strategic and a long-term alliance that serves both sides.

Afterwards, a Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) was formed to investigate Hariri’s assassination after a consensus between Lebanon’s government and the United Nations Security Council. The mandate of the STL would be for 3 years and could be renewed by the end of the term and Lebanon would cover all costs. Quickly, the STL ordered the arrest of the head of all security apparatuses who were loyal to Syria without any damning proofs or charges of their involvement in Hariri’s assassination.⁵⁰ After four years of detention, they were released. Therefore, Hezbollah and the 8 March coalition accused the STL of being politicized and leading a conspiracy against Hezbollah on behalf of Israel and America. Nasrallah and al-Manar, Hezbollah’s TV channel, accused the STL of hiring CIA members and therefore, having prejudices against Hezbollah rather than damning evidences.⁵¹

However, Robert Baer, the former CIA officer working in the STL, claimed that he has been contacted long after being released from the CIA and accused Hezbollah of

⁵⁰ “Lebanon tribunal orders release of generals” by Aaron Gray-Block & Nadim Ladki. On 20 April 2009. Reuters. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-tribunal/lebanon-tribunal-orders-release-of-generals-idUSTRE53S4JP20090429>

⁵¹ “The Hunt”. By Jad Ghoson. Al-Jadeed TV. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcW-kpEsmOA>

murdering Hariri. He said that the Lebanese people always believe in conspiracy theories which is a false and falsifying premise.⁵² Baer (2014) reasoned that al-Manar referred to his former work in the CIA when he tried to hunt Imad Moughniyeh in the 1980s and predicted that “the indictments refer to new leaks that the STL is about to name 4 Hezbollah members in the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the billionaire and former Lebanese Prime Minister” (p.xiv-xv). In September 2018, “4 Hezbollah members have been tried in absentia for participating in the murder of Hariri.”⁵³ The tribunal blamed Moustafa Badredden, Moughnieh’s brother-in-law and his successor, killed in Syria in 2016, for orchestrating the operation.

The assassination was a turning point in the history of Lebanon with domestic and regional ramifications. Adham Saouli (2019) argued that Hariri’s assassination ended Lebanon’s stability and opened “a new chapter in the country’s turbulent history” (p.163). It created a schism between two camps: the pro-Syria 8 March and anti-Syria 14 March. Nevertheless, Hezbollah’s participation in Seniora’s cabinet failed to remedy the Sunni-Shi’a split generated after Hariri’s murder that was paralleled with the rise of sectarian bickering in post-2003 Iraq. Nasrallah’s main objective, however, was to counterbalance external pressures on the organization in a bid to force it to abandon its arsenal.⁵⁴ Hezbollah felt confined in the ensuing years by both domestic and external pressures: the STL, the Seniora government and its international backers who intended to isolate the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Nicholas Blanford. 16 September 2018. The Arab Weekly. Retrieved from: <https://thearabweekly.com/special-tribunal-lebanon-conclude-whimper-rather-much-anticipated-bang>

⁵⁴ “Syria supporters rally in Lebanon”, by Scott Wilson, on 9 March 2005. The Washington Post.

organization, the 2006 war, and lastly, the threat of a Sunni-Shi'a war, Hezbollah's worst nightmare (Bassel Salloukh and Shoghig Mikaelian, 2013, p.525). The withdrawal of Syria from Lebanon left a power vacuum in the political system and Hezbollah was the strongest force that was qualified to fill it, but generated as much nemesis as support. The decision to participate initiated from al-Dahiyah rather than Tehran and it was Hezbollah's choice. Therefore, driven by the events, Hezbollah had to participate in the cabinet for the first time and start a new phase in the history of the organization.

4.4 Memorandum of Understanding

The transformative regional events that were engulfing the Middle East had placed Lebanon on a slippery slope. Michel Aoun, then Army Chief who rejected the Ta'if agreement and fought against the SAA, returned to Lebanon in 2005 after 15 years of exile in France. Aoun was a key figure in the 14 March coalition but abandoned it after Syria's withdrawal, established a new party, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), and when the "Quartet coalition" emerged, Aoun, against all odds, participated in the elections and formed the largest block in the parliament. Thereafter, Hezbollah, looking for a strong ally to provide it with the perfect cover, sought to mend ties with Aoun who was open for this alliance. This cross-sectarian alliance eased tensions that were mounting against Hezbollah. Despite its Shi'a identity and its devotion to *wilayat al-faqih*, a long-term relationship with a the strongest Christian figure proved to be a beneficial endgame. Therefore, the dual talks between both sides culminated on 6 February 2006 in signing a memorandum of understanding between Nasrallah and Aoun at the Mar Mkhayel Church in Haret Horeik.

Following are the key points of the memorandum: First, dialogue is the only path for Lebanon's crises based on consensual will; second, reflecting the spirit of the constitution and the essence of shared coexistence, consociational democracy remains the essential basis for governance in Lebanon; third, the reform and arrangement of political life in Lebanon necessitate a modern electoral law, proportional representation may be one of its effective shapes; fourth, state building; fifth, the missing during the Lebanese civil war and the uncover of their fate with collaboration of all parties; sixth, a call upon the Lebanese in Israel to return to resolve their case; seventh, on security issues: the condemnation of any political assassination in general and those that occurred in Lebanon specifically such as Hariri's assassination or other figures, so the investigation must continue until justice prevails; eighth, maintaining good relations with Syria and rejecting any sort of external guardianship; ninth, Palestinians in Lebanon must abide by the authority of the Lebanese government and their case must be looked at from a global approach and the same time the solidarity with their cause; tenth, the protection of Lebanon and the preservation of its independence and sovereignty as a national responsibility, being guaranteed by international treaties and the right of confronting any threat. Moreover, Hezbollah's arsenal must be tackled as a general approach linked to the reasons behind its existence. Lebanese must share the burdens of protecting their country and maintaining its stability through liberating all prisoners in Israel, the liberation of the Shebaa farms, and the protection of Lebanon through national dialogue that shapes a strategic national defense plan.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Memorandum of understanding between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement. 16 February 2007. Retrieved from: <https://www.mogawama.org/essaydetailsf.php?eid=467&fid=19>

In fact, if anything, the essence of the memorandum laid in the last point that legalized Hezbollah's arsenal and presence as a resistance movement, not only to defend its territory, but also to liberate inmates from Israeli prisons. On the commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the memorandum, Aoun commented that "everybody must understand that Lebanon is built upon balance and participation and the agreement between us was built upon our word and there are ethics in our relationship."⁵⁶ Daher (2019) opined that the agreement was a triumph for Hezbollah: "profiting from the inter-Christian rivalries, it had succeeded in attracting a significant part of a community which *a priori* had no reasons to favorably inclined towards the party" (p.199). Even when Hezbollah faced the biggest war of elimination in July 2006, Aoun remained loyal to this alliance endearing him further in the former's eyes. This culminated in 2016, as will be argued in section 7 of this chapter, in electing Aoun as president after Hezbollah's insistence on the following: Aoun or vacuum. By and large, this relationship proved to be a mutually beneficial long-term alliance rather than a *modus vivendi*.

4.5 The July War: Towards a New Power Balance?

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon gave momentum to the emergence of Hezbollah. Although it was not the only organization that fought the IDF, Hezbollah, backed by Iran and Syria, had the means to endure and improve on the military level. Pursuing an increasingly assertive foreign policy, both countries rushed to counterbalance Israel and play a regional role by bolstering Hezbollah. This does not mean that Iran and Syria shared the same goals, but at that moment they had a shared interest. On 25 May 2000,

⁵⁶ "Aoun Upon Tenth Anniversary of agreement with Hezbollah only renews commitment", 4 February 2016, NNA. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/56296/Aoun-upon-tenth-anniversary-of-agreement-wi>

the IDF withdrew from Lebanon and Hezbollah was praised for this liberation after almost two decades of confrontations with Israel and its Lebanese allies. Now that Israel withdrew, Hezbollah's priority became the release of all Lebanese inmates from Israeli prisons. In 2004, a prisoners' swap culminated in the release of hundreds of Lebanese, Palestinians and Arabs in exchange for three Israeli bodies captured in 2000 and an IDF colonel that was previously kidnapped by Hezbollah. Among the Lebanese liberated were two key Hezbollah figures: Mustafa Dirani and Sheikh Abdel-Karim Obeid (Blanford, 2011, p.365).

Although Israel didn't release Samir al-Kuntar, named in Lebanon the "dean of prisoners", alongside 4 other inmates, Hezbollah was unyieldingly determined to release all prisoners. Celebrating the exchange, Nasrallah pledged to release all the remaining prisoners (Daher, 2019, p.201). This left Hezbollah with more room to maneuver. By other words, Hezbollah was given the chance to launch a war against Israel under the narrative of releasing the hostages. Had Israel released all inmates, Hezbollah wouldn't have used this excuse to generate a confrontation. In 2005, "in the early afternoon of November 21, the Islamic Resistance launched a coordinated multipronged assault against Israeli positions in Ghajar village and the adjacent Sheb'a Farms in what was the largest and most complex operation since the October 2000 abduction of three soldiers" (Blanford, 2011, p.366). On 24 April, 2006, Nasrallah referred to Hezbollah's intentions of kidnaping Israeli soldiers to free Kuntar and the rest of the prisoners (Nicholas Noe, 2007, p.370). The big confrontation was yet to come, however.

On 12 July 2006, at 9:05 am, a top-notch Hezbollah unit attacked an IDF convoy in a cross-border raid, killing six soldiers and capturing two. Shown in the released footage

by Al-Mayadeen channel for the 10th anniversary of the war, this special unit had planned and trained for the operation beforehand and was supervised by Moughniyeh who appeared giving instructions during the final drill.⁵⁷ Soon after the operation, Nasrallah issued a public statement claiming that he had expressed many times during that year about Hezbollah's determination to kidnap Israeli soldiers in its hope for a bargain to release the prisoners. Since neither the international community nor any country have put efforts to release the Lebanese hostages, according to Nasrallah, it is our right and the only logical solution left for us to accomplish our promise. Releasing the hostages, Nasrallah said, was our priority since the beginning of 2006 in order to permanently seal the prisoners' dossier.⁵⁸ Nasrallah emphasized that the decision to capture soldiers rather than civilians was taken months before executing the operation by the Shura Council – the highest decision-making council, and was later sent to the Jihadi Council for execution. Nasrallah declared that a special unit crossed several times into the Palestinian territories but the operation did not happen because the targets were civilians.⁵⁹

As a matter of fact, Hezbollah did not expect Israel to launch a war and Nasrallah explicitly expressed that their only target was a swap rather than a confrontation in south Lebanon. "Our intensions are neither to raise tensions on the borders nor to spark a full-scale war with Israel, rather we are seeking a consensus for a prisoners' exchange

⁵⁷ Hezbollah releases never seen footage from the ambush that sparked the 2006 war. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mQH6n2zRR4>

⁵⁸ Nasrallah's conference to explain the operation "Truthful promise". Published on 11 July 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfsqZ05gmuE>

⁵⁹ "Hezbollah Leader reveals secrets of the July 2006 War, by Ibrahim al-Amine; Wafic Kanso; Hassan Illaik; & Maha Zureikat, 14 August 2014, Al-Akhbar Newspaper.

through indirect channels. However, we are prepared and ready if the enemy wanted a confrontation.”⁶⁰ More to the point, Nasrallah palpably explained that Hezbollah did not want a war and designed a route to reach a solution rather than a conflict. In fact, Lebanese prime minister Fouad Seniora asked Nasrallah’s advisor, Hussein Khalil, of the expected reaction from Israel and the answer was “nothing” (Blanford, 2011, p.379). Daher (2019) argued that Nasrallah absolved Seniora’s cabinet from any responsibility claiming that the government was not informed beforehand (p.201). If Hezbollah’s purpose was to conduct a full-scale war it would have pursued its attack on IDF headlocks and fired rockets into Israel instead of adopting a calmativ narrative and pushing towards indirect negotiations for hostages’ exchange. That said, there were no Iranian orders to initiate a war because Hezbollah wouldn’t have halted if it wanted to launch a confrontation on Tehran’s behalf. Simply, the decision to execute the operation was to fulfil Nasrallah’s earlier pledge to release all inmates in the Israeli prisons.

Nasrallah announced the success of the operation, which he dubbed *al-Wa’d al-Sadeq* (Truthful Promise), in reference to his earlier pledge to liberate all Lebanese inmates in Israeli prisons. However, “Truthful Promise” quickly cascaded out of control and shifted from a small operation to a full-scale war. Augustus Richard Norton (2007) argued that Israel’s offensive was beyond Hezbollah’s expectations (p.136). Israeli miscalculations led to false presumptions of its ability to eliminate Hezbollah within days. Israel’s prime minister, Ehud Olmert, rushed to express that the IDF’s purpose is to destroying Hezbollah. Indeed, the Israeli cabinet had agreed for an aerial and naval

⁶⁰ Nasrallah’s conference to explain the operation “Truthful promise”. Published on 11 July 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfsqZ05gmuE>

assault on Lebanon assuming that Hezbollah will shortly be seeking armistice (Blanford, 2011, p.379). Daher (2019) noted that Olmert pledged to “set Lebanon back 50 years” (p.201), a promise that he would soon realize was doomed.

Soon after these events, Rafik Hariri’s airport runways were hit and Hezbollah’s headquarters where Nasrallah resided were turned into debris. Correspondingly, Hezbollah’s rocket bases were bombarded alongside other infrastructures. Daher (2019) emphasized that the IDF pilots demolished Hezbollah facilities from the air, including buildings, offices, hospitals, schools, charities, and its leaders’ residences (p.202). Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, the IDF Chief of Staff, declared that “90 percent of Hezbollah’s long-range rocket arsenal was destroyed” (Blanford, 2011, p.380). However, against all odds and the propaganda machination of the Israelis, Hezbollah responded by firing rocket salvos into Israel undermining Halutz’s claims and Israel’s hope of a quick triumph.

Despite the lack of precision, on July 14, Hezbollah fired missiles into Haifa for the first time. This was an important military development for both sides since Hezbollah had used new weaponry and Israel, unaccustomed to be targeted this deep at home, was now under scrutiny. After that, Nasrallah stressed: “You [Israel] wanted an open war, an open war is what you will get” (Blanford, 2011, p.381). At the same time that Nasrallah was speaking and in a very well-coordinated strike, a land-to-sea missile hit an Israeli warship in front of Beirut’s shores. As he had vowed surprises if a war erupted, Nasrallah announced: “Now, in the open sea, off Beirut’s coast, the Israeli warship that has been bombarding our infrastructure and homes, look at it as it burns and will sink with tens of

Zionist soldiers, and this is only the beginning.”⁶¹ “Clearly, the Israeli warship had turned off its anti-missile system because it lacked intel vis-à-vis Hezbollah’s ownership of such missiles.”⁶² In the post-war, the IDF confessed that the hit was due to a missed Information from the intelligence vis-à-vis Hezbollah’s possession of C 802 land-to-sea sophisticated rockets.⁶³ This was not a mere minutiae, somewhat, it was an alteration in the history of the Arab-Israeli wars because the former had not known any victory or even military balance since the beginning of the confrontations in 1948. In fact, if anything, it endeared Nasrallah further in the eyes of his supporters and of many Arabs raising his credits across the Arab world. Furthermore, this blow altered the balance of power in the confrontation and crippled the IDF by dealing it a military blow.

Amid these confrontations, Shi’a areas in the south and al-Dahiyah, were evacuated and refugees relocated to Druze, Sunni and Christian areas and to Syria. Thousands of refugees fled their villages to Nabatiyeh and escaped to other locations far from the frontline. 5 days after the beginning of the war, Olmart announced the prolongation of the strikes until the following aims were reached: “The return of the hostages, a complete cease-fire, deployment of the Lebanese army throughout south Lebanon up to the blue Line, the expulsion of Hezbollah from the border district, and the party’s disarming under UNSCR 1559” (Blanford, 2011, p.389). Underestimating Hezbollah by Israel and blatantly expressing that it can achieve the previously mentioned goals undermined it because at the end of the war, it was obliged to succumb to reach a

⁶¹ Hezbollah’s Nasrallah target Israeli warship live on T.V. 25 November 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNMK1vwlumM>

⁶² Interview with author. On 18 December 2018.

⁶³ Hezbollah’s Nasrallah target Israeli warship live on T.V. 25 November 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNMK1vwlumM>

ceasefire. Adham Saouli (2019) opined that after one week of bombardment against Hezbollah, the Israelis failed to achieve their aims or to soothe the Lebanese organization (p.174).

On the same day, IDF troops launched their ground offensive by advancing into the Lebanese village of Maroun al-Ras. Unpredictably, Hezbollah fighters resisted for 7 days before the village fell into the hands of the attacking forces. Blanford (2011) assumed that “Hezbollah’s men were fighting from well-prepared defensive positions. Far from hitting the Israelis and then disappearing in the usual guerilla fashion, the Hezbollah fighters had their ground and within hours the soldiers had taken casualties and were surrounded” (p.390). During the confrontations in the 1990s, Hezbollah fighters had adopted a hit-and-run strategy as they were not capable of withholding their positions. This time, the guerilla tactics changed and Hezbollah troops fought back hoping to thwart ground advances. Meanwhile, Israeli air force kept bombarding Hezbollah’s strongholds and the latter retaliated by firing rockets into Israel. Daher (2019) argued that during the offensive Israel was forced to admit that Hezbollah’s military arsenal and capabilities were unharmed and was still able to outmaneuver the Israeli air forces (p.205).

On average, 170 missiles were launched from Lebanon into Israel during the first week, and numbers kept increasing afterwards to reach 350 on July 18 (Blanford, 2011, p.393). Every time Israel’s scope of targets grew against Lebanon, unyielding in its determination to hit back, Hezbollah launched missiles deeper inside Israeli territories. Furthermore, Nasrallah threatened to target Tel Aviv, Israel’s capital, had Beirut been under fire (Daher, 2019, p.204). On another level, even under heavy air assaults and ground offensives, the communication between Hezbollah fighters and their leadership

endured because the units on the ground were keeping up with Nasrallah's pledges. To communicate, they used an internal telecommunication network that they have been building for years, keeping it out of reach for the Israelis as it works through underground cables. While some Hezbollah personnel had specialized in Hebrew to intercept Israeli messages whenever they can, Blanford (2011) confirmed that technicians in the organization were able to analyze which frequencies were surveilled by the Israelis so the fighters would know which walkie-talkies frequency was safe to use (p.394). As it should be clear by now, the modus operandi of Hezbollah seemed organized and everyone pre-acquired his responsibility.

On July 24, the IDF advanced to Bint Jbeil, but Hezbollah fighters didn't budge an inch and clashed face to face with the Israeli soldiers, and after 4 days of draconian fighting, the IDF retreated. The latter, Blanford (2011) argued, explored Hezbollah's "new military doctrine of defensive resistance" (p.391). It had built underground tunnels in all frontline villages which gave it leverage during battles. Not only did Hezbollah fighters held their grounds, but they were also using these underpasses to surround Israeli troops and launch attacks from all sides (Blanford, 2011, p.391). One sample of these secretive underpasses was later revealed in Mlita, a southern village, and is open for visitors and tourists. Furthermore, when battles turned into street fights, Hezbollah combatants were able to cross the village from house to house, through holes in the walls that they had dug, without being detected, and therefore attacking the IDF from multiple positions. This strategy would make the Israelis overestimate the numbers of fighters as they become under fire from different locations and wouldn't be able to detect their whereabouts. The Israeli army described the clashes in Bint Jbeil as "the fiercest battle in years" (Daher,

2019, p.205). Hezbollah's stand as a bulwark against the IDF might look normal for the casual observer, but brief though it was, these confrontations demoralized Israel and boosted Hezbollah fighters, its supporters and many Arabs. An armed group defeated one of the strongest armies in the Middle East and dealt it an immense military blow. In fact, the leitmotif that the Israeli army is invincible proved to be incorrect.

Hezbollah introduced new sophisticated rockets and missiles to the battle that were of surprise for the IDF: BM-27 Uragan 220 mm, Fajr-3 240 mm, Khaibar-1 302 mm, Zelzal-1 610 mm. Additionally, it used the C 802 land-to-sea rockets at least once when the warship was hit, the Russian 9M133 Kornet anti-tank guided missiles that proved fatal to the Merkava-4 Tanks –considered impenetrable and undefeated in the pre-war rhetoric, the Miras-1 UAV (drone) which didn't have any effect but rather destroyed by the Israeli air force (Blanford, 2011, p.394). Blanford (2011) revealed that both, a former senior Israeli military intelligence and some Hezbollah fighters, confirmed Hezbollah's possession of the anti-helicopters SA-18 shoulder-fired. Moreover, it had Zelzal-2, with an eleven-hundred-pound warheads and a far reaching distance but it kept them as a surprise in case the war escalated even more (p.395). The defeat of Hezbollah was therefore not as easy as Olmert had claimed.

On 24 July, Condoleezza Rice, the US Secretary of State arrived to Beirut to bargain with Lebanon's prime minister, Fouad Seniora. It wasn't until then, that she realized the failure of the "birth pangs of the New Middle East" plan she hoped for (Blanford, 2011, p.399), and that Israel was unable neither to destroy Hezbollah nor to help shaping a new Middle East in this war. It seemed that everyone underestimated Hezbollah's capabilities. In parallel, international meetings were held separately, i.e. in

Rome, to reach a cease-fire; however, memorandums were rejected by either Hezbollah or Israel. Détente was far from happening. So these doomed negotiations were coupled with mounting fights and confrontations reached their apogee. On July 30, Israel bombarded a civilian house in Qana village, south Lebanon, killing dozens of civilians. The same village had witnessed a ferocious assault by Israel 10 years earlier during the Operation Grapes of Wrath, slaughtering tens of civilians in the UN headquarters. In both wars, the massacres were a turning point, but although it led to a written cease-fire in 1996, it failed to do so in 2006. However, pressured by the US and western countries, a 48 hours' aerial truce was agreed upon by Israel.

By the beginning of August, the IDF summoned its reserve to assist their counterparts in a large ground assault against Lebanon. Another cease-fire failed on 11 August, and Olmert ordered the invasion of Lebanon up until the Litani river. With the plan ready, the IDF advanced into Lebanon and air-dropped some units into the Ghandourieh village, adjacent to the Litani. With the IDF troops arriving to Wadi al-Hujair valley, they found their selves trapped and under heavy fire again.⁶⁴ Wadi al-Hujair, a geographically stiff valley with steep and well covered hills, made a good location for an ambush. "In all, thirty-three soldiers were killed and eleven of twenty-four Merkava Mark 4 tanks had been hit" (Blanford, 2011, p.407). Al-Manar TV, Hezbollah's channel, was streaming part of the confrontations, namely the Israeli Mirkava tanks when they were set ablaze by Hezbollah cornet guided missiles. This standoff helped boost Hezbollah's morale and increased its credibility among all Arabs, who had suffered endless forfeitures against Israel since its

⁶⁴ Youtube: Wadi al-Hujair Battle, The slaughter of the Mirkava. 4 July 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buQe4ubRIXc>

emergence. Hezbollah has proven its ability to deliver and moved from the underdog to a player in the regional power balance. Accordingly, international intervention increased when Israel realized that its hope of annihilating Hezbollah was waning. Consequently, indirect negotiations were held between Hezbollah and the Israeli government through the UN and the Lebanese government. On 12 August, Hezbollah and the Lebanese cabinet accepted UNSCR 1701 that sought to terminate hostilities. The next day, the Israeli government had no option but to approve the resolution that ended the war on the morning of August 14. The cease-fire was due at 8 am but 5 minutes before, at 7:55 am, Hezbollah launched the final round of rockets towards the Israeli territories.

On one side, UNSCR 1701 conditioned that Hezbollah release the kidnapped soldiers and prevent it from deploying any military equipment south of the Litani river. On the other side, it guaranteed Israel's departure from Lebanon and the restoration of the old rules of the game between Hezbollah and Israel, namely to avoid targeting civilians. Moreover, Nasrallah rejected the discourse that argued about an Iranian role in the maneuver to kidnap the soldiers and avowed that all personnel who participated in the operation were Lebanese.⁶⁵ He argued that it is better not to use misleading premises by dovetailing domestic and regional factors vis-à-vis this operation.⁶⁶ In fact, if anything, had Israel freed all Lebanese prisoners in the 2004 swap, it would have left Hezbollah with no justification for any assault against its troops. And in case Hezbollah had initiated

⁶⁵ Youtube: Nasrallah's first televised speech in July 2006's war. on 16 July 2006. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWHp99qUvdg>

⁶⁶ Youtube: Nasrallah's conference to explain the operation "Truthful promise". Published on 11 July 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfsqZ05gmuE>

the war on Iran's behalf, it would have disarrayed it and put it under scrutiny of many Lebanese.

In 2008, Israel released al-Kuntar and his companions in exchange for the bodies of the two Israeli soldiers who Israel thought were still alive. The 33 days' war led to some 1200 Lebanese death, and another 121 on the Israeli side, in addition to large infrastructural damages on the Lebanese side. Tens of thousands of houses were smashed in Lebanon and certain villages in the south were almost entirely leveled. "The government estimated direct damages from the 2006 war at \$2.8 billion and lost output and income at \$2.2 billion" (Blanford, 2011, p.412). Al-Mayadeen channel reporter, who covered Hezbollah's Qusayr battle in Syria, considered this war a whopping military progress that transformed the organization into a regional actor.⁶⁷ Despite the losses that struck Lebanon and Hezbollah, the latter, ecstatic of its endurance and its ability to stand its ground against a ground and aerial Israeli assault, declared itself triumphant. In fact, from the outset, Israel belittled Hezbollah and declared its purpose of annihilating it and this was a genuine mistake. Had it not stated its target, it might have been able to undermine Hezbollah's triumph discourse which retroactively used Israel's pledge to praise itself.

"It is our right," Nasrallah claimed, "according to the international law, to conduct attacks against Tel Aviv as long as one meter of our lands is occupied."⁶⁸ This claim was no more than an overture for possible raids against Israel which did not retreat from the

⁶⁷ Interview with author. 11 September 2018.

⁶⁸ Youtube: Nasrallah's conference to explain the operation "Truthful promise". Published on 11 July 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfsgZ05gmuE>

Sheb'a Farms. Moreover, with the war unfolding, Hezbollah has proved its credentials. It did not only fight a traditional guerilla warfare through hit-and-run tactic like the pre-2000 era, but it also used a mixture of classical army-guerilla tactics to face the IDF. Hezbollah declared itself victorious not by defeating the IDF, but because it survived a war of extinction, aborted the Israeli plan and caused high damages for the IDF. Saouli (2019) emphasized that Hezbollah has survived against "one of the world's most powerful armies" and prevented Israel from achieving its political and military goals (p.176). Moreover, Nasrallah argued that the Washington Post Journal wrote about the American experts who studied the war and its implications, in reference to the triumph of the organization's military tactics⁶⁹. It was hard to escape the sense of triumphalism that reverberated across Lebanon and the Arab world. Further afield, Hezbollah imposed itself as a stalwart ANSA and generated a new balance of power in the region. However, this finest moment for Hezbollah did not last long. The events that engulfed Lebanon enmeshed Hezbollah in a domestic confrontation, coupled with the rise of the Sunni-Shi'a schism, distorting its image in the eyes of many Lebanese and Arabs.

4.6 7 May clashes and the Doha agreement

In the ensuing months after the 33 days' war, tensions mounted in the cabinet between Hezbollah and its foes. On 11 November, two days before the cabinet meeting which was supposed to approve the STL, the Shi'a ministers resigned accusing the international community of seeking to blame Hezbollah for Hariri's assassination as a prelude for its disarmament after two failed attempts: the 1559 UNSCR and the July war

⁶⁹ Youtube: Responding to Puppet Mubarak's accusation against Hezbollah. Published on 4 October 2009. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Oe-K2TJdp4>

(Daher, 2019, p.231). Despite the resignation, the cabinet approved the implementation of the STL. Consequently, Hezbollah and Amal insisted that given the absence of a major sect from the state's highest executive body, cabinet decisions were void and illegitimate. As a sign of opposition, along with their 8 March allies and Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Hezbollah organized massive demonstrations and a sit-in in downtown Beirut insisting that the cabinet must resign.

This political dispute plunged the country into a stalemate that would endure for almost two years. Seniora turned a blind eye to the demonstrators who camped just a few meters away from both the parliament and the Serai, the cabinet's headquarters. It is important to mention here that these political disagreements were taking place amid the rise of Sunni-Shi'a tensions in Iraq, which also started affecting Lebanon since Hariri's elimination. A Druze citizen recalled, "my mother always taught me to say that I am Lebanese when asked about my sect. I never knew the sects of my friends before 2005 but when Hariri died it all changed. After three days of national mourning, we came back to school and everyone was asking about the other's sect. The sectarian division that started with Hariri's assassination seemed to have been restored in 2008."⁷⁰ Although Hezbollah has always avoided being placed at rivalry with Sunnis, the escalating events put it in a critical situation.

Following the demonstrations and sit-in held by Hezbollah and its allies, clashes started occurring every now and then. Daher (2019) reported about the murder of an Amal supporter in December 2006 by a sniper in Kaskas, a Sunni neighborhood in Beirut (p.231). "Between early 2007 and the spring of 2008 the ultra-polarization on the political

⁷⁰ Interview with author. 20 November 2018.

stage led partisans of the two sides to clash repeatedly on the ground” (Daher, 2019, p.238). One example is the fight at the Arab University that started as a quarrel between Sunni and Shi’a students and developed to clashes after requesting back up from both sides. By early 2008, the prices of weapons in black markets doubled if compared with their 2006’s value (Blanford, 2011, p.448). Palpably, the generating nemesis was taking the form of sectarian disputes and chaos was engulfing Lebanon. At that moment, the cabinet took the decision that would sour the situation even more igniting a bloody conflict.

On 5 May, 2008, the cabinet took a tremendous decision to shut down Hezbollah’s internal telecommunication network and to remove Beirut’s airport security chief, General Wafic Shkeir, from his position. On 2 May, Walid Jumblatt, the Druze leader, had emphasized that Hezbollah is directing a telecommunication network linking all Shi’a areas and that containers were spotted on the runway 17 of Beirut’s international airport –in reference to Hezbollah (Daher, 2019, p.239). The day after, Hezbollah’s secretary general stated that the government’s action is tantamount to a declaration of war and demanded that it be reversed immediately.⁷¹ Moreover, he emphasized that the “communications network was the most important weapon in the resistance” (Blanford, 2011, p.447). This same network leveraged Hezbollah’s fighters as it provided them with undetected and safe communication throughout the July 2006 war. When asked about the next move, Nasrallah refused to reveal it as it will be based on daily decisions.⁷² Hezbollah was suspicious of the decision claiming that it was part of a grandiose plan to

⁷¹ Youtube: Nasrallah’s speech on 8 May 2008. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hRwn3kJ-xE>

⁷² Youtube: Nasrallah’s speech on 8 May 2008. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hRwn3kJ-xE>

direct a blow against it. Therefore, on 7 May, Hezbollah and its allies, mainly Amal movement and the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP), blocked main streets in Beirut and the road leading to the airport claiming a national strike. In the ensuing hours, pressures amplified and quickly turned into street fighting. Subsequently, Hezbollah led a lightning foray of west Beirut and occupied the port of the city. Additionally, its fighters surrounded the houses of the 14 March leaders, namely Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt.

Few days later, fights escalated and spilled over outside Beirut. In Tripoli, up north, clashes erupted between pro-government Sunnis and pro-Syria Alawites and then spread to Mount Lebanon between Jumblatt's supporters and Hezbollah fighters. There were no remarkable fatalities during the clashes in Beirut as Hezbollah easily overran its opponents but it is estimated that 40 fighters were lost from both sides during the turmoil in Mount Lebanon. For an entire week, it looked like Lebanon was disintegrating into chaos which if escalated, can lead to a new civil war. But external intervention led to a cessation of hostilities and to the intervention of the Lebanese army to prevent further fighting. "Starting on 11 May, Arab foreign ministers met with the secretary-general of the Arab League, who was presiding over a gathering that had been arranged to address the Lebanese situation. They aimed to end the fighting on the ground and to find a way out of the deadlocked issues" (Daher, 2019, p.243).

Following the cease-fire, delegations of both 14 and 8 March alliances journeyed to Doha, Qatar, where they negotiated an agreement under Arab and International auspices. Qatar's mediation succeeded in resolving the first internal Lebanese military conflict since the end of the civil war. The outcome of the "Doha Agreement" was as follows: First, Michel Suleiman, then Army Chief, would be elected president within 24

hours. Second, a national unity cabinet composed of 30 ministers would be formed, of whom 11 would be pro-Hezbollah. Third, the “Qada” would be adopted as the electoral constituency in the 2009 elections according to the 1960’s law. Forth, all weapons are not to be used for political gains in any future internal political conflict.⁷³ But firstly, the 5 May decisions by the Seniora’s cabinet were withdrawn and neither Hezbollah’s telecommunication network nor General Shukeir were removed.

Al-Mayadeen channel reporter considered that Hezbollah succeeded in protecting itself during the clashes but at a high cost as it lost popularity among Sunnis and Druze.⁷⁴ Hezbollah’s deputy head of political relations argued that politics in Lebanon is full of traps, however, Hezbollah succeed in dealing with it. He opined that they [Hezbollah] never acted emotionally but on the contrary, it maneuvered with full rationality.⁷⁵ This justified the danger that Hezbollah sensed when the 5 May decisions were taken. A former Christian anti-Hezbollah MP argued that Hezbollah addresses the Druze with mercy and indirectly refers to its ability to enter their leader’s house but they didn’t –in reference to the grip on Jumblatt’s house. Moreover, it blackmails the Sunnis by referring to what happened to their Sunni counterparts in post-civil war Syria and post-2003 Iraq.⁷⁶ The Future movement’s deputy secretary general emphasized that Hezbollah failed to prevent domestic chaos but on the contrary, the organization might have played a role in

⁷³ “Lebanon rivals agree crisis deal”, on 21 May 2008. BBC news. Retrieved from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7411835.stm>

⁷⁴ Interview with author. 11 September 2018.

⁷⁵ Interview with author. 8 September 2018.

⁷⁶ Interview with author. 9 October 2018.

reinforcing it.⁷⁷ In fact, each actor in Lebanon tackled these matters depending on its political stance vis-à-vis Hezbollah.

The “Doha Agreement” was the fruition of an eighteen-months’ deadlock that culminated in a bloody havoc. It created a new domestic order and power balance in Lebanon drawing a new redline that Hezbollah’s foes are not allowed to cross in the future. “Violence and the threat of its use now became a Hezbollah asset in its domestic rivalries. In long-term strategic calculations, Hezbollah established itself as Lebanon’s most powerful actor” (Saouli, 2019, p.183). Hezbollah stretched its muscles by blatantly attacking its Lebanese counterparts to thwart what it perceived a domestic and external threat against its arsenal. However, this conflict implemented asymmetric fissures that straddled the sectarian fault-lines of the country. The Sunnis, outmaneuvered by Hezbollah fighters, felt belittled by the Shi’a. Clearly, Hezbollah didn’t pick this battle and was not fond of it. Its ministers resigned at the first place after the political dispute with Seniora and 14 March, and the decision to protest afterwards was discussed with other allies, including the former 14 March figure, Aoun. Also, had the cabinet retrieved its decision on 5 May, the 7 May confrontation wouldn’t have materialized. Therefore, the 7 May clashes were the outcome of a sequence of events imposed on Hezbollah that have shown once again, the autonomy of its leadership in the Lebanese theatre.

4.7 Presidential elections: Aoun or vacuum

Indicated in the Lebanese constitution, an elected president needs at least 2/3 of the parliament’s votes. In 2014, the term of Michel Suleiman, elected president after the 7 May clashes, came to an end. Though elected with Hezbollah’s approval, Suleiman’s

⁷⁷ Interview with author. 10 November 2018.

discourse diverged and he gradually started criticizing Hezbollah, namely for its intervention in Syria since mid-2012. Therefore, undeterred in the Syrian battlefield, Hezbollah objected the election of any candidate for presidency but Aoun. As mentioned above, Aoun was Hezbollah's Christian ally who signed the "Memorandum of Understanding" with Nasrallah in 2006, praised the organization during the 33 days' war, and demonstrated and camped with it against Seniora's government. Not only did Hezbollah endear Aoun's political stance, but the latter also owned his legitimacy as the strongest Christian figure in the Lebanese scene. That said, after 45 attempts, the cleavage between 8 and 14 March alliances prevented the election of a president and Lebanon was without a head of state for two years and a half. Nevertheless, on 31 October 2016, Michel Aoun, bolstered by Hezbollah, was elected president by a majority of 83 votes.

It is necessary to recall that the "Memorandum of Understanding" was signed in 2006 and after the 7 May turmoil in 2008, the "Doha Agreement" ensured the election of Suleiman. By other words, questions can be raised vis-à-vis the election of Suleiman rather than Aoun at that moment although Hezbollah had the upper hand in the Doha. Three possible explanations can be reasoned: first, Hezbollah might have been compensating Suleiman, then army chief, for not intervening against its fighters during the 7 May clashes which would have had wide conflagrations; second, it didn't trust Aoun enough back then; third, there was no regional and international agreement on electing a pro-Hezbollah president. The first and third point are the most reasonable explanations. After all, Lebanon's "consociational system" is built on the consensus between both domestic and external powers; therefore, the election of a president needs an agreement

of the regional and international states. Samir Geagea, head of the “Lebanese Forces” and backed by the 14 March coalition, was running against Aoun. However, prime minister Hariri shifted his rudder and sought to suggest the election of Suleiman Frangiyeh, Hezbollah’s closest Christian ally who didn’t enjoy as much support as Aoun. Hariri thought that Hezbollah would turn a blind eye on electing Aoun because it can’t reject Frangiyeh’s election, who’s also a close friend of Bashar al-Assad, Syria’s president. However, Geagea, Frangiyeh’s rival since the Lebanese civil war, rushed to sign a “Reconciliation Memorandum” with Aoun, agreeing on his nomination to avoid electing his foe. Aoun and Geagea together represent the majority of Christians and their agreement forced Hariri to announce in a press conference his approval to elect Michel Aoun in one last trial to save the country because Hezbollah had insisted that the only choices were a presidential vacuum or Aoun’s election.

Aoun’s appointment occurred amid military victories in Syria by Hezbollah, the Syrian regime and Iran, tilting the balance of power in their favor. In fact, while Hezbollah and the SAA were marching on Aleppo, Aoun was being elected in Lebanon. “While visiting Aoun earlier,” a former Lebanese minister said, “I asked him: when do you expect to be elected president? When Aleppo falls into the hands of Hezbollah and the regime, he answered. And that is what actually happened. While the opposition was retreating from Aleppo in the green buses, Aoun was being sworn president.”⁷⁸ More to the point, Aoun recognized that facts on the ground dictate the Lebanese theatre. The timing of the election was seen as a political triumph for the axis, namely Hezbollah, who was able to invest in Lebanon its prevail in the region. This narrative was indeed plausible because

⁷⁸ Interview with author. 4 December 2018.

Hezbollah had struggled to guarantee the election of its ally as president. Benedetti Berti (2016) suggested that Aoun's election was a political win for Hezbollah.⁷⁹ Despite the media statements and political analysis which alleged that Hezbollah scored a political gain, the decision was taken by Hezbollah with the end of Suleiman's turn, who they consider has turned against them.

Iran had been accused of hampering the presidential elections and preventing Hezbollah from attending to the parliament and Hezbollah's rivals accused the organization of intentionally obstructing the vote. Future Movement MP, Jamal al Jarrah, argued that there was a clear Iranian decision to block the election of a president.⁸⁰ But Nasrallah insisted that Hezbollah's decision for Lebanese Presidency was issued in Lebanon and Iran "has stated that the election is a Lebanese matter that is decided by Lebanese only".⁸¹ In fact, during that time, Hezbollah had proven its credentials in Syria and embedded itself as a partner and decision-maker in the axis. Therefore, operating for the benefit of the axis that extends from Beirut to Tehran, via Damascus and Baghdad, Hezbollah didn't need guidance by Iran. However, this does not mean that Tehran didn't indirectly supervise the political agreement that brought Aoun to presidency because as many opined, it was a US-Iran deal. Here, it is important to state that the election of presidents in Lebanon, has always been confined to external agreements. It is almost impossible to elect a Lebanese president without a nod by the Americans. Also, since

⁷⁹ "Lebanon's new Pro-Hezbollah President vows to retake 'Israeli-occupied' Land", by Yasser Okbi and Maariv Hashavua, 31 October 2017.

⁸⁰ "Iran is blocking the Lebanese Election", 29 September 2016, The tower. Retrieved from: <http://www.thetower.org/3976oc-lebanese-mp-iran-blocking-election-of-lebanese-president/>

⁸¹ Youtube: Nasrallah talks about Presidency. On 29 January 2016.

Hezbollah represents the axis, Aoun's election was backed by Tehran. In previous elections, however, Tehran's role was minor, especially when consensus in Lebanon were spearheaded by Syria, Saudi Arabia and the US. A Shi'a pro-Saudi journalist close to Hariri reasoned that Hezbollah managed to freeze the presidential election imposing the appointment of its ally, so Hariri had no choice but to elect Aoun. "We were facing two options", he said, "the first was to refuse Aoun's election while risking a clash with Hezbollah that would result in enforcing a new constitution, new prerogatives and terms, new legacy, and the dismantling of the Ta'if agreement. The second was to elect Aoun with the possibility of having nuances with him every now and then, but within the current political system. So Hariri preferred the second option rather than the first one. Moreover, if we didn't elect him, the vacuum would have endured for a very long time."⁸² Former Christian anti-Hezbollah MP argued that Aoun is acting with pure transparency regarding his relationship with Hezbollah. By other means, he provides the legal cover for their illegal arsenal and in return they support him for all governmental positions.⁸³ Hezbollah considered the election a payback to Aoun for standing alongside the organization during the July 2006 war, but also because Aoun's regional choices overlaps with it.

Bassel Salloukh (2017) argued that Syria's civil war produced a presidential vacuum as political protagonists and their sponsors waited for the Syrian conflict to settle. From the outset, Hezbollah unyieldingly insisted to elect Aoun and didn't budge an inch. Although Hariri nominated Frangiyeh, the historical Christian ally of Hezbollah, thinking that it was a gift hard to decline, Hezbollah was eager to keep his promise, which was

⁸² Interview with author. 13 November 2018.

⁸³ Interview with author. 9 October 2018.

outspoken by Nasrallah, of nominating Aoun. For sure, Aoun's election was the outcome of a political consensus between Iran and the US. Thanassis Cambanis seconded that Hariri and Aoun reached an agreement after years of discussion with the mediation of foreign countries, namely Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the US.⁸⁴ As the Shi'a pro-Saudi journalist placed it: "Aoun's election is an overlap of internal and external factors. Hezbollah represents an extension of Iran's interests in the region, so if the Lebanese organization accepted, it means Iran did."⁸⁵ Yet, political factions such as the Future Movement and the Lebanese Forces are the ones who changed their choice rather than Hezbollah and this is most probably because Hezbollah and the axis, prevailing in the regional theatre, had the upper hand on the negotiation table.

4.8 En 'Odtom 'Odna

The Beqaa valley, a predominantly Shi'a inhabited area on the Lebanese-Syrian borders, has always been Hezbollah's linchpin and its perpetual backyard and reservoir. It has been a base for its training campuses since its foundation in 1982, a permanent route for its weapon shipments from Iran via Syria, and since 2012, a frontline against the Syrian opposition and a starting point for its full engagement in Syria's turmoil. Chapter 5 will unpack the clashes that occurred in the area and how Hezbollah began its gradual intervention through this region but it is important to mention in this chapter the confrontations that erupted on the Lebanese side of the border. Flanked by large numbers of Shi'a, Aarsal, a Sunni village of approximately 40,000 citizens, sits atop the Beqaa

⁸⁴ "Michel Aoun Rises to Lebanese Presidency, ending power vacuum", by Thanassis Cambanis. On 31 October 2016. The New York Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/01/world/middleeast/michel-aoun-lebanon-president.html>

⁸⁵ Interview with author. 13 November 2018.

mountains and converges with Syria's border. The Sunni citizens of this village, along with other Lebanese Sunnis, had accumulated their antagonism towards Hezbollah for years, namely driven by the 7 May clashes that was paralleled with the rise of the Sunni-Shi'a schism in the region. With the eruption of Syria's civil war, Aarsal became a sanctuary for jihadist factions, namely Hay'at Tahreer al-Sham (HTS), formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS later, who were taking refuge in its mountain tops.

In 2014, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) executed a clandestine operation leading to the arrest of a military leader of HTS. In retaliation, the village was overrun by HTS and ISIS kidnapping 30 Lebanese soldiers and police officers before retreating to the barren hills of the village. Under political pressures spearheaded by Sunni clerics and figures, the LAF weren't given permission to advance to the rescue of their comrades and the attack was halted. However, with Aoun in office since late 2016, the situation changed and the confrontation in the hills started looming. Additionally, Hariri, supported by the US, agreed to conduct the operation by the LAF to cleanse these mountains from terrorists. But before plunging into the war, the Lebanese political elites, hoping to ease sectarian tensions, expressed that this operation was directed against terrorism rather than Sunnis. Sectarian otherness was never the causal factor of most confrontations, and if occurred, it was an exception. But it was easy to malign the other by using a sectarian discourse and victimhood. During this period of time, HTS and ISIS had clashed multiple times in the hills for a battle of domination but with little advancements from either side.

While the preparation for the confrontation was ongoing, Hezbollah stepped in on 20 July, and launched an offensive against HTS-dominated peaks.⁸⁶ Aram Nerguizian (2017) accused the organization of preventing the LAF from executing a dual plan to attack both together, HTS and ISIS.⁸⁷ Regardless, with Hezbollah closing up on al-Nusra from all sides, the latter bargained a deal for a safe retreat towards Idlib, northwestern Syria. One month later, on 19 August, Aoun initiated an offensive he dubbed “*Fajr al-Jouroud*” (Dawn of the Barren Hills) conducted by the LAF against ISIS fighters “Dawn of the Barren Hills”. Tacitly coordinating with the LAF, yet without public confirmation, Hezbollah and the SAA declared too, the beginning of a raid they called “*En ‘Odtom ‘Odna*” (If you’re back, we’re back), against ISIS’s strongholds from the Syrian side of the borders. These confrontations were dictated by the overlap of politics and facts on the ground.

“The United states and the United Kingdom have stated clearly that as members of the US-led counter-ISIS coalition, they stood ready to assist the Lebanese armed forces, should Lebanon and the armed forces request it.”⁸⁸ Donald Trump, the US president, indirectly stood against Hezbollah’s claims of defending Lebanon saying that “American assistance can ensure that the Lebanese army is the only defender Lebanon

⁸⁶ “‘Dawn of the barren hills’ and ‘If you’re back, we’re back’ the reason of the similiar timing”, by Ali Awada. On 20 August 2017. An-nahar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://www.annahar.com/article/643917-فجر-الجرود-وان-عدتم-عدنا-سبب-التوقيت-الواحد>

⁸⁷ The Lebanese armed forces, Hezbollah and military legitimacy. By Aram Nerguizian, on 4 October 2017. Centre for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved from: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/lebanese-armed-forces-hezbollah-and-military-legitimacy>

⁸⁸ “The Lebanese armed forces, Hezbollah and military legitimacy”, by Aram Nerguizian. On 4 October 2017. Centre for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved from: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/lebanese-armed-forces-hezbollah-and-military-legitimacy>

needs.”⁸⁹ This statement remains confined to the political dynamics rather than facts on the ground. “Hezbollah’s cooperation with the LAF is not new but rather perpetual, so how come they would not cooperate with them while both are attacking the same target in one geographical zone.”⁹⁰ However, Nerguizian (2017) insisted that “elements close to Hezbollah” are promoting the rhetoric of collaboration between the LAF on one side and their Syrian counterpart and Hezbollah on the other. Nerguizian’s argument is misleading from a military point of view because facts on the ground dictated the rudder of the confrontation and it impossible not to coordinate the attacks.

The triumph of the LAF was considered quick in rock-solid terrains, full of hidden caves and elevated hills. Cornered between the LAF from one side and Hezbollah from the other, ISIS bargained a deal with the latter allowing them to journey to the then ISIS controlled area of Deir ez-Zor in northwest Syria. In exchange, ISIS pledged to release Hezbollah captured fighters and to reveal the place of the bodies of the LAF and police soldiers which had been abducted in 2014. Hezbollah tried to promote itself as the redeemer by bringing back the bodies of the dead soldiers of the LAF. As a matter of fact, Hezbollah was keen to appear as the defender of Lebanon’s soil and overstated the battle’s results when Nasrallah claimed that this is “the second war of emancipation.”⁹¹

By the expulsion of these jihadist fighters who found sanctuaries in the Beqaa’s barren

⁸⁹ “ISIS negotiates safe exit from Lebanese border in air-conditioned buses”, by Richard Hall. On 30 August 2017. USA today. Retrieved from: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/08/30/isis-negotiates-safe-exit-lebanese-border/615533001/>

⁹⁰ Interview with author. 4 September 2018.

⁹¹ “Nasrallah: 28 August is the second day of emancipation and to investigate with whoever prevented the army since 2014”, on 28 August 2017. An-nahar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/650049--28-أب-نصرالله-عيد-التحرير-الثاني-التحقيق-مع-من-منع-الجيش-عام-2014>

hills, Lebanon secured the last enclave on its territory. If compared to its full-scale intervention in Syria's civil war, the decision to conduct this offensive by Hezbollah was minor. In parallel to the ground assault, it also led the negotiations with these groups. Taking part in the assault did not need the approval of Iran as Hezbollah had already been enmeshed in Syria's civil war for years now.

4.9 2018 Parliamentary elections: Massive win

Parliamentary elections in Lebanon take place every four years. However, gridlocked in the turmoil caused by the civil war in Syria and its political and security spillovers into Lebanon, elections were adjourned 3 times. The elections that were supposed to be held in 2013, were postponed twice on conditions of security threats and the possible terrorist attacks that might occur. On 16 June 2017, after a long governmental stalemate, political factions agreed, some reluctantly, on a new proportional representation (PR) law for the first time since independence. Therefore, a technical extension for 11 months was to postpone the elections until 6 May 2018. The new electoral law gave voters the choice of one preferable vote within the list they choose to elect, called single transferable vote (STV). Pundits have criticized this suggestion by pointing out that it “redraws electoral districts in an overly sectarian fashion, insuring that parliamentarians are elected mainly by their co-religionists.”⁹² Although PR is better than the majoritarian system as it gives the opportunity for minorities and small parties to be represented, the religious and sectarian mindset of most voters would drive them to give

⁹² “Is Lebanon’s new electoral system a path out of sectarianism”, by Elias Muhanna. On 29 June 2017. The New Yorker. Retrieved from”
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/is-lebanons-new-electoral-system-a-path-out-of-sectarianism>

the preferable vote for a candidate of their sect. This is not the norm in other countries, however.

The amendment of the electoral system was the hardest milestone. Their mutual antagonism notwithstanding, Aoun and Geagea had always appealed to change the majoritarian electoral law to a more democratic PR system. In his inauguration speech, Aoun insisted that a new electoral law must be implemented and hence allowing a fair and better representation for all Lebanese groups.⁹³ As mentioned in the “Memorandum of Understanding” signed between Aoun and Nasrallah in 2006, a new electoral law based on PR must be implemented. Hariri and Jumblatt, however, both afraid to lose seats for their political opponents and hoping to confiscate the decision-making in their sects, were opposed to any kind of PR. But to gain their approval, many constituencies were gerrymandered in their favor. Hezbollah knew that a PR system will give them a majority in the parliament because the majoritarian system will not allow their Sunni and Druze allies to be elected as they don’t represent a majority in their sects. Palpably, Hezbollah’s foremost target is bringing to the fore its Muslim identity rather than confining itself to the Shi’a sect, especially after the sectarian splits in the region and its accusation of targeting Sunnis. So once their Sunni allies get elected, the organization will counter-argue the “Shi’a identity” label.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, such attempts were nearly impossible as will be shown in chapter 5 and 6, because Hezbollah helped aggravate the Sunni-Shi’a schism by instrumentalizing further its sectarian identity.

⁹³ “New president in Inaugural speech: Lebanon to Cope with corruption, preemptively fight terrorism”. On 31 October 2016. Al-Manar English. Retrieved from:

<http://english.almanar.com.lb/83290>

⁹⁴ Interview with author. 4 December 2018.

A Pro-Saudi Shi'a reporter accused the organization of pressing everyone to accept the new law in order to politically breach other sects representation, namely Sunnis. He contended that Hezbollah's identity politics within the Shi'a sect is impenetrable, which is not the case for other sects or parties. Therefore, this new PR system leveraged Hezbollah's allies which now form a cross-sectarian alliance, but didn't harm Hezbollah since its milieus are closed either by ideology or power of arms.⁹⁵ The "Lebanese Forces" spokesman argued that Hezbollah has supporters among all sects even though the percentages fluctuate from one sect to another, but they were always outnumbered in the majoritarian law. This is not the case anymore because the new PR system cleared the path for the triumph of its Sunni allies.⁹⁶ The Future Movement deputy secretary general seconded that Hezbollah succeeded by insisting on a new electoral law which gave it, along with allies, a parliamentary majority, but "what is winning or losing in Lebanon?", he ended.⁹⁷ The outcome, however, was a clear win for Hezbollah and its allies, an endgame that the organization has always wished for.

Furthermore, in previous elections, not all Shi'a seats were allocated by the Hezbollah-Amal coalition, i.e. Beirut Shi'a seats were dominated by Hariri's Future Movement who benefited from the majoritarian law in a Sunni majority district. Such prevail was only possible by the majoritarian system and all largely-represented parties have always took advantage of this system to marginalize their foes. Consequently, Hezbollah's first priority in the May 2018 election was securing all Shi'a seats. The second priority was to secure as much seats as it can for their Sunni allies; therefore, the

⁹⁵ Interview with author. 13 November 2018.

⁹⁶ Interview with author. 20 October 2018.

⁹⁷ Interview with author. 10 November 2018.

organization urged its supporters to vote for their allies in districts where Hezbollah has no Shi'a candidates. As an outcome, 6 pro-Hezbollah Sunni figures won of which 4 formed a block in the post-election period that was called by the media and Hariri's supporters the "Sunnis of the 8 March coalition". By doing that, Hezbollah's opponents tried to strip these MPs from their Sunni identity as being pro-Hezbollah, and therefore, pro-Shi'a. Stripping people of their identity because of their political stances had always been the norm in Lebanon.

The tricky calculations of the new electoral law placed allies on rival lists. Some coalitions were a short-term marriage with electoral benefits rather than long-term political programs. The result was catastrophic for Hezbollah's opponents as the latter secured, along with its allies, 71 out of 128 seats in the parliament: 29 seats were allocated for the FPM, 29 for Hezbollah and Amal, and 13 other seats for minor allies, including 6 Sunnis. However, the 14 March coalition only secured 38 seats: Future movement suffered the biggest loss as it only withheld 20 seats, the "Lebanese Forces" secured 15 seats, and "al-Kata'ib" (The Phalangists) won 3 seats. Jumblatt, however, won 9 seats but at this period of time he wasn't completely sidelining with the 14 March coalition. But even with Jumblatt, they would count 47. 10 remaining seats were allocated for independents. Compared with the 57 MPs in the former parliament, Hezbollah and its allies were able to secure a majority in the parliamentary elections of 2018 surpassing the MPs of the 14 March block. Therefore, Hezbollah's persistence to implement a new PR electoral system, together with its key ally, President Michel Aoun, proved fruitful. The 2018 elections marked the end of an era in Hezbollah's history during which it reached the apogee.

4.10 Conclusion

Since its emergence, Hezbollah has continued to rise unabated. Despite its loathe by the West and many Arab regimes in later stages, the operational status of Hezbollah gradually gained credibility. In the 1990s, it witnessed its first transition by adopting the “*infitah* policy” leading to the heralding of its first participation in domestic politics. Faced by a multisectarian society, Hezbollah recognized that implementing an Islamic State in Lebanon was nearly impossible. Subsequently, it participated in the 1992 parliamentary elections amid internal debates creating the dichotomy of soft- vs hard-liners. While the latter rejected the participation in a confessional system that it had long pledged to thwart, the former adopted a more lenient stance by pressing towards an adaptation with the status quo. This chapter unpacked the maneuvers of Hezbollah in the Lebanese theatre from 2004 until its prevail in the 2018 parliamentary elections. Hezbollah sensed that a quiet war is being waged against it by external and internal actors threatening its interests in the Lebanese theatre. Therefore, it explained the conditions that pushed Hezbollah to participate in the cabinet in the post-Syria withdrawal era, marking its second engagement in the Lebanese system.

Consequently, it unpacked the important agreement called “Memorandum of Understanding” that Nasrallah signed with Aoun, representing the strongest party among Christians, in 2006. This was few months before the cross-border raid that Hezbollah orchestrated against the IDF and culminating in the kidnap of 2 soldiers. Nasrallah sought to exchange these prisoners for the Lebanese inmates in the Israeli prisons who Nasrallah promised earlier to release. Unexpectedly, Israel launched a full-scale war that proved to be a fiasco. Tel Aviv failed to accomplish its earlier claim of annihilating

Hezbollah and therefore the latter declared itself triumphant at the end of the conflict. The chapter examined the domestic split after Hariri's assassination between pro- and anti-Syria coalitions, 8 march and 14 march, consecutively. In 7 May 2008, Lebanon disintegrated into chaos as clashes erupted between both sides. Hezbollah overran its opponents and captured Beirut, further exacerbating the Sunni-Shi'a tensions. The conflict was sealed by the "Doha agreement" which took place in Qatar.

This chapter scrutinized the presidential elections that brought Aoun to presidency and the military operation conducted by Hezbollah on the Lebanese-Syrian borders against ISIS and HTS, it dubbed "En 'Odtom 'Odna". Finally, it underscored the 6 May parliamentary elections and the triumph of Hezbollah and its allies by securing the majority of the seats. This triumph in the legislative council posed a new challenge for Hezbollah, as it "would have to seek to improve state services, stabilize government finances, spark regional development, and spearhead administrative reforms."⁹⁸ Now, more embedded in the system, they will have to fulfil the voters' expectations or risk losing supporters. Further afield, by 2018, Hezbollah had clearly become a regional ANSA operating for the benefit of the axis that extends, from Beirut to Tehran, via Damascus and Baghdad.

⁹⁸ "Hezbollah's Journey from Syria's Battlefield to Lebanon's Political Minefield", by Ali Hashem. On 28 August 2018. Carnegie Middle East Center. Retrieved from: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/08/28/hezbollah-s-journey-from-syria-s-battlefield-to-lebanon-s-political-minefield-pub-77115>

5 The Regional Geopolitical Contest: Hezbollah's Operations beyond the Lebanese Theatre

5.1 Introduction

Beyond the Lebanese theatre, Hezbollah mainly operated in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and bolstered Palestinian groups through channeling weapons and training but without direct engagement. Furthermore, with the eruption of the Bosnian civil war in the 1990s, it sent small units to provide military training for the Muslim community. In all these fields, Hezbollah cooperated with the Quds Force, the external branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Therefore, the role that Hezbollah was aiming to play was never confined to the Lebanese theatre but was also directed by facts on the ground. That said, this chapter will examine Hezbollah's proxy role vis-à-vis Iran in Palestine, Iraq, and Yemen. It will maintain that in these countries, Hezbollah's fighters were executing Iran's geopolitical agenda. It will open with examining Hezbollah's role in supporting Palestinian factions, namely Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). This support would have not been possible without Iran's financial and military sponsorship.

Afterwards, the chapter will tackle Hezbollah's proxy role in the post-Saddam Iraq by training, arming and organizing Shi'a groups to fight under the supervision of the IRGC. These groups, in coordination with Hezbollah and the Quds Force, fought the Americans for years, and in later stages, they spearheaded the offensives against ISIS. The chapter will thereby address Hezbollah's minor role in Yemen and will contend that its role in buttressing the Houthis in San'a was performed on Iran's behalf. However, Hezbollah's most eloquent role in its history had been in Syria. The groundswell of the Arab Uprisings

reached Syria in 2011 and quickly escalated to a devastating civil war between Bashar al-Assad's regime and the host of opposition groups. As the situation cascaded out of control, Syria's turmoil turned into a geopolitical confrontation between domestic, regional, and international powers. In parallel, it became with Iraq a fertile terrain for the blossom of terrorism. For Hezbollah and Iran, Assad was a key ally and Syria was the bridge for the weapon shipments en route from Tehran to Beirut. Losing Syria in favor of their rivals would tilt the regional power balance against them; therefore, preventing Assad's collapse was a bid that Hezbollah was forced to take.

Hezbollah didn't rush headlong, but bit by bit since mid-2012, it started its engagement in the war of necessity that brought a great geopolitical risk for it. This chapter will unpack the intervention from the outset, its motives, its causal factor, its achievements and ramifications. It will argue that Hezbollah adopted a sectarian mobilization agenda to marshal arrays of Shi'a fighters fanning the flames of sectarian discord. As will be observed in this chapter, Hezbollah instrumentalized sectarian identity for geopolitical ends, but it was not the primary motive for conflict. The factual reason was to protect its interest, and by that, the interest of the axis. "The Axis of Resistance" (which is dubbed the axis in this paper), Sullivan (2014) explained, "is an Iran-led alliance of state and non-state actors in the Middle East that seeks to confront Western interests in the region, namely those of the United States (US) and Israel. Historically, this alliance has included the Assad regime in Syria and Lebanese Hezbollah. In recent years, Iran has also cultivated Iraqi Shi'a militants as the newest members of this alliance" (p.9). The turmoil in Syria has shaped Hezbollah as a quasi-army mixing between guerilla and classical army tactics and formations and a partner in the axis. By examining these

events, this chapter will therefore note that Hezbollah has become a regional armed non-state actor (ANSA) during Syria's civil war.

5.2 Hezbollah's first proxy role: Palestine

In its Open Letter addressed to the world on 19 February 1985, Hezbollah stated its fundamental objective: "To expel Israel for good from Lebanon, as a prelude to its total annihilation, and the liberation of Jerusalem and its holy cities from the occupation" (Joseph Alagha, 2011, p.43). In 2000, Israel withdrew from Lebanon, except for the Sheb'a Farms and Tilal Kafarshouba, and therefore, Hezbollah's discourse in post-Israel Lebanon consisted of three priorities: The liberation of all occupied Lebanese territories, the release of all prisoners from Israeli prisons –achieved in 2008, and the freedom of Palestine. These pledges are Hezbollah's *raison d'être*. Abandoning them would be a somewhat political suicide for the organization with devastating backlashes. Therefore, from its 1985 Open Letter to its 2009 manifesto, the organization's beliefs vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli struggle did not change: "we [Hezbollah] invite and call upon Arabs and Muslims at both the official and popular levels, and on all countries that are devoted to world peace and stability, to coordinate their efforts and resources for the liberation of Jerusalem from Zionist occupation, and to work on maintaining Jerusalem's true identity, and Islamic and Christian sacred sites" (Alagha. 2011, p.134).

Hezbollah's support was not merely verbal, it rather provided weapons, money, and training when and where possible. It assisted and trained many Palestinian groups, including Hamas, Fatah, and the PIJ. "Through Hezbollah, Iran also provides a tremendous amount of funding and logistical support to Hamas, in addition to funding

Fatah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.”⁹⁹ It is easier for Hezbollah to operate clandestinely in Arab countries as the complexion will help them maneuver undetected and will reduce the chances of catching them. Iran took advantage of this fact and used Hezbollah’s personnel to smuggle weapons into Palestinian territories, namely through Sinai-Gaza and Jordan-West Bank borders. There, Hezbollah operated as a proxy for Tehran driven by its unyielding support for the Palestinians. Many Arabs perhaps share the same ambition as Hezbollah, however the organization’s assistance for Palestinians wouldn’t have been achievable if it wasn’t for Iran.

Al-Akhbar, a Lebanese pro-Hezbollah newspaper, reported that during the first hours of the Israeli offensive against Gaza in 2012, Hezbollah and the IRGC raised the alert of their personnel who are specialized in smuggling weapons Iranian and Syrian harbors to Gaza via Sudan and Sinai in Egypt.¹⁰⁰ According to Rola el-Hussaini (2010), Hezbollah has been accused for smuggling massive arm cargos from Iran to Palestine. Rafael Frankel (2006) seconded that documents seized in busts on Palestinian offices and interrogations of many detainees over the years, revealed the

⁹⁹ “Assessing Hezbollah’s West Bank Foothold”, by Zohar Plaetti & Mathew Levitt, 18 June 2004. The Washington Institute. Retrieved from: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/assessing-hizballahs-west-bank-foothold>

¹⁰⁰ “Rocket Bridge between Hezbollah and the Strip”, by Hassan Ollaik. On 17 November 2012. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Arab/78941/%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%B1-%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AE%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B9>

relationship between Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as Fatah and the PIJ.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Frankel (2012) opined that the development of the relationship between Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the PIJ, during the years of the Oslo Accords was an attempt to impede the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks (p.59). More to the point, Hezbollah refused any normalization with Israel, and therefore was lurking to sabotage the talks conducted by Yasser Arafat, the late Palestinian president. However, if all Palestinian groups had agreed on a peace plan, Hezbollah's momentum to pursue its struggle against Israel would have been undermined.

The PIJ, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), was the first Palestinian organization to join the axis that had then started emerging under Iran's supervision. Following the exile of the PIJ's leaders to Lebanon in the 1980s, they initiated a partnership with the Quds Force and Hezbollah.¹⁰² The fingerprints of Hezbollah and the IRGC were soon to be remarkable when in the 1990s, the PIJ started conducting successful attacks against the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Therefore, Hezbollah's touches were salient and it was obvious that new tactics were implemented in these operations. Daniel Levin (2018) emphasized that the PIJ's military wing, al-Quds Brigades, has conducted a variety of suicide bombings against the IDF.¹⁰³ Moshe

¹⁰¹ "Israel Troubled that war in Lebanon drove its enemies closer", by Rafael Frankel, 22 September 2006. The Christian Science Source. Retrieved from: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0922/p01s04-wome.html>

¹⁰² "Iran, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad", by Daniel Levin, 9 July 2018. The Wilson Center: The Islamists. Retrieved from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad>

¹⁰³ "Iran, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad", by Daniel Levin, 9 July 2018. The Wilson Center: The Islamists. Retrieved from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad>

Ya'alon, then Israel's Defense Minister, reasoned that Hezbollah and the PIJ in Gaza wouldn't exist without Iran's financial, military and training support.¹⁰⁴

However, Iran's relationship with the PIJ faced a sit back after the former's intervention in the Yemeni and Syrian conflicts to back the Houthis and Assad's regime, consecutively. Despite the close relationship between Iran and the PIJ, it has been affected by the deepening Sunni-Shi'a schism in the post-Uprisings Middle East. The spillovers of the wrongly framed sectarian conflicts and the sectarian mobilization it caused has soured this relationship as the PIJ was pressed to side with its Sunni brethren. Few years later, ties were mended between both sides and water returned to its streams. Therefore, on the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Hezbollah invited the newly elected PIJ secretary general to give a speech in Dahiyah, Hezbollah's stronghold in Beirut's suburbs. In December 2018, Ayatullah Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, met with PIJ leaders in Tehran as a sign of the restoration of the friendship.¹⁰⁵ However, this rift has laid bare the fragility of the PIJ's relationship with the axis because it was not an ideological replica of Iran, but on the contrary a jihadist Sunni group.

Another faction that Hezbollah and Iran buttressed was Hamas, also a MB offshoot. At the outset, the Israelis cleared the air for Hamas' personnel to blossom and

¹⁰⁴ "New Hezbollah Unit Training Shiite Guerillas Across Mideast", by Dave Bender, 10 June 2014. The Algemeiner. Retrieved from: <https://www.algemeiner.com/2014/06/10/new-hezbollah-unit-training-shiite-guerillas-across-mideast/>

¹⁰⁵ "Jihad Leaders, calls for Israel's downfall", by Cassandra Gomes-Hocherberg. On 31 December 2018. Jerusalem Post. Retrieved from: <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Iran-News/Irans-leader-meets-Islamic-Jihad-leaders-calls-for-Israelis-downfall-575951>

thrive as they thought that this was the only strategy to counter-balance the supremacy of the then strongest Palestinian faction, Fatah. Avner Cohen, retired Israeli official who worked in Gaza for two decades, stressed that “ Hamas, to my great regret, is Israel’s creation.”¹⁰⁶ However, Hamas amplified its clout and gradually developed to stand as a bulwark against Israeli ambitions on Palestinian territories. Furthermore, Frankel (2012) emphasized that Hamas has maintained close relations with Hezbollah and Iran tracing back the relationship between both sides to the 1992, when hundreds of Hamas leaders were expelled to Lebanon by Israeli forces (p.57). Indeed, Hezbollah arranged meetings between Hamas and the IRGC in Beirut and later in Iran.

Daniel Levin (2018) contended that in 1992, at a conference in Tehran, Iran declared its sponsorship of Hamas with \$30 million yearly and training its fighters under the supervision of Hezbollah and the IRGC.¹⁰⁷ Frankel (2012) seconded that at that time Hezbollah and Iran began training, arming and funding Hamas. Furthermore, “it is no coincidence”, he said, “that the first successful suicide bombings perpetrated by Hamas came in the beginning of 1994, after the group received instruction from Hezbollah” (p.59). Establishing such proxies was paramount for Iran giving it, by and large, more room for plausible deniability while advancing its regional agenda. Through Sinai in Egypt, Hezbollah smuggled weapons, including short and mid-range

¹⁰⁶ “How Israel helped to spawn Hamas”, by Andrew Higgins, on 24 January 2009. The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123275572295011847?ns=prod/accounts-wsj&ns=prod/accounts-wsj>

¹⁰⁷ “Iran, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad”, by Daniel Levin, 9 July 2018. The Wilson Center: The Islamists. Retrieved from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad>

missiles to Hamas' jihadi wing, Izz ed-Din al-Qassam Brigades. Obviously, this early role proved that Hezbollah was never confined to the Lebanese theatre.

Augustus Richard Norton (2007) argued that Egyptian authorities arrested, in April 2009, 25 people including Sami Shehab, who Nasrallah acknowledged of sending to Egypt to smuggle weapons for Hamas, and 21 others were condemned for espionage and holding weapons (p.187). Hezbollah's secretary general argued that after the arrest of Shehab by the Egyptian authorities for smuggling weapons into Gaza, Egypt's media conducted a campaign against Hezbollah and Hamas. Nasrallah admitted that "brother Sami" is a Hezbollah member and his role was logistical on the Egyptian-Palestinian border as he was helping transfer armaments to the Gaza Strip. However, he accused the authorities of providing false and misleading information about Hezbollah's role and intentions announcing that Shehab was in contact with no more than 10 people not 50, as the Egyptians claimed. More importantly, Nasrallah made it clear that if helping the "oppressed Palestinians is a crime and we are being sentenced for it, I officially announce today that we are proud of these charges."¹⁰⁸ Sami Shehab is one among many others directing cells for Hezbollah in Egypt.

They smuggle these weapons through underground tunnels linking Gaza to Sinai allowing them to go undetected by the Israeli border security. Underground tunnels had been primarily used by Hezbollah to outmaneuver the IDF during the confrontations in Lebanon. Shaul Michal and Avraham Sela (2006) argued that these tactical techniques were transmitted from Hezbollah to Hamas fighters when they were expelled to Lebanon

¹⁰⁸ Youtube: Responding to Puppet Mubarak's accusation against Hezbollah. Published on 4 October 2009. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Oe-K2TJdp4>

in the 1990s. However, this had retroactively backlashed on Hezbollah when it became salient that Hamas diverted this tactic to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), previously Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda branch in Syria, which used it against the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) strongholds. HTS fighters even upgraded this tactic as they loaded tunnels under the regime's security buildings and headlocks with bombs and detonated them. In the early days of the war, this proved fatal for the regime as it was used as a prerequisite for each HTS-offensive. Similarly to the PIJ, with the eruption of the Syrian civil war, Hamas sided with the opposition, namely jihadist groups, and closed its bureaus in Syria. This was a damning evidence of the fragile bond that linked Hamas to the axis. The Sunni-Shi'a rift overpowered the partnership that Hamas and the PIJ shared with Hezbollah and Iran for two decades and the former seemed more inclined to leap into a Sunni alliance than risk losing credibility among the wider Sunni Arabs. Frankel (2012) argued that Iran's financial backing to Hamas degraded after its positioning in the camp that opposed the Assad regime in Syria (p.59). Levin (2018) prescribed that Iran cut off its financial support to Hamas from \$250 million to \$23 million in 2012.¹⁰⁹ For sure, there are no accurate numbers of the amounts transferred to Hamas, but these amounts have definitely increased because of this political diversion. "Despite the shared history, Hamas' relationship with Hezbollah and Iran was more a marriage of convenience than true ideological kinship" (Frankel, 2012, p.59).

The Sunni-Shi'a divide has always been Hezbollah's biggest fear as it would detach it from a wider Sunni supporters in the Arab world. When it intervened in Syria,

¹⁰⁹ "Iran, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad", by Daniel Levin, 9 July 2018. The Wilson Center: The Islamists. Retrieved from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad>

Hezbollah was aware that the Sunni-Shi'a schism might be one among many other collateral damages having no choice but to fight alongside the regime or be overburdened by the outcomes of Assad's removal. Despite the cold relationship between Hamas and Iran, Nasrallah eschewed blaming Hamas or criticizing it for its political stance but on the contrary he argued that Hezbollah maintained close connections with the Palestinian resistance and is always ready to back it up.¹¹⁰ In fact, Hezbollah and Iran recognized that losing the only Sunni card in the region would not only reduce the axis' influence but prove its Shi'a identity mobilizing more Sunnis against it. The rational reaction by Hezbollah and Iran by containing the clash rather than widening it reopened the doors to reinstate the relationship in 2017. Yehya Sinwar, a senior Hamas military leader, argued that ties are being restored more than before and Iran is the main supporter of Izz ad-Din al Qassam Brigades with weapons and money.¹¹¹ "The relationship between Hezbollah and Hamas – which strikingly bridges the Shi'a/Sunni divide– is one of broad ideological affinity and of emulation on the part of Hamas" (Rola el Hussein, 2010). In earnest, this dispute somewhat laid bare the vulnerability of the relationship with the axis. Furthermore, would doctrinal otherness be the causal factor of future conflicts rather than political, this alliance will not survive.

However, while preserving its relations with Hamas and tightening the ties more with the PIJ, Tehran pushed the IRGC to form a new organization with unquestionable loyalty to it with Hezbollah's help. Since 2015, the Quds Force and Hezbollah, have

¹¹⁰ Youtube: Nasrallah: Hezbollah can attack Israel upon Hamas' request. Published on 14 August 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsFK7IHwSv0>

¹¹¹ "Iran, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad", by Daniel Levin, 9 July 2018. The Wilson Center: The Islamists. Retrieved from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad>

financed and provided media support for an emerging group called al-Sabireen (The Patient Ones) in the Gaza Strip.¹¹² Iran's fund for the PIJ shifted to the new group which is led by the former PIJ leader, Hisham Salem.¹¹³ Indeed, Iran might have cut some funding for the PIJ, but the latter still function in coordination with Tehran. Israel exploited the Sunni-Shi'a schism linking al-Sabireen to Hezbollah and Iran hoping to detach it from its Sunni context. Al-Sabireen spokesperson, Abou Youssef, denied any connection to Hezbollah and insisted on the group's Sunni identity but was open to cooperation with it and to learn from its long experience in the confrontation with Israel.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, the flag and the logo of al-Sabireen represented a new Hezbollah in the Gaza Strip. Al-Sabireen is Tehran's ideological replica.¹¹⁵ Against all odds, al-Sabireen personnel changed their sect from Sunni to Shi'a.¹¹⁶ This is a compelling proof of Hezbollah's lost trust in Palestinian Sunni factions and its preference to buttress a Shi'a group. Therefore, it used its sectarian identity to establish more groups pledging allegiance to the *wilayat al-faqih* in Tehran and to the axis. Sect-centricity has therefore become paramount for the axis and sectarian identity the primary mobilizational tool for these actors. In Palestine, as well as in Syria and Iraq as will be tackled later, building ideological replicas was a priority for Hezbollah and the Quds Force.

¹¹² "Replacing Hamas: Iran's New Proxy Militia in Gaza", by Ehud Yaari, 28 September 2015. Foreign Affairs. Retrieved from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/palestinian-authority/2015-09-28/replacing-hamas>

¹¹³ "Iran, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad", by Daniel Levin, 9 July 2018. The Wilson Center: The Islamists. Retrieved from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad>

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ "Al Sabireen: A New Resistance Movement in Gaza", by Hani Ibrahim, May 31 2014, Al-Akhbar English.

¹¹⁶ Interview with author. On 9 September 2018.

Hezbollah's fingerprints also appeared in the majority of the attacks conducted in the West Bank and imprisoned Fatah operatives confessed that the Lebanese organization is sponsoring all operations.¹¹⁷ Matthew Levitt (2003) referred to the capture of two individuals in Jordan for smuggling arms to the Palestinians in 2001, and after the arrest, it came out that they were both involved in the failed attempt to blast the Israeli embassy in Thailand –in reference to Hezbollah. Since the 2000 al-Aqsa intifada, Hezbollah focused on operating in the West Bank and was keen to recruit Fatah members and train and arm them to conduct operations against Israeli targets.¹¹⁸ For Hezbollah, assisting Palestinians financially, militarily or even morally is an obligation. As Qassem (2005) contended that jihad highlighted that armed resistance in the region is the only solution to maintain the Palestinian national identity alive (p.171). In 2002, an Israeli security official accused Moughniyeh of smuggling the arms shipload "Karine A" from Tehran to Palestine, whereas Hezbollah and Iran denied any connection with the incident (Judith Palmer Harik, 2005, p.186). Identifying himself as Abbas Nouredine, Harik (2005) argued, Moughniyeh and the IRGC have both participated in smuggling weapons from Jordan to the West Bank. Moreover, three Lebanese have been arrested and accused of transporting Katyusha rockets to the Palestinians (p.186). Nasrallah claimed that Hezbollah's relationship with all Palestinians is robust and that he continuously meet with all groups.¹¹⁹ In the ensuing years, the grip of the Israelis on the West Bank limited the

¹¹⁷ "Assessing Hezbollah's West Bank Foothold", by Zohar Plaetti & Mathew Levitt, 18 June 2004. The Washington Institute.

¹¹⁸ "Hezbollah Recruiting Fatah Cells to Attack Israel", 24 August 2015. Israel National News. Retrieved from: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/199842>

¹¹⁹ "Nasrallah's Talk of the Year", 26 January 2019. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/930481/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A>

weapons smuggling and the area is almost entirely under surveillance. Hezbollah's personnel have grown accustomed to fighting Israel and that liberating Palestine is a jihadi duty. However, Iran has used the organization as a proxy to implement its foreign policy agenda through exploiting the Israeli-Arab animosity.

When Hezbollah captured 3 Israeli soldiers in 2000, Nasrallah announced that the prisoners exchange will not only include Lebanese but also Palestinians (Adham Saouli, 2019, p.151-152). That said, Hezbollah was always determined to solidify the unity between both countries who formed one front in this struggle giving the axis more room to maneuver. Naim Qassem (2008) opined that Hezbollah has played a significant role in transferring knowledge, experience and weapons to Palestinian factions (p.336). "For Hezbollah, the attacks Hamas and the Islamic Jihad inflicted on Israel increased the pressure on the Zionist enemy and kept the 'culture of resistance' alive against the 'culture of submission' of the Palestinian Authority" (Adham Saouli, 2019, p.151). Further afield, despite that Hezbollah's position vis-à-vis the Palestinians had not budged an inch, Tehran's benefit from the organization's support to Palestinian movements is immense. Hezbollah was always keen to provide the oxygen needed to fan the flames of chaos to serve the geopolitical interest of the axis, and chiefly Tehran's. In this theatre of operation, Hezbollah functioned as a proxy for Iran by implementing its regional agenda and leveraging its position in the Middle East.

[%D8%AF-%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%87%D8%B0%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9--%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A8/](#)

5.3 Hezbollah in Post-Saddam Iraq

Up until 2003, Iraq, ruled by the late president Saddam Hussein, has always been a direct menace for Iran and a threshold against its regional ambitions. Iran and Iraq had fought an 8 years' war that costed millions of death and casualties, and huge damages in the infrastructure of both countries. In 1991, Saddam conducted an assault against Iraqi Shi'a accusing them of receiving aids from Iran to overthrow him. However, the US invaded Iraq in 2003 vandalizing the country and causing, by and large, a short and long-term wave of unrest with transformative regional events. The sectarian distort it created has continued to rise unabated in the Middle East bringing regional rivalries to its apogee. This was Iran's perfect opportunity to expand its regional clout through the muddy quagmire of Baghdad. Imad Salamey (2017) argued that "the power vacuum left by the collapse of the Iraqi regime brought the rivalry between Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia for regional control to its climax" (p.23). Therefore, right after the invasion, Iran started establishing Shi'a proxies in a bid to exploit its sectarian identity and fill the power vacuum in post-Saddam Iraq, putting it on a collision course with regional Sunni actors, namely Saudi Arabia, which also leapt into Iraq.

Salloukh (2013) argued that sabotaging Iraq became the purpose of Washington's foes and allies alike, namely Saudi Arabia. "By 2004, King Abdullah in Jordan was already talking about fears of a Shi'a crescent, arcing from Iran and sympathetic Alawite allies in Syria to Lebanon" (William Burns, 2019, p.197). Amid this chaos, Hezbollah's fingerprints started immediately floating to the surface along with the Quds Force. Although it did not engage in any direct battles, yet it played a cardinal role in helping Iran expand its influence in post-Iraq Saddam by assisting, training and funding the Iraqi armed groups

under the IRGC's supervision. Matthew Levitt and Nadav Pollak (2014) argued that in 2003 the Quds Force urged Hezbollah to further Iran's influence in Iraq. Therefore, on Tehran's behest, Hezbollah established a special force, Unit 3800, designated for training and assisting Shi'a groups to target multinational forces in Iraq.¹²⁰ This unit contained a small number of Hezbollah fighters who headed to Iraq and some Iraqi fighters who were brought to the Lebanese camps for advanced training.¹²¹ The primary focus of these armed groups was conducting operations against the US army corps and its headquarters.

Hezbollah's former private universities spokesman argued that Iraqi people were oppressed and "wherever there are oppressed people we fight"; however, the organization's role was limited to training Iraqis in order to fight the Americans.¹²² Hezbollah's deputy head of political relations contended that the organization always studies the benefits of intervening anywhere before putting boots on the ground saying that Nasrallah had urged Iraqis to reach an internal agreement with Saddam before the invasion, regardless of Hezbollah's stances against the then Iraqi president "who's a dictator that committed atrocities against his people". However, he neither confirmed nor denied their involvement in direct clashes in Iraq, but "after the invasion", he pursued, "we definitely helped the Iraqi resistance in any possible means."¹²³ On the contrary,

¹²⁰ "Treasury Sanctions Hezbollah Leadership", on 22 August 2013. US Department of Treasury. Retrieved from: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2147.aspx>

¹²¹ "Hezbollah in Iraq: A Little Help Can Go a Long Way", by Matthew Levitt & Nadav Pollak, on 25 June 2014. The Washington Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-in-iraq-a-little-help-can-go-a-long-way>

¹²² Interview with author. 5 September 2018.

¹²³ Interview with author. 8 September 2018.

Hezbollah's minister denied any direct fighting but confirmed sending military trainers to assist Iraqis.¹²⁴ Hezbollah, as always, denied its role in intensifying sectarian tensions, but paradoxically, facts on the ground were clear as Hezbollah helped establish ideological replicas on Iran's behalf. And it is normal that the creation of such sect-centric groups would generate further sectarian antagonism.

In 2006, Moughniyeh had traveled to Iraq and helped training the Mahdi Army.¹²⁵ The latter was created in 2003 under the leadership of Muqtada al-Sadr and was banned in 2008. The name of the organization has been derived from the 12th Shi'a Imam, *al-Mahdi* or the redeemer, who they believe will appear someday to reinstate justice in the world. The mere use of such sect-specific symbols rubbed more salt to the wound of the Sunni-Shi'a schism because it inflated resentment among Sunnis who became the underdogs in the post-Saddam Iraq. Furthermore, the Badr Organization, a pro-Iran faction that played a major role in the 1991 revolution against Saddam, had also been in close contact with Hezbollah. Bringing the discussion back to the fighters of Unit 3800, they headed to Shi'a regions for consulting and training the Badr Organization as well as the Iraqi Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq who are also Iranian-backed groups.

In 2004, a group has split from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army to establish an independent organization under Iran's direct supervision and is considered one of the closest factions to Hezbollah: Special Groups which later became known for Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. Hezbollah played a whopping role in its foundation and they both share the same

¹²⁴ Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

¹²⁵ "Hezbollah fighters train Iraqi Shiite militants near Mosul", by David Daoud, on 5 November 2016. FDD's Long War Journal. Retrieved from: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/hezbollah-fighters-train-iraqi-shiite-militants-near-mosul.php>

creed of the *wilayat al-faqih* swearing allegiance to the Iranian Supreme leader. Hezbollah's maneuvers in the Iraqi theatre of operations to establish Shi'a groups loyal to Tehran served best the axis and Iran's agenda. It was clear that trusting Hezbollah with such proxy missions proved the deep relationship that it shares with the IRGC. Moreover, Kata'ib Hezbollah's leader, Abou Mahdi al-Muhandis, killed in early 2020 along with the Quds Force leader Qassem Suleimani by a US missile, had long served Iran's geopolitical agenda and executed its orders.

On 20 January 2007, the Joint Coordination Center in Karbala was attacked, resulting in the deaths of four American soldiers. Levitt (2013) maintained that the militants were trained by the Quds Force and Hezbollah to carry out this operation (p.285). In 2007, Ali Mousa Daqdouq, a Hezbollah member, was arrested and accused for planning the operation in cooperation with the Quds Force, in addition to his involvement in other operations, i.e. kidnapping a British soldier.¹²⁶ Daqdouq was captured along with Qaisa al-Khaz'ali, head of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, then called Special Groups. Levitt (2013) reported that documents captured with Khaz'ali were directly linked to the involvement of the Quds Force in the operation (p.286). More to the point, the key figures who established the Iraqi Shi'a factions had been operating in tandem with Hezbollah since the 1990s. The overlap of Shi'a identity and geopolitics served Iran's assertive foreign policy hoping to be further immersed in the region. However, the withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq in December 2011 ended an era of a bloody confrontation with Iran's

¹²⁶ "Hezbollah in Iraq: A Little Help Can Go a Long Way", by Matthew Levitt & Nadav Pollak, on 25 June 2014. The Washington Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-in-iraq-a-little-help-can-go-a-long-way>

proxies and paved the way for a new level of cooperation. The debacle of Saddam paved the way for Iran to increase its regional clout. In fact, if anything, it appeared as if the US invasion removed the final obstacle that was standing as a bulwark against Iran's influence.

Soon after, the upsurge of an unpredictable ordeal made matters worse in Baghdad unleashing a new wave of unrest. In June 2014, a terrorist group called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) overran the Iraqi army conquering one third of Iraq's territory and took over Mosul, the second largest city in the country. In 2010, Abou Bakr al-Baghdadi had become the leader of the then called Islamic State in Iraq, which didn't draw much attention at that time as its role was finite. Nevertheless, when the Arab Uprising's wave reached Syria, al-Baghdadi started unleashing jihadists across the Iraqi border to recruit, assist and train fighters to combat Bashar al-Assad's regime. Subsequently, in 2013, the name of the organization changed to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS) or Da'esh in Arabic. While the focus was on the Syrian civil war and Assad's removal/survival, all the world switched focus to the events coming from Iraq. Da'esh's draconian massacres became the new fear that swept across vast swathes of the Middle East. In 2015, operating internationally and attracting foreign fighters to its ranks, Da'esh changed its name to the Islamic State. It is necessary to mention here that the latter, an ANSA, played a prominent role in altering the regional balance of power in the Middle East during this time. On the other side, the rise of ISIS further mobilized many Shi'a to fight in the ranks of pro-Iranian groups which were the only recourse as the Iraqi army quickly collapsed. Sectarian violence increased creating communal danger and further demarcating geographies.

Amid the unceasing waves of attacks, conquests and atrocities, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most prominent Shi'a Iraqi cleric, issued a fatwa to fight Da'esh and establish *al-Hashd al Sha'bi* (Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF). But Sistani, represented by Sayyed Ahmad Safi, stressed that the call is for all Iraqis, not only for Shi'a, considering this a threat for everyone (Genieve Abdo, 2017, p.22). This was the perfect opportunity for Iran to further entrench itself in the region by organizing, assisting, funding, and more importantly, institutionalizing Iraqi Shi'a groups to fight ISIS. Abdo (2017) opined that the Quds Force sought to co-opt and micromanage any clerical decision issued by the Iraqi clergy (p.22). Besides, Iraqi Shi'a had no other choice because Iran was the only back up which was able to act fast and assist them. Consequently, most armed Iraqi factions, of which many swore allegiance to *wilayat al-faqih*, were united under the PMF. This coalition included about 60 factions, predominantly Shi'a controlled by Iran, such as the Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali and Kata'ib Abu Fadhl al-Abbas. Their names referred to Shi'-specific symbols and some had fought to protect Shi'a shrines in Syria. Sect-specificity has been paramount for these groups. Similarly to Hezbollah, ahead of each offensive, they pronounce the names Shi'a-specific symbols and slogans. Falih al-Fayyad became the Chairman of the PMF, and Abou Mahdi al-Muhandis, leader of Kata'ib Hezbollah, his Deputy and military commander. Some Sunni tribes, Christians, Turkmenistan and Yezidis fought in the ranks of the PMF, but this did not erase its sectarian label as the Shi'a were dominant. The situation, according to Abdo (2017), was that Arab Shi'a factions, taking orders from a Persian Shi'a group, the IRGC, to fight the Sunni ISIS, that has some support among Iraqi Sunnis (p.14).

During the same month of the Mosul offensive which aimed to recapture the city from ISIS, Nasrallah stated that Hezbollah is ready to sacrifice 5 times more martyrs in Iraq than it did in Syria to defend the Shi'a holy sites referring that those sites are far more important than the ones in Syria.¹²⁷ Hezbollah's justification to intervene in Syria's civil war, as will be elaborated in the next section, was to protect Sayyida Zeinab's shrine, along with its claim to protect Shi'a on the Lebanese-Syrian borders. This speech, among many others, helped sectarianize the conflict in Iraq. Sectarian otherness was not the primary driver of the conflict as Hezbollah was not seeking religious truth in Iraq. On the contrary, the instrumentalization of sectarian identity was used for Shi'a mobilization and solidarity but it also antagonized anti-Shi'a Sunnis. James Worall & al. (2016) claimed that Hezbollah fighters and the IRGC presence in Iraq reflected "broader sectarian concerns" (p.145). In 2015, Nasrallah maintained that they limited their presence in Iraq "at the moment."¹²⁸ Therefore, sending more fighters to Iraq was to be determined by facts on the ground.

Muqtada al-Sadr, an Iraqi Shi'a cleric and leader, has criticized Nasrallah and the involvement of Shi'a factions in battles outside of their country's borders.¹²⁹ In 2017, Nasrallah contended that "after the final triumph" against ISIS, "we [Hezbollah] will reassess the situation with our brothers in Iraq and we might be pulling our forces if we

¹²⁷ "Hezbollah to Iraq: A bit of help may benefit a lot", on 30 June 2014. An-nahar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://www.annahar.com/article/146743-حزب-الله-الى-العراق-القليل-من-المساعدة-قد-تنفع-كثيرا>

¹²⁸ "Youtube: Hassan Nasrallah admits presence of Hezbollah in Iraq", on 17 February 2015. Retrieve from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUOltqGL72U>

¹²⁹ "Youtube: Popular Mobilization Forces: Military Capabilities, their Role in Iraq and Middle East", on 27 August 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ezk1LRvJ4TU>

considered that our mission is accomplished.”¹³⁰ In fact, Nasrallah had then become a fundamental partner in the axis capable of playing a role in the regional power balance. Despite the rejection of certain Shi’a figures, these events strengthened the ties within the axis, with now a recent loyal host of Iraqi Shi’a groups. Iran is responsible for arming and assisting many of the PMF groups while the Iraqi government pays their salaries. “For months prior to the offensive, Iran, and its Iraqi proxies pressured the Iraqi government to accept the militias’ role in the Mosul offensive, a move that could give them a share of victory and provide them with a pretext to justify their activities long after the defeat of ISIS.”¹³¹ Also, Hezbollah has sent its best trainers and military leaders to participate in the process alongside the Quds Force and its late leader, General Qassem Sulaimani. Akram al Ka’bi, the leader of Harakat al Noujaba’, an Iranian proxy, stated that Hezbollah trained the PMF under Suleimani’s guidance.¹³²

However, the eroding support for Hezbollah among many Lebanese parties became whopping after its participation in the region’s havoc. A spokesman of the “Lebanese Forces” argued that the core disagreement with Hezbollah is in its assertive interference beyond Lebanon. Hezbollah, he observed, doesn’t believe in the finite borders and fights anywhere necessary under the discourse of Islam as Nasrallah’s own words indicated: we fought in Bosnia. “As a Christian, I didn’t fight to protect the Christians in the Levant, i.e. Syria and Iraq; therefore, Hezbollah is an Islamic regional force focusing

¹³⁰ “Lebanon: Hezbollah ready to pull forces from Iraq after defeating IS”, on 20 November 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4-rcVv1c4Y>

¹³¹ “Is this the Beginning of ‘Hezbollah-ization’ of Iraq?”, by Hassan Dai, on 10 November 2016. Al-Arabiyya. Retrieved from: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/2016/11/10/Mosul-offensive-and-Shiite-militias-Is-this-the-beginning-of-Hezbollah-ization-of-Iraq-.html>

¹³² “Is this the Beginning of ‘Hezbollah-ization’ of Iraq?”, by Hassan Dai, on 10 November 2016. Al-Arabiyya.

on the *umma* (nation) rather than a limited territory, Lebanon in this case.”¹³³ This claim, as explained in chapter 3, is valid because as Hezbollah’s personnel explained: The organization is a jihadist Islamist movement which believes in the *umma* of Islam. The Future Movement deputy secretary general argued that the Middle East has always been related to influential non-state actors, especially in fragile states where the system allows the emergence of such organizations. The role of these actors was highlighted with the rise of ISIS and its slaughters against minorities. However, he pursued, distinguishing Hezbollah’s interest from Iran’s is hardly accomplishable because the former has been the spearhead of Tehran’s regional agenda.¹³⁴

A Lebanese pro-Saudi Shi’a journalist emphasized that what should be taken into consideration is the “power projection” that Hezbollah has presented in Lebanon which was tempting for the Iraqi Shi’a. Iran, delighted by the success of the Lebanese sample –Hezbollah, was eager to inspire the Iraqis to follow path. Hezbollah, he continued, was a partner in training, qualifying, educating and skill-teaching them. It helped investing in the Shi’a identity and even though Iraqis have a big reservoir of combatants, Hezbollah fought in Iraq and buried some fighters in Lebanese villages. Moreover, he concluded, before the emergence of Iraqi Shi’a figures, Nasrallah was their only voice and built public support for their cause.¹³⁵ Sectarian identity has worked as a mobilizational tool in Iraq as well as in Lebanon but each in its own context: In the latter it was used at the outset against Israeli occupation in Lebanon while in the former against the Americans and later

¹³³ Interview with author. 20 October 2018.

¹³⁴ Interview with author. 10 November 2018.

¹³⁵ Interview with author. 13 October 2018.

against ISIS. Sectarian mobilization was also used by Hezbollah in post-civil war Syria to prevent the collapse of the Syrian regime.

That said, there was no point in Hezbollah's role in Iraq except its implementation of Iran's regional agenda. William Burns (2019) emphasized that "the chaos that spread across Iraq after 2003 created opportunities for Iranian mischief and influence, and helped reawaken broader competition between Sunni and Shi'a for supremacy in the Middle East" (p.197). In fact, the one to blame for this turmoil is the US as Iran engaged after the breakdown of Saddam's regime and had the US not removed the latter, there would have been no room for Tehran's intervention. Although Hezbollah claim that its role in Iraq was limited, it is palpable that it is operating as a proxy for Iran in the country. Since 2003, it has helped establish pro-Iran Shi'a groups, transmitting its experience to use anti-tank missiles, mortars and sophisticated weapons. Nevertheless, Nasrallah has denied any involvement in shipping any type of arms to Iraq.¹³⁶ In 2016, the PMF participated in liberating Mosul from ISIS' grip and diverged later to the Iraqi-Syrian border to cut off ISIS' route. In that part of the region, advance on the ground had become a race for geopolitical dominance and the axis has accelerated its tempo to capture it to coalesce its Tehran-Beirut route. The conquests and massacres committed by ISIS have strengthened the relationship between the host of Shi'a actors: Hezbollah, the Quds Force and Iraqi Shi'a factions. By then, Hezbollah's regional role had unfolded and it appeared as a regional ANSA operating on Iran's behalf in Iraq, but as a partner in Syria.

¹³⁶ "Lebanon: Hezbollah ready to pull forces from Iraq after defeating IS", on 20 November 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4-rcVv1c4Y>

5.4 The Battle for Syria

Departing from Tunisia, the wave of the Arab Spring disembarked on Syria's shores in March 2011. Bellicose and eager to achieve political gains, domestic, regional, and international foes succumbed to the use of force. From an uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime, demonstrations quickly deteriorated into a bloody civil war between the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and the anti-Assad armed groups. Soon enough, two camps were shaped: the first supporting the rebels, and contains the US, Britain, France, Turkey, most Gulf countries, namely Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and a host of jihadist groups and terrorist organizations such as ISIS and HTS; the second backing the Assad regime, and includes Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, some Shi'a Iraqi groups, i.e. Brigade Abou el-Fadl el-Abbas, who later joined *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* or PMF, and pro-Iranian Afghani factions. Henry Kissinger (2014) delineated this rivalry as follows: "Saudi Arabia sees a Tehran-led archipelago of rising Shi'a power and influence running from Iran's Afghan border through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the Mediterranean in confrontation with a Saudi-led Sunni order composed of Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf states, and the Arabian Peninsula, all in a wary partnership with Turkey" (p.140).

Amid this turmoil, it was hard to escape the sense of insecurity that engulfed Hezbollah, pressing it to engage in the conflict to prevent the collapse of Assad's regime, a strategic ally and partner in the axis. As rebels were biting, political and sectarian calculations commingled and Hezbollah launched its gradual intervention. It started by protecting a Shi'a religious Shrine in Damascus's outskirts, that of al-Sayyida Zeinab, and fighting alongside the Lebanese-Syrian border in order to protect Shi'a villages from rebels assaults in al-Qusayr. Of course, Hezbollah deepened the Sunni-Shi'a schism. In

the case of Hezbollah, as this chapter will examine, sectarian dynamics took a turn for the worse, and it became unlikely that the Sunni-Hezbollah, not to say Sunni-Shi'a, relationship will regain its previous amicability. More assertively, in May 2013, Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Secretary General, acknowledged Hezbollah's intervention in Syria's blitz, saying that "Syria is the back of the resistance and naive is he who watches himself being besieged."¹³⁷ Subsequently, Hezbollah fighters spread all over the country and fight from Dar'a in the south all the way up to Deir ez-Zor in the northeast and via inland Syria. "Hezbollah views its organization as the front line in the confrontation with Israel, and sees Syria as its rearguard" (Marisa Sullivan, 2014, p.9). Therefore, it was almost impossible for Iran and Hezbollah to overlook the leverage that Assad's regime had long provided them with.

By and large, Hezbollah's embroil in Syria's civil war for the ensuing years was a geostrategic necessity. The intervention was not as easy as it sounds, however. To garner support and mobilize its fighters, Hezbollah adopted a sectarian mobilization agenda using sect-specific symbols and grievances linking them to the current situation. However, the primary motive behind this was to preserve the geopolitical interest of the axis. The Syrian battlefield somewhat shaped Hezbollah as a quasi-army mixing between guerilla and classical warfare tactics. Therefore, this chapter will examine how the intervention in Syria's moor was a war of necessity that gradually embedded Hezbollah as a partner in the axis. Moreover, it will unpack the events that transitioned Hezbollah

¹³⁷ "Al-Qusayr is the back of the resistance and stupid is he who watches himself sieged" by Wafiq Kanso. On 27 may 2013. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2013/pdf/p02-20130527.pdf>

into a regional ANSA fighting for the benefit of the axis that extends from Iran to Lebanon, via Syria and Iraq, to a lesser extent, Palestine, and more recently Yemen.

5.4.1 From Qusair to Qalamoun: Hezbollah's Crawling into Syria's Moor

The engagement of Hezbollah in Syria's civil war started in earnest from the Lebanese-Syrian border through the city of al-Qusayr, in Homs governorate. Al-Qusayr, strategically positioned on the route between Damascus and the pro-Assad mostly Alawite coastal regions, became a rebels' den by mid-2012. It was also a crossing point for the opposition from Tripoli, northern Lebanon, to all rebel-held areas in Syria. Further afield, it was a smuggling route exploited by the opposition to transfer not only weapons, but defecting regime figures such as Manaf Tlass, a close friend to Bashar al-Assad and a General in the Republican Guard, but with low influence in the regime (Sam Dagher, 2019, p.306-307). However, Hezbollah and the SAA managed to recapture the city faster than expected. Mohammad Mohsen (2017) argued that it was Hezbollah's first serious offensive and was followed by a complete control of the region (p.13). From there, beaten and outmaneuvered, rebels moved to al-Qalamoun. Designed to curtail the rebels' clout, Hezbollah and the SAA launched an offensive to control the villages and the barren hills of al-Qalamoun. The attack was paralleled by suicidal car bombs and rocket salvos against Shi'a areas in the Beqaa and Dahiyah, Beirut's suburbs. Although Hezbollah and the SAA were prevailing in 2015, the battle for al-Qalamoun dragged until 2017 for two reasons: First, Hezbollah decided to besiege the village of al-Zabadani for a quid pro quo allowing Shi'a civilians to leave two surrounded towns in Idlib, al-Fou'a and Kfarya; second, the remaining fighters of HTS and ISIS were positioning in the outskirts of the Lebanese Sunni village of Arsal, and trying to avoid further Sunni-Shi'a tensions,

Hezbollah halted its advance. The confrontations in these overlapping areas unpacked the three variables that established Hezbollah as a regional ANSA during Syria's war of necessity: the instrumentalization of sectarian identity, its emergence as a quasi-army, and its partnership in the axis and participation in the decision-making process.

Since the early days of the protests in 2011, demonstrators in the city of Homs started maligning Hezbollah. The latter was looking with mounting alarm as the opposition's animus was gradually unfolding. For instance, they were chanting "no for Hezbollah no for Iran" and "Hezbollah oh Hezbollah, we want king Abdullah" – the then king of Saudi Arabia.¹³⁸ In Hama they burned Hezbollah's flag.¹³⁹ At this early stage, it was mere demonstrations, therefore, there was no military presence for Hezbollah and it had not yet declared any official statement that supported Assad or despised the opposition. Fearing ambiguity and exaggeration by the regime's security reports, Hezbollah sent a delegation of its own security apparatus in the spring of 2011 to have a firsthand feedback of the situation, and in parallel appealed for political negotiations between the regime and the opposition (Samir al-Hassan, 2017, p.129). Hezbollah was acutely aware of the possible pandemonium that might engulf Syria and its spillovers into Lebanon. Rapidly, the war drums started beating and the country disintegrated into chaos.

¹³⁸ "Youtube: Al-Mayadeen Documentary- From Homs to Qalamoun", by Augarite Dandash. On 9 May 2015. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=z5W4hAGhECs

¹³⁹ "The Choice of necessity: Hezbollah in Syria". On 23 January 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/724564/---الخيار-الضرورة-حزب-الله-في-سوريا>

By early 2012, clashes between the regime and the opposition intensified. The town of Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus' suburbs that contains the Sayyida Zeinab's Mosque, named after the daughter of Imam Ali, one of the most significant shrines and destinations for the Shi'a, came under heavy attacks by jihadist factions. This accelerated the tempo of Hezbollah's intervention in Syria to defend Shi'a citizens and shrines. Sect-specific symbolism was paramount for the sectarian mobilization that it has always adopted. Subsequently, the possible invasion and destruction of the shrine, led two Shi'a organizations, the Lebanese Hezbollah and Abou al-Fadl al-Abbas, an Iraqi group, to send small units to prevent such outcome. Mohsen (2017) seconded that Hezbollah started a minor intervention in Syria to protect Sayyida Zeinab's Mosque after threats by the armed rebels who promised to destroy it once they control the town (p.12). This will be unpacked in the next section. Suffice it to say here that the intervention to protect Sayyida Zeinab's shrine was the first direct engagement of Shi'a groups, namely Hezbollah, in Syria's turmoil.

In parallel, tensions were peaking in the west of Homs, namely in al-Qusayr. The latter converges with the Lebanese districts of Beqaa and al-Hermel, mostly Shi'a areas, and Hezbollah's permanent backyard. In 1982, the IRGC infiltrated through the Syrian border and set up camps in the Beqaa valley to train Hezbollah fighters, then emerging as an Islamist jihadi group determined to resist Israel's invasion of Lebanon. Nicholas Blanford (2011) highlighted that the IRGC started mobilizing, preaching and training recruits in the Beqaa Valley villages of what later became Hezbollah (p.44). Also, many Lebanese Shi'a were cohabiting villages in al-Qusayr with their Sunni counterparts. Villages overlapped and both Sunni and Shi'a had lived in harmony for decades, shared

the same markets and smuggling routes, intermarried, and even some Lebanese villages used the Syrian currency as they shared more with the Syrians than the Lebanese. Mentioning such a thing appears somewhat as an explanation of an abnormal or exceptional event about how Sunni and Shi'a citizens lived together. But this is not the case because the Sunni-Shi'a contest and sectarian dynamics are not the primary motive behind these conflicts as neither Sunni nor Shi'a were seeking doctrinal truths, with of course, the exception of ISIS or HTS. The point to note here is that sectarian or religious conflicts are the exception rather than the norm and the true causal factor is mostly political. Bringing the discussion back to al-QUsayr, with the rise of the military confrontations between the Syrian regime and armed rebels in 2012, the Sunni-Shi'a relationship in al-Qusayr's countryside rapidly deteriorated. Sectarian contest in these villages was part of the broader communitarian schism that exploded in the Middle East since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

In an attempt to reduce tensions, an agreement had been bargained between both sects: The Shi'a wouldn't back any side in the war, while the Sunni pledged not to treat them as foes. The oral consent wouldn't last long, however. The rebels started accusing Hezbollah of conducting attacks against them and supporting the Syrian regime in the battlefield. The Syrian National Council blamed the Lebanese organization for helping the SAA in the attacks against three Syrian villages on the borders.¹⁴⁰ Abducting and killing became a daily fear for the Shi'a inhabitants forcing a majority to journey toward safer Lebanese areas. Prospects of reconciliation waned. The race for armament started and

¹⁴⁰ "Hezbollah condemned for attack against Syrian villages", on 18 February 2013. BBC. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21496735>

barricades were elevated on both flanks. Thereafter, rebel groups started conducting daily raids against towns such as al-Qasr and al-Tufail in the Beqaa Shi'a villages in al-Qusayr. Without hyperbole, this is not meant to demonize rebel groups or to sanctify Hezbollah. A Syrian fighter appeared in a post-battle video in Ain al-Damamel, a town in western Qusayr, shouting "Shi'a have no more lands here."¹⁴¹ More importantly, Mohsen (2017) emphasized that commanders of some rebels' groups, namely Al-Farouq Birgades, had occasionally opened the map of the Assi River that flows through al-Hermel, and discussed how they will control the restaurants on its shores (p.62). The sectarian discourses and the footages distributed by the rebels increased the insecurity among Shi'a and helped Hezbollah justify its gradual intervention.

Subsequently, Shi'a in the villages held arms and established popular committees to defend their homes (Mohsen, 2017, p.38). There was then no recorded presence for Hezbollah. However, Sullivan (2014) highlighted the death of Hezbollah's commander, Ali Hussein Nassif, in October 2012 and the attendance of high ranking Hezbollah commanders during the funeral in the Beqaa valley. As usual, the organization's public report claimed that he was martyred doing his jihadist duties without stating neither the cause nor the place of death to keep them in blur (p.12). In fact, if anything, Hezbollah was present but it was not the right time for public declaration. A report by a Lebanese Television, filming on the borders in the village of al-Hammam, interviewed some of the armed men of the popular committees who denied any presence of Hezbollah fighters

¹⁴¹ "Youtube: Al-Jadeed Looks for Hezbollah inside Syria". 24 February 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7R1DI1Hy1c>

and claimed that they are defending their towns from terrorist attacks.¹⁴² However, the organization has always had partisans and combatants in these villages, and therefore, they were fighting clandestinely under the cover of these committees. One Hezbollah fighter later argued that they distributed weapons to the citizens and helped them organize these committees.¹⁴³ Mohsen (2017) clarified that in his report for Al-Mayadeen channel, he didn't mention the presence of the organization's fighters, but it was clear that most of them were well trained members of Hezbollah and other parties such as the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) (p.44). Al-Hassan (2017) stressed that in the summer of 2012, Hezbollah units, namely Unit 910 – responsible for external missions– turned from advising the SAA to fighting and in July, some troops started appearing in Homs and Damascus' suburbs (p.129). Sullivan (2014) confirmed that by mid 2012, "Hezbollah's fighters killed in Syria were quietly buried in Lebanon" (p.12). These events set the organization on a slippery slope towards a full-scale military involvement in Syria's tumult.

It is important to mention here that at the early stages of the war, the presence of Islamist groups hadn't flourished yet in al-Qusayr and it was mostly dominated by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a moderate group of defected soldiers and officers. Soon enough, other armed factions, such as Kata'eb al-Farouq, Liwa' al-Qusayr, and HTS, started gradually reinvigorating in the Syrian city. In February 2012, Ayman al-Zawahiri,

¹⁴² "Youtube: Al-Jadeed Looks for Hezbollah inside Syria". 24 February 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7R1D11Hy1c>

¹⁴³ "Youtube: Al-Mayadeen Documentary- From Homs to Qalamoun", by Augarite Dandash. On 9 May 2015. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=z5W4hAGhECs

leader of al-Qaeda, had called for jihad in Syria.¹⁴⁴ Subsequently, the first flag of HTS had risen in June 2012 and was followed by a large campaign of violence. For the first time in the war, a clandestine tunnel was dug under the hospital of al-Qusayr, controlled by the SAA, filled with explosives and blown up turning the hospital into debris. Sullivan (2014) argued that “improvised explosive devices (IEDs), tunnels, barricades, and booby-traps” resembled to those taught by Hezbollah to Hamas which proved that these capabilities were transmitted to the rebels (p.16). Moreover, in December, HTS executed two successful suicide bombings against regime headlocks. These operations were occurring only few kilometers from the Beqaa valley and Shi’a towns, along with menaces and increasing aggressions. Mohsen (2017) explained that in a taped video, Wardan al-Zouhouri, the founder of al-Zubair Ben al-Awwam Brigade, spoke about respecting any new regime that the Syrian people would choose, with a personal preference for being Islamic. However, Mohsen pursued that off-record, al-Zouhouri expressed sectarian hatred against all non-Sunnis (p.53). By other words, tacitly, sectarian belief was a key driver for few groups which demonized the sectarian other. Nevertheless, Mohsen (2017) acknowledged that not all factions who Hezbollah had fought were extremists or thirsty for blood like the so-called “Abou Sakkar”, the one who ate a piece of the Syrian soldier’s liver (p.14). However, the situation disintegrated into chaos and anti-minorities narratives were used by Hezbollah to justify its intervention and adopt sectarian identity as a machinery of mobilization.

¹⁴⁴ “The Choice of necessity: Hezbollah in Syria”. On 23 January 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/724564/---الخيار-الضرورة-حزب-الله-في-سوريا>

In February 2013, Al-Farouq Brigades was able to kill four Hezbollah fighters in a close combat between the two villages of al-Safsafa and Abou Hourri (Mohsen, 2017, p.64). A line was then drawn between Hezbollah units defending Shi'a villages and the armed rebels without any advancing attempts by the former. Parallel to these clashes, rockets were being fired into the Lebanese villages. Hezbollah commanders in the Beqaa considered that by firing missiles into Lebanon, the FSA and HTS have crossed a red line (Mohsen, 2017, p.70). Meanwhile, the organization admitted its participation in the fights in Syria, yet it claimed fighting only to protect Sayyida Zeinab's shrine and the Shi'a who live in al-Qusayr villages (Matthew Levitt, 2014, p.103). Yet, these events were a turning point as Hezbollah twisted from defense to offense. Although Hezbollah adopted a sectarian mobilization agenda to justify its intervention, it was setting foot in a zero-sum geopolitical confrontation. Hezbollah's intervention in Syria's tumult was plagued with sectarian bickering in which Hezbollah took part. The point to make here is that its binary justification that consisted of defending Sayyida Zeinab's shrine and Shi'a villages in al-Qusayr was merely a justification for what was in fact a geopolitical contest. As Fanar Haddad (2020) explained, "antagonistic, even aggressive, historical sect-specific myths, symbols, grievances and the like may be resuscitated and used for legitimation, mobilization and the creation of a sense of solidarity and continuity in service of contemporary conflicts and socio-political aims; however, these neither cause nor do they explain sectarian dynamics today. (p.221-222).

Eager to protect its geopolitical interest and that of the axis, fighting in Syria had then become a war of necessity for Hezbollah. The removal of Assad's regime will be a fatale loss for both Iran and Hezbollah and will tilt the balance of power in the Middle East

in favor of Iran's foes, namely the US and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, weapons en route to Hezbollah has always checked-in in Damascus before being transported to Lebanon. However, the decision to participate and fight alongside Assad was not easily accepted at the outset. Mohsen (2017) contended that Hezbollah didn't suffer any internal dispute for fighting in Syria (p.138). However, when interviewed, he admitted that the internal debate took place, but the dialogue ended, according to Mohsen, when the first confrontation started. Some questions were raised, such as "why should we fight in Syria?"; "we encouraged Uprisings in Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia, why not in Syria?".¹⁴⁵ Hezbollah fighters, who had always prioritized the struggle against their "eternal enemy", Israel, switched priorities. Sectarian tensions helped ease the intervention. As Haddad (2020) put it: "The intersection of sectarian identity and Arab-Iranian rivalry has seen regional strategy instrumentalizing markers of sectarian identity to foster sectarian solidarity and mobilization by portraying geopolitical issues as existential threats confronting all Sunni and Shi'a (p.116)".

Sullivan (2014) argued that Nasrallah's speech in 25 May 2013 was addressed against "takfirists" (those who accuse the other of apostasy) speaking about a new phase in the Syrian civil war, and by doing so Nasrallah was targeting Shi'a audiences who were anxious about the organization's intervention and its consequences (p.16). "Takfirists", according to Abdullah Anas (2019), "declare you an apostate if you did not have the same creed as them, or if you failed to declare the Muslim rulers to be infidels or you believed in democracy then you were outside the fold of Islam" (p.150). Although Hezbollah could have directly used the geopolitical calculations as an excuse for the engagement, it could

¹⁴⁵ Interview with author. 11 September 2018.

have been a double-edged sword, avoiding further sectarian tensions, but also limited its machinery of mobilization among the Shi'a. It was fully aware that such an involvement will be accompanied with a maligning agenda and a skyrocketing hatred among Sunnis in Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere, but this would be a bearable loss if compared with the consequences of the possible collapse of Assad's regime.

Hezbollah has taken the attention by its intervention, but it was neither the only Lebanese faction that stepped into the Syrian quagmire nor the first. Many Islamists and youth, mostly Sunni from Tripoli and Akkar, northern Lebanon, bamboozled by sectarian hatred were heading to al-Qusayr to fight alongside their Syrian comrades. Da'i al-Islam al-Shahhal, a Salafist leader in Tripoli, along with other clerics, mobilized Sunnis to defend their Syrian brethren against both Hezbollah and Iran (Genieve Abdo, 2017, p.84). The pace of sectarian mobilization on both sides of the aisle was increasing. One Sunni fighter said that "originally, we don't hate them [Hezbollah], but they started the attack on Sunnis in Syria" (Mohsen, 2017, p.149). Consequently, Hezbollah was being demonized among Sunnis and anti-Hezbollah edicts were enunciated in Sunni mosques. Salem al-Rafi'i, president of *Hay'at al-Oulama' al-Mouslimeen* (Muslim Scholars Association), had encouraged youth in his weekly sermon in al-Takwa mosque to fight in Syria against Hezbollah and "advanced a Sunni martyrdom at the hands of the Shi'a" (Abdo, 2017, p.85).

That said, the religious mindset of these notorious figures wasn't triggered by Hezbollah, and this Sunni mobilization stems from the antagonism vis-à-vis Assad and the Alawite sect. Again, this does not mean that doctrinal truth was the primary driver of the conflict but was one among other factors that animated sectarian dynamics. The

Lebanese Sunni enclaves such as Tripoli had become a linchpin for fighters who smuggled into SYria. Furthermore, the route from Tripoli to al-Qusayr via Akkar was strategic for the opposition and its Lebanese supporters. Sullivan (2014) emphasized that anti-Assad factions were smuggling weapons, supplies and fighters from Lebanon to Homs and elsewhere via al-Qusayr (p.8). It was a two-lane route and the rebels' itinerary didn't stop in al-Qusayr, but stretched to Homs, Rif Dimashq, and Dar'a. Linking these regions was a calculated step because it gave the Syrian dissent access to the seashores of Tripoli and its harbor. In 2012, an armed shipment headed to Syria called "Lutfallah 2" was captured in Tripoli's port.¹⁴⁶ However, linking regions was a leverage in military calculations and therefore became a goal for both sides. That said, capturing al-Qusayr by Hezbollah and the SAA would annihilate the leverage that the anti-Assad factions have enjoyed in the pre-Qusayr battle.

Hezbollah's former private universities spokesman argued that the organization's military skills paved the way for its intervention in Syria focusing on securing Damascus and its suburbs as a first step. He stressed that various world powers assisted the opposition and "since we are part of an axis, we protected our borders and Sayyida Zeinab, before expanding over vast swathes of the country."¹⁴⁷ This was somewhat a direct explanation of the causal factor behind the intervention: the interest of the axis and its regional agenda. A Lebanese Shi'a politician close to Hezbollah said that the decision was strategic and straightforward: they wanted to pull the terrorists back and protect their

¹⁴⁶ "The Choice of necessity: Hezbollah in Syria". On 23 January 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/724564/---الخيار-الضرورة->

[/حزب-الله-في-سوريا](#)

¹⁴⁷ Interview with author. On 5 September 2018.

backyard.¹⁴⁸ Hezbollah's deputy head of political relations emphasized that the participation came in the discourse of the geopolitical struggle in the region and questioned the rebels' origins and their backers: "Who is the opposition? Only ISIS and HTS, or also the US, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Jordan? No one in the world can face such powers alone."¹⁴⁹ Similarly, Hezbollah's Minister explained that the war was not only a conspiracy by extremists and foreigners to breakdown Assad's regime, but also against Hezbollah, so we had to face it. Moreover, he assured that the intervention was not an Iranian decision.¹⁵⁰ This was contradicted by a Christian anti-Hezbollah former MP who maintained that the intervention was a pure Iranian decision.¹⁵¹ The latter's discourse underestimated Hezbollah's partnership in the decision-making process of the axis. In fact, if anything, its engagement falls into the partnership that it had long shared with Syria and Tehran. The interest of the axis was to stand as a bulwark against those who hoped to break the bridge at its center: Damascus. Tilting the balance of power in Syria by removing Assad would endanger Hezbollah's survival and undermine Iran's regional interest.

Marching towards al-Qusayr, Hezbollah hoped to establish a buffer zone on the contours of its backyard in the Beqaa and Hermel, and test in earnest its military capabilities in a new battlefield and new type of warfare. Accustomed to fight in small formations and guerilla tactics, its fighters would now shift to using large army formations supported by aerial and ground bombardment. March 2013 marked the first confrontation

¹⁴⁸ Interview with author. 9 September 2018.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with author. On 8 September 2018.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with author. On 12 September 2018.

¹⁵¹ Interview with author. On 9 October 2018.

for Hezbollah in al-Qusayr's countryside. That month, rebels had overrun the SAA and controlled "Tall Mando" (Mando Hill), a strategic and well located peak. In late March, Hezbollah and the SAA successfully launched a counter-offensive to regain it. Mohsen (2017) reported that intense bombardment and barrages of airstrikes anticipated the ground offensive and facilitated the capture of the hill lasting no more than 10 minutes (p.93). Since this first foray, Hezbollah adopted a "carpet bombing policy" that consisted of intensive bombardment of the area before the subsequent advance of ground forces. Rebels tried to counter-attack but their attempts to recapture the hill were a fiasco. In the first wave of assaults conducted by Fajr al-Islam Brigades, Hezbollah lost 7 fighters (Mohsen, 2017, p.93). The resonances of this assault reverberated across Syria and Lebanon. Eager to rout its opponents, Hezbollah triumphed in its first confrontation. Recapturing "Tall Mando" would just be the beginning, however.

The Syrian regime had put much effort to push against the rebels' advance and lost thousands of fighters but could not withstand further losses because regional and international powers had been increasing their sponsorship to the anti-Assad factions. A Shi'a pro-Saudi journalist close to Hariri emphasized that the facts of a possible regime breakdown pushed Hezbollah to fight in Syria.¹⁵² Assad's regime was then enduring its weakest days since the beginning of the civil war and therefore Hezbollah started accelerating the tempo of its intervention. At that time, Nasrallah visited Khamenei in Tehran and met with Mikhael Bogdanov, Putin's special envoy to the Middle East. Two weeks after, Nasrallah stated that Syria's regional and international allies, will not allow

¹⁵² Interview with author. 13 November 2012.

its collapse neither at the hands of the US and the Israelis nor the “takfirists.”¹⁵³ However, he denied the intervention of Iran and Hezbollah “yet”, but they both might do if needed. Further, Nasrallah insisted that Hezbollah will not keep the Lebanese in al-Qusayr vulnerable against menaces and assaults.¹⁵⁴ The point to note here is that when Nasrallah announced Hezbollah’s intervention, its fighters had already been operating inside Syria for a while. More importantly, not only did Nasrallah speak for Hezbollah but also for Iran. Needless to say that this was a damning evidence that the Lebanese organization was gradually developing into a regional ANSA, cementing its partnership in the axis and participating in the decision-making process. A spokesman of the “Lebanese Forces” opined that Hezbollah and Assad are part of an axis, and the former reckoned that a regime’s breakdown will be a strategic setback. Damascus, he pursued, is the bridge between al-Dahiyah –Hezbollah’s stronghold in Beirut’s suburbs– and Tehran, so it was a war of existence for them. Further, Nasrallah is the one who spoke about his visit to Iran in order to convince Ayatollah Khamenei about the necessity to fight in Syria.¹⁵⁵ Coming from an anti-Hezbollah person, this further added to the argument that this paper is trying to make: Hezbollah participated in the decision-making process and the Syrian cataclysm was the conduit for its transition into a partner in the axis.

Bringing the discussion back to the battlefield, after capturing the Mando hill, the Lebanese organization sought to secure the surrounding villages, and so it did. A counter-

¹⁵³ “Nasrallah: Syria’s friends will not allow its collapse”, on 1 May 2013. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrived from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/1994/pdf/p02-20130501.pdf>

¹⁵⁴ “Nasrallah: Syria’s friends will not allow its collapse”, on 1 May 2013. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrived from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/1994/pdf/p02-20130501.pdf>

¹⁵⁵ Interview with author. On 20 October 2018.

offensive spearheaded by Al-Farouq Brigades to retake positions it had lost quickly failed. Subsequently, Hezbollah positioned in these captured areas and gradually started biting rebel-held strongholds. While these triumphs dealt the rebels an immense psychological blow, it boosted the moral of its fighters. In three days, Hezbollah units were able to control the western countryside of al-Qusayr cutting the supply route for the rebels from Akkar, northeastern Lebanon. Afterwards, Hezbollah forces moved to secure the southern and eastern countryside, an area of around 100 square kilometers and much bigger than the western part. Fights increasingly intensified and Hezbollah faced fierce resistance in the village of “Jouseh”, yet after capturing it, most of the southern part became under its grip. Then, a 36 hours’ battle took place in “al-Dothariyeh” and “al-Atifiyyeh” where Hezbollah faced severe resistance by HTS and the FSA fighters culminating in the former’s prevail with minor losses: 3 Hezbollah fighters were killed and 18 injured (Mohsen, 2017, p.127). By the end of these clashes, Hezbollah and the SAA had encircled the city of al-Qusayr from the west, east, and south, while leaving its northern countryside unharmed.

As mentioned earlier, this further aggravated the Sunni-Shi’a schism. The sect-symbolism such as ‘Ya Zahraa’, ‘Ya Hussein’ or ‘Ya Zeinab’, that Hezbollah’s fighters used while marching against the rebels who happened to be Sunnis aggravated the sectarian cleavage. Besides, Sunni clerics such as Adnan al-‘Ar’our, based in Saudi Arabia, mocked the Shi’a and questioned their beliefs asking if they are murdering the children in al-Qusayr to avenge the death of Imam Hussein (Genieve Abdo, 2017, p.70-71). Paulo Gabriel Hilu Pinto (2017) stressed that “the Sunni sectarian discourse of some of the new players in the Syrian political landscape, such as Shaykh al-‘Ar’ur, was a gift to the regime, fueling its sectarianization narrative of the uprising as a Sunni militant

revolt” (p.133). That said, it was clear that clerics such as al-‘Ar‘ur were merely using these facts as a mobilizational tool among Sunnis. It might not be clear to the casual observer but Hezbollah’s fighters had always used sect-symbolism and sectarian mobilization to create a sense of solidarity. By other words, Hezbollah used these sect-specific mottos, symbols and myths, against Israel to boost the moralities of its own fighters rather than recently adopting such discourse. This did not ease tensions but on the contrary further sectarianized the conflict, however.

Hezbollah’s fast advance unfolded the finesse of its fighters and their ability to deliver. In fact, it was quickly adapting to unaccustomed warfare tactics where it adopted army formations instead of small top-notch units as it previously did in Lebanon, supported by armored units containing tanks and aerial support. In fact, if anything, the firepower and pouring of ammos that they enjoyed was not provided to any ANSA in the Middle East. The carpet bombing policy was devastating for the rebels and eased Hezbollah’s mission. This is not to underestimate the capabilities of its fighters on the individual level, but it is necessary to mention that Hezbollah was leveraged by a wide range of weapons and armament and the rebels were not easy meal. These were the first steps that changed it into a quasi-army that mixed classical and guerilla tactics. The next battle would be the cruelest and a game changer in the discourse of the Syrian civil war: The battle for al-Qusayr city.

Therefore, on 19 May 2013, Hezbollah and the SAA instigated a whopping offensive to recapture al-Qusayr city. This battle was by and large Hezbollah’s first serious military confrontation and the key to its would-be preeminence in the battlefield. Since 2012, al-Qusayr city became the den of the rebels, with huge fortifications and

underground tunnels all over the town providing leverage for the defenders. Hezbollah and the SAA, overwhelmed by their fast prevail in the countryside, had been preparing for the battle since they controlled the southern part. For the first time in its history, Hezbollah was invading a city with large military formations and using classical military tactics. Further, the battle was a hot spot for local, regional, and international media, which were keen to live stream the offensive. Western and anti-Assad Arab media, such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya channels, were used as platforms to promote rebels' advance, though they were more often defeated than triumphant. "Plenty of adjectives and some clichés are being bandied about from Washington to Beirut to describe the al-Qusayr battle results and significance. Among them are "game-changer," "mother of all battles," "altered balance of power," critical "turning point in the civil war".¹⁵⁶ In fact, broadcasting and social media platforms were used by each side for its own interests, but Hezbollah's prevail in the battlefield contradicted the zeal promulgated by the opposition's channels. The media did not necessarily endorse false premises and illusory victories, but sometimes it was not objective. Social media was fundamental for the rebels who used it to promote their cause, their sectarian mobilization and their forays against the SAA and Hezbollah strongholds in an attempt to mobilize more Sunni sympathizers from across the world. This strategy worked for the rebels, however. They marshalled arrays of Sunni fighters who joined the 'righteous cause' against the devil and the "'a'da' al Sunna" or Sunni foes as they called them. Above all, the Israeli media kept a close eye on the course

¹⁵⁶ "US and Israel Lobby Reels from Hezbollah al-Qusair Victory", taken from Franklin Lamb, Achieve of Al-Manar, retrieved from: <http://archive.almanar.com.lb/english/article.php?id=96749>

of the confrontations, given the strategic nature of the area if controlled by their major enemy: Hezbollah.

The battle opened with barrages of airstrikes and aerial bombardment of the city by the Syrian air forces and regime's artilleries –the carpet bombing policy. These bombardments were followed by torrent of infantry crashing into rebels' defenses. Mohsen (2017) highlighted that the ground assault was launched by Hezbollah from 10 positions distributed in the south and east of the city. The FSA and HTS, the two main forces who were defending the southern part of al-Qusayr, had the upper-hand through defensive buildings and strongholds, while Hezbollah was advancing from open grounds. This culminated in heavy losses that exceeded 40 dead and many more injured among Hezbollah units (p.160). This was the highest death toll that Hezbollah had suffered in one day and its resonances amid Hezbollah's supporters in Lebanon were frustrating. "I asked one Hezbollah commander amid these battles: Why are you sending waves of fighters? Why don't you unleash them all at once? His answer was simple: We can't afford losing huge numbers of fighters in one day because it will be a devastating blow for our supporters in Lebanon. The fact that Hezbollah's elite troops were no more than 5000 strong, it limited its maneuvers as it couldn't risk a high death toll in one day."¹⁵⁷ Hezbollah spearheaded the offensive. This autonomy has revealed the mutual trust between the organization and Assad's regime in such a fundamental confrontation plainly shaping Hezbollah as a partner in the axis. Mohsen (2017) argued that after the first day, Hezbollah units and the SAA had controlled 40% of the city (p.163). Thereby, although it had lost many fighters, Hezbollah was able to accomplish a major breakthrough into the

¹⁵⁷ Interview with author. 18 December 2018.

defenses of the rebels. Brief though it was, this first advance, by and large, was important to Hezbollah's amplifying clout.

On 21 May, Hezbollah and the SAA claimed that they have advanced to the center and the northern part of the city, "destroying tunnels, weapons and explosive devices. But the rebels, though outgunned, said they were holding their ground against the onslaught and had destroyed several armored vehicles and had inflicted heavy casualties on the army." Qassem Tilawi, a FSA commander said: "I wasn't expecting that from them [Hezbollah]." ¹⁵⁸ FSA commanders in al-Qusayr referred to the reception of Shi'a refugees during the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel thinking that the former would endear their previous hospitality instead of attacking them. Palpably, this standoff heralded further sectarian jitters and torpedoed the Sunni-Shi'a bridges. The eroding support for Hezbollah among Sunnis was driving more youth into a fight that they perceived virtuous to defend their Sunni fellows in Syria against the assaults by Shi'a and Alawites. This is plainly not the case, however. Rather sectarian mobilization was merely a tool for geopolitical ends. Abdo (2017) argued that the tweets of Adnan al-Ar'our, a Syrian Salafist leader who lives in Saudi Arabia, peaked during al-Qusayr battle when he tried to mobilize supporters by calling for *jihad* in Syria (p.77). After Hezbollah's breakthrough, the combat became a draconian street fight and mostly from house to house. Bit by bit, the death toll in the ranks of decreased if compared with the early days while succeeding to emancipate most of the southeastern part of the city. Hezbollah was altering into a quasi-army mixing between guerilla and classical army tactics and formations.

¹⁵⁸ "Syrian Forces and Hezbollah fighter press assault on Key city", on 21 May 2013. The New York Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/22/world/middleeast/syria-developments.html>

Now that Hezbollah has become enmeshed in Syria's turmoil, it altered its sectarian discourse and mobilization to a more political-centric discourse. "If Syria falls in the hands of the Americans, Israelis, takfirists, or regional pro-American countries," Nasrallah explained, "the resistance will be surrounded and Israel will invade Lebanon again and we will dive into a dark era" (Mohsen, 2017, p.136). Conspiracy theories have always been a tool to face internal or external political threats and to galvanize supporters in the Middle East. The easiest narrative to mobilize supporters was to merge conspiracy theories with sectarian discourses. That said, Nasrallah framed the geopolitical contest in Syria as a conspiracy against Hezbollah and the axis. At this point, Mathew Levitt (2014) stressed that Nasrallah had promised a complete victory even though Hezbollah will have to sacrifice and take responsibility along the road (p.102). 2 days after, clashes increased in the city and in the adjacent airport of al-Dab'a. The assault on the latter was mainly conducted by the SAA while Hezbollah focused on pursuing the offensive to retake the city. Amid these confrontations, rebel forces were shelling the Lebanese villages in the Beqaa valley and al-Hermel on daily basis. By 29 May, most of the city came under the control of Hezbollah and the SAA. A fighter of the Lebanese organization had commented that al-Qusayr was divided "on a grid into 16 squares, and 13 have been controlled". A spokesman of al-Farouq Brigades avowed sustaining heavy losses and losing most of the city for the regime and Hezbollah troops.¹⁵⁹ But while the rebel forces seemed collapsing, back up arrived. A huge force of al-Tawhid Brigade, led by the former SAA General known as Hajji Mare', came from Aleppo and was able to infiltrate into the city

¹⁵⁹ "Hezbollah said to control most of Qusayr in major setback for Syria rebels", by David Enders. On 29 May 2013. Miami Herald. Retrieved from: <https://www.miamiherald.com/latest-news/article1951968.html>

after fierce battles with the Syrian army. The arrival of reinforcements and the counterattacks conducted by the rebels failed to alter the course of the battle which was sliding towards a triumph for Hezbollah.

Mohsen (2017) opined that following these events, the narrative that al-Qusayr is “the myth of the Syrian revolution” collapsed, and many domestic, regional, and international parties fruitlessly intervened to bargain a ceasefire which would allow the evacuation of the injured rebel fighters (p.175). As they were biting, Hezbollah troops have shown finesse and an unyielding determination in the battleground. Acutely aware of the wider conflagration that its intervention will set off, Hezbollah had not budged an inch. The final wave of the offensive started on 2 June. Heavy equipped and armored Hezbollah and SAA forces, reinforced by more than 10 tanks, initiated the attack from al-Dab’a airport to capture the town of al-Dab’a. In parallel, “Grad” missiles rained down the remaining pockets while Hezbollah units were marching toward the village (Mohsen, 2017, p.179). Throughout these battles, Hezbollah was learning to manage and spearhead large offensives by coordinating between the attacking forces on the ground and air forces. Needless to say that such confrontations changed Hezbollah into a quasi-army where it mixed classical warfare and formations with guerilla tactics. Although Hezbollah adopted large formations in its offensive, it also executed clandestine missions with small top-notch units. Additionally, Hezbollah worked in tandem with the SAA and had the Lion’s share in the operation room of al-Qusayr’s offensive. Sullivan (2014) reasoned that Hezbollah’s influence in the battlefield in 2013 was unquestionable, and for the first time, it operated in big numbers and “controlled the planning and the conduct of operations” (p.13-15). These daily events proved how Hezbollah was transitioning into a

regional ANSA. Its military engagement in Syria's conflict embedded it as a partner in the axis and participated in the decision-making process on the military and political levels.

In parallel to the attack on the city of al-Qusayr, Mohsen (2017) said that al-Dab'a village was divided into squares, each with a number and also containing the names of the leaders conducting the assault in these areas (p.181). The offensive was unsuccessful, however; and Hezbollah units were trapped midway and the primary plan that was put to encircle the city of al-Qusayr after capturing al-Dab'a town was aborted. A failed offensive was a rare outcome for Hezbollah since the beginning of its participation in the Syrian civil war. After that, videos of a new devastating missile called "Burkan" or Volcano, were released on social media. In the afternoon of that day, Mohsen (2017) reported that a big truck holding a huge missile reached the area. The latter was a short-range rocket, with a big explosive warhead, fabricated by Hezbollah but highly effective and damaging. This kind of missiles became frequently used by the organization in al-Qusayr (p.183). Hezbollah has not been a mere receiver and consumer of artillery, but it has developed and fabricated many rockets, i.e. the Volcano, and drones. On June 4, the remaining rebel-held streets in al-Qusayr witnessed intense shelling and barrages of rockets and missiles, namely "Burkan". Mohsen (2017) reported that the rebels' pages on Facebook stated that missiles and rockets fired on the remaining parts of the city were clashing in the air (p.192). Sullivan (2014) seconded that on June 5, Hezbollah and regime units conducted the final attack after "intense bombardment of the rebel enclave" (p.16).

By dawn, 7 Hezbollah top-notch units infiltrated into the remaining rebel-held streets under heavy firepower to cover their advance while rebels were given a safe passage into the town of al-Dab'a which partly remained under their control. By 6 am, the

FSA and HTS fighters retreated from the remaining parts of the city after sustaining heavy losses and one day after, Hezbollah and the SAA also recaptured al-Dab'a village. The Hezbollah-led offensive, along with the SAA, to recapture al-Qusayr, has only lasted 17 days. One of the most fortified rebel strongholds in Syria has been retaken from the opposition and Hezbollah has proven its ability to deliver. "The seizure of the strategic town after a fierce 17-day battle marks a significant victory for Assad regime and for Hezbollah, which has triumphed in its first engagement of the Syrian war."¹⁶⁰ The prevail in al-Qusayr has caused an avalanche of transformative events in the balance of power in Syria. For its own security, Hezbollah had to be immersed in al-Qusayr and succeeded in routing its opponents.

One Hezbollah commander who fought in al-Qusayr contended that 1700 Hezbollah fighters participated in al-Qusayr offensive, forming 14 divisions and covering all specialties such as snipers, rocket launchers and many others (Mohsen, 2017, p.191). Sullivan (2014) confirmed the number saying that up to 200 were killed in action and they were divided into 17 units each containing 100 fighters and sometimes to smaller groups of 3 to 5 men (p.15). Using top-notch small units was a tactic used to execute fast and efficient blitzes of hit-and-run. By and large, the military success in al-Qusayr was a game changer for the course of the Syrian conflict and the overture of a full-scale intervention. Chulov (2013) emphasized that the strategic triumph in al-Qusayr was a defining battle in the Syrian war.¹⁶¹ The war drums that knocked on Hezbollah's doors has driven it to

¹⁶⁰ "Hezbollah marks major triumph as Qusayr tips back into Assad camp", by Nicholas Blanford. On 5 June 2013. The Christian Science Monitor. Retrieved from: <https://0-search-proquest-com.lib.exeter.ac.uk/docview/1364905915?accountid=10792>

¹⁶¹ "Syrian town of Qusair falls to Hezbollah in breakthrough for Assad", by Martin Chulov, 5 June 2013, The Guardian.

slowly pedal into a battle that shaped it as a regional ANSA and a partner in the axis that extends from Beirut to Tehran, via Damascus and Baghdad. During this time, the geopolitical contest was in its heyday and the pace to fill the vacuum in the collapsing state reached its apogee. Days after the prevail in al-Qusayr, Nasrallah said that “wherever we [Hezbollah] must be, we will be.”¹⁶² This discourse raised the stakes and unleashed Hezbollah’s fighters from the Syrian-Lebanese borders, all the way down to the south, namely Dar’a, and up to the north via inland Syria. The upcoming battle would concentrate on al-Qalamoun mountains, south of al-Qusayr.

Overpowered in al-Qusayr, some rebels retreated to the city of Homs while some others journeyed to the mountains of al-Qalamoun which contours Arsal, a Sunni anti-Hezbollah Lebanese town. Since the early days of Syria’s conflict, Arsal became a safe haven for all the opposition fighters. Its barren mountains suited ISIS and HTS fighters, and therefore turned out to be their ultimate recourse that wouldn’t be fully liberated until 2017, as detailed in chapter 4. By the end of the battle for al-Qusayr, al-Farouq Brigades faded and its fighters joined other factions such as HTS, ISIS, Jaish al-Islam (Army of the Muslims). In August 2013, Nasrallah opened the door for a greater intervention: “if we have a 100 fighter in Syria, we’re going to make them 200, if they are 1000, we’re making them 2000, if 5000 we’re making them 10000; if the battle against these terrorist takfirists needed me and all Hezbollah members to go to Syria we will not hesitate.”¹⁶³ More to the

¹⁶² Middle East Observer. (20 June 2013). “Hezbollah’s Nasrallah on Syria: wherever we must be we will be”. Retrieved from:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUkKcEfDehI>

¹⁶³ “The Choice of necessity: Hezbollah in Syria”. On 23 January 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/724564/---خير-الضرورة-حزب-الله-في-سوريا>

point, it was clear that Hezbollah was going all-in in its bid to safeguard the survival of the regime. During that year, the geopolitical contest peaked.

Keen to fill the void and gain regional leverage, Gulf countries, namely Saudi Arabia and Qatar, sponsored the Sunni rebels using a sectarian mobilization agenda that undermines Iran by accusing it of backing a Alawite regime against the Sunni majority. Kissinger (2014) opined that “to Saudi Arabia, the conflict with Iran was existential. It involves the survival of the monarchy, the legitimacy of the state, and indeed the future of Islam. To the extent that Iran continues to emerge as a potentially dominant power, Saudi Arabia at a minimum will seek to enhance its own power position to maintain the balance” (p.141). The rivalry and the geopolitical confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia was the main driver of the Sunni-Shi’a rift. Bassel F. Salloukh (2017) emphasized that “the recent spread of sectarianism like wildfire in the Middle East is rooted in how Saudi Arabia and Iran have deployed sectarian identity, narratives, and symbols to neutralize both domestic and external regime threats in what is otherwise a grand geopolitical contest” (p.36). On 28 October, Nasrallah urged a political reconciliation in Syria rather than military conflict and accused Saudi Arabia of thwarting the talks between the regime and the rebels. “If the regional and international powers are honest about the political solution,” Nasrallah stressed, “then they should remove the obstacles that they are implementing.”¹⁶⁴ This appeal might have been valid before Hezbollah’s military intervention but now that it is part of the conflict such suggestions were a mere discourse contradicted by facts on the ground. Further, removing Assad, according to Nasrallah, will

¹⁶⁴ “Youtube: Press Conference- Hassan Nasrallah”, on 28 November 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhkXE6zv2jk>

pave the way for extremists who butcher people for giving their opinion¹⁶⁵ –in reference to HTS and ISIS which were increasing their clout at that time.

In November, Hezbollah and the SAA launched the offensive to retake al-Qalamoun. The latter is a mountainous region located on the Lebanese-Syrian borders and extends from the outskirts of al-Qusayr to al-Zabadani, Rif Dimashk protectorate. It has high peaks and abundant caves facilitating camouflages and traps. In 2013, suicidal attacks started targeting Shi'a areas in the Beqaa, al-Hermel, and al-Dahiyah. On 15 August, a car bomb exploded in al-Dahiyah killing 18 people and wounding 300 (Sullivan, 2014, p.25). Also, the Iranian embassy was targeted by a double suicidal attack causing many casualties but was unable to penetrate the fences and no Iranian diplomat or personnel were injured. Most assaults were conducted with cars full of explosives originating from al-Qalamoun mountains and infiltrated through Aarsal. A military analyst argued that Hezbollah was not planning to begin an offensive on al-Qalamoun, but the bombings that targeted its residential areas rushed the battle. Moreover, Mohammad Ra'ed, Hezbollah's, Member of Parliament, argued that these attacks "pushed us to continue our job" to end the presence of the terrorist groups in the mountains.¹⁶⁶ In fact, had the offensive been postponed, it would have only been delayed for few months.

15 November 2013 marked the first clash in al-Qalamoun. During the offensive, it adopted large formations, used drones and armored vehicles, and was assisted by the Syrian air forces. Such sophisticated weapons, along with the army formations it adopted,

¹⁶⁵ "Youtube: Nasrallah speech- in Memory of Hezbollah Martyrs", on 16 February 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxbdAIOKF4U>

¹⁶⁶ "Youtube: Al-Mayadeen Documentary- From Homs to Qalamoun", by Augarite Dandash. On 9 May 2015. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=z5W4hAGhECs

was not at hand for other ANSAs or armed groups. Hezbollah's amplifying clout was both on the military and political levels transitioning it into a quasi-army. The advance started from the eastern city of Qara on the highway that links Damascus to Homs. The battle started by a draconian artillery and aerial bombardments and the town was captured 3 days later. The rebels haven't shown serious resistance in Qara and retreated to Deir Atiyyeh and al-Nabk. When ISIS and HTS attacked a hospital in Deir Atiyyeh that remained under regime's control, many civilians were killed, including children, doctors and nurses. By late November, Hezbollah and the SAA overran the rebels in the village and moved towards al-Nabek.

In parallel, ISIS and HTS were conducting an attack against the Christian village of Ma'loula. By 2 December they took over the town, burned a church and kidnapped 12 nuns and transported them to the deeper rebel-held town of Yabrud.¹⁶⁷ HTS fighters removed the church bells and the statue of Jesus Christ in the village and detonated the statue of Virgin Mary.¹⁶⁸ At this point, such sectarian-based raids were animating sectarian conflict and mobilizing fighters on both sides of the Sunni-Shi'a divide. Paulo Gabriel Hilu Pinto (2017) argued that the regime took advantage of this situation to frame the rebels as Sunni jihadists (p.132). A Hezbollah-led offensive recaptured Ma'loula and their troops took advantage of the situation to present themselves as protectors of the

¹⁶⁷ "Syrian army moves to retake maaloula". On 10 September 2013. The Daily Star, Lebanon. Retrieved from: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Sep-10/230680-syrian-army-moves-to-retake-maaloula.ashx#axzz2eXe50KpU>

¹⁶⁸ "Maaloula's bells will ring anymore", by Rasha abi-Haidar. On 10 January 2014. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Arab/25148/%D8%A3%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%AA-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%B9>

Christians and other minorities by distributing pictures with statues of Jesus and Christian Crosses on social media. There was nothing more beneficial for Hezbollah than the rise of these groups and the sectarian-based attacks they conducted by providing Hezbollah with the perfect justification of a pre-emptive war against terrorist groups in Syria. While rebels did not put much resistance in Qara, they fought back in al-Nabek thwarting the recapture of the town by Hezbollah until mid-December in a battle that endured more than two weeks.¹⁶⁹

The next phase of the offensive began in late February when Hezbollah and the SAA marched on Yabrud, a rebel fortress, in an attempt to cut the supply route from Lebanon to the town. In both al-Qusyar and al-Qalamoun, cutting routes was a strategy that Hezbollah adopted in order to prevent further backup to the rebels. Hezbollah lost most of its fighters controlling the hills and the Rima Farms that contour the village, and once captured, they breached the town from the western side.¹⁷⁰ On 12 March, Hezbollah led the final raid on Yabrud leaving an escape route for the rebels towards western Qalamoun and Arsal (Marisa Sullivan, 2014, p.22). In these confrontations, Hezbollah was leading most operations in coordination with the IRGC and the SAA. The cooperation with both sides during the ground offensives was a key factor that helped deepen the

¹⁶⁹ "Saudi loses the battle for Reef Dimashk", by Hassan Ollaik. On 11 December 2013. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Arab/61857/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%80%D9%82>

¹⁷⁰ "Is Qalamoun battle over? Hezbollah will be standing on over 18000 SQM2", by Elijah J. Magnier. Middle East Politics. On 17 March 2014. Retrieved from: <https://ejmagnier.com/2014/03/17/is-qalamoun-battle-over-hezbollah-will-be-standing-on-over-18000-sqm2/>

tripartite relationship and embed Hezbollah as a partner in the axis. For its own security, it had to pursue its operations on the borders while pursuing an increasingly assertive involvement in the chaos that engulfed Syria. Needless to say that the axis that it is part of was playing a prominent role in the regional order through the conflict.

By the following week, Ras al-Ain and Rankous were liberated. Capturing the latter was a strategic move as it isolated Aarsal hoping to prevent smuggling more loaded cars into Lebanon.¹⁷¹ These explosions overburdened Hezbollah as it was fighting in Syria but was not able to secure its Shi'a areas and protect them from such attacks. By 13 May 2015, Hezbollah had controlled the western peaks of the Lebanese village of Younin which were used to launch rocket salvos targeting Shi'a areas in the Beqaa valley.¹⁷² In these mountainous battles, Hezbollah used exploratory drones days before the ground advance of its fighters,¹⁷³ and aerial footage has been circulated on its media and social media channels.¹⁷⁴ Not only its fighters were unaccustomed to such classical warfare, but

¹⁷¹ "Drying the source of terrorism on the borders with Syria", on 11 March 2014. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2269/pdf/p02-20140411.pdf>

¹⁷² "Operations of the Lebanese Resistance", on 13 May 2015. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/730207/-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86/>

¹⁷³ "Operations of the Lebanese Resistance", on 13 May 2015. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/730207/-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86/>

¹⁷⁴ "Hezbollah allegedly using drones against Al Qaeda in battle for Qalamoun", by Alessandria Masi. On 12 May 2015. International Business Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.ibtimes.com/hezbollah-allegedly-using-drones-against-al-qaeda-battle-qalamoun-1918696>

they had always been the underdogs during the confrontations with Israel as the IDF had aerial supremacy. That said, Hezbollah has continued to rise unabated during the battle for al-Qalamoun as its fighters were triumphing and accumulating more expertise in the battlefield.

In parallel to this advance, a siege had been imposed by rebels against two Shi'a villages with approximately 15000 inhabitants, Kfarya and al-Fou'a, in Idlib, a Syrian protectorate adjacent to Turkey's border. The twin Shi'a towns were surrounded by large numbers of bellicose anti-Assad groups, namely jihadists, and have been continuously bombarded and attacked; food and medical aids were only available via parachutes dropped by aircrafts.¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, they were defended by armed units who were trained and well equipped by Hezbollah and therefore the attacks were doomed. In retaliation, Hezbollah besieged al-Zabadani town in al-Qalamoun to press the rebels hoping to bargain a deal that would culminate in lifting the siege imposed on the Kfarya and al-Fou'a. It is important to mention here that many pro-regime towns were besieged or many citizens killed but the regime did not react if these areas were strategically worthless. However, the Shi'a identity of the twin villages dovetailed with the determination of Hezbollah and Iran to protect all Shi'a citizens culminating in the effort

¹⁷⁵ "Advance in al-Zabadani ... and "Ajnad al-Sham" loses its General military leader", on 7 September 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Arab/107111/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AF-%D9%85-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%88-%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%B1-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7>

to lift the siege. However, Nasrallah had always denied arguing that when Hezbollah offer support in any confrontation, it would be driven by what it sees as the best interest of the nation and the populations of these countries rather than through the sectarian lens.¹⁷⁶ these accusations Despite Nasrallah's continuous claim that Hezbollah is not confined to Shi'a citizens, facts on the ground contradicted this discourse. Not only did sect-specific grievances, myths and symbols serve as a mobilizational tool but the policy of protection imposed by Hezbollah and Iran vis-à-vis Shi'a citizens became blatant. Hezbollah of course operated in tandem with Sunni groups, such as Hamas, but its priority was to mobilize Shi'a fighters and groups.

That said, on 5 July, the offensive against al-Zabadani started and the opposition, besieged with no safe passage, had no choice but to fiercely resist. The attack began with barrages of aerial bombardments and rockets prolonging for three consecutive days.¹⁷⁷ This was the carpet bombing policy that leveraged Hezbollah ahead of every offensive and minimized its losses. While Hezbollah suffered daily losses while advancing towards al-Zabadani, it kept pressing the rebels to bargain a deal for Kfarya and al-Fou'a. Progressively, Hezbollah cornered the fighters in the city after controlling the countryside and strictly besieged them in a distance of 2.5 square kilometers.¹⁷⁸ It blocked the arrival

¹⁷⁶ See Interview with Nasrallah, "If we didn't Fight in al-Qusayr and al-Qalamoun, they would occur in Beirut and the coastal areas", al-Akhbar newspaper, on 15 August 2014. Retrieved from: https://www.al-akhbar.com/Home_Page/36268/-القصير-والقلمون-لوحلم-نقاتل-في-القصير-والقلمون-لوحلم-نقاتل-في-القصير-والقلمون

¹⁷⁷ "Rebels collapse as Syrian Army, Hezbollah storm Zabadani", by Zen Adra. On 5 July 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/rebels-collapse-as-syrian-army-hezbollah-storm-zabadani/>

¹⁷⁸ "Al-Zabadani has follow ... and Madaya for Kfarya and al-Fou'a", by Elie Hanna. On 18 August 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://www.al-akhbar.com/Arab/9696/الزبداني-سقطت-ومضايها-مقابل-كفريا-والفوع>

of food and medical care and cut the water. Choked, the rebels had no choice but to comply. Subsequently, on 24 September, an agreement sponsored by Iran and Turkey was reached under the supervision of the United Nations (UN): 10000 civilians would be evacuated from Kfarya and al-Fou'a while 4000 fighters will remain, and in exchange, the rebels would withdraw from al-Zabadani, in addition to the release of 500 inmates held in the regime's prisons.¹⁷⁹ Mikhael Awad (2017) argued that the regime was discontent with the deal since it mostly happened through back channels without its full consent (p.201). Hezbollah did not give much attention to the pundits who raised their voice against the imposed siege on al-Zabadani as it was unyieldingly determined to safeguard Shi'a citizens across Syria at any cost.

Soon after, Russia declared its intervention in the war to buttress Assad outraging the rebels who reneged the deal and the evacuation was hence postponed. Kissinger (2014) opined that "Russia, a formal ally of Syria, was interested in the continuance of the Assad government and to some extent in Syria's survival as a unitary state" (p.128). Although Hezbollah maintained some kind of equilibrium in the battlefield and recaptured some areas that have been formerly lost for rebels, it didn't have neither the means nor the quantity to cover all Syrian soil and help the regime prevail. At this time, Russia's intervention was necessary for the exhausted regime whose fighters were spreading from south to north via inland Syria. Russia's supremacy turned the table upside down curtailing the chance of succeeding for the rebels and their sponsor states. Therefore, the

¹⁷⁹ "Syrian army, rebels reach deal on zabadani, Idlib Vilages: source", on 24 September 2015. The Daily Star Lebanon. Retrieved from: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Sep-24/316543-hezbollah-syria-army-reach-deal-with-rebels-on-fate-of-zabadani-idlib-towns-sources.ashx>

implementation of the deal was delayed for almost two years and would only be reinvigorated by a Turkish-Iranian sponsorship. On 20 April 2017, the final rebel boot left al-Zabadani, and in parallel, the remaining Shi'a civilians were transported outside of Kfarya and al-Fou'a. This arrangement has shown that Hezbollah had had an Iranian green light to protect Shi'a inhabitants. The starvation they imposed on al-Zabadani has been a compelling proof that the ends justify the means if it meant safeguarding the Shi'a. Fanar Haddad (2020) opined that "while religious or doctrinal otherness is undoubtedly a factor, it is questionable whether it can, on its own, animate sectarian dynamics" (p.56). After all, sectarian otherness is not the primary motive for conflicts in the Middle East but the causal factor of the clashes that engulfed the twin villages was the overlap of sectarian identity and geopolitics. Afterwards, Hezbollah cleared the remaining ISIS and HTS-dominated pockets in the barren hills of the Beqaa and chased them into the mountains of Aarsal. In 2017, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Hezbollah both launched an offensive and ended the linger of both terrorist organizations on the Lebanese-Syrian borders.

The result of the Qalamoun battle came as follows: liberating a distance that extends over 2500 kilometers on the Syrian-Lebanese borders, taking over 5 cities and 11 villages, closing up 30 passages on the borders, dismantling 76 cars full of explosives, confiscating 28 bombs and missile factories and killing 300 commanders of HTS and other factions.¹⁸⁰ The seizure of this geostrategic area was paralleled with suicidal attacks, car bombs, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and around 70 cross-border

¹⁸⁰ "Youtube: Al-Mayadeen Documentary- From Homs to Qalamoun", by Augarite Dandash. On 9 May 2015. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=z5W4hAGhECs

rocket salvos against Shi'a areas, namely al-Dahiyah, Beqaa valley and Hermel. Up until June 2014, these attacks resulted into some 60 dead and 500 injuries.¹⁸¹ The Beqaa and Hermel have always been Hezbollah's reservoir and backyard providing Hezbollah with a myriad of loyal fighters. Furthermore, they have been the route for smuggling weapons from Syria, the shelter for the organization in extreme urgencies, and a storage for its arsenal. Needless to say that losing the leverage that these fundamental areas have always offered for Hezbollah was unbearable.

More to the point, when the rebels positioned atop of these mountains and sectarian tensions started erupting, Hezbollah decided to intervene: first by defense, then shifted to offense. First, the organization's troops moved into al-Qusayr to protect Shi'a villages from rebels' attacks and then launched a full-scale offensive and recaptured the city alongside the SAA. A Shi'a pro-Hezbollah politician argued that heading to fight in Syria was a strategic decision to push back against terrorist groups and protect the organization's backyard.¹⁸² The deputy secretary general of the Future Movement had a different approach explaining that "during the Lebanese civil war, the Iran-Syria contest was driving the conflict between the Amal movement and Hezbollah in 1989, but at the moment, they both share the same regional agenda. Historically, Iran needed Syria when it was under Hafez al-Assad's rule, however, the situation changed."¹⁸³ Although Hezbollah has taken advantage of the rebels' pitfalls and adopted a sectarian mobilization through sect-specific discourse to justify its leap into Syria's quagmire, the true motive underpinning this intervention was to frustrate would-be regional threat had Assad's

¹⁸¹ "Bombings in Lebanon", 18 June 2014, The daily Star Newspaper.

¹⁸² Interview with author. 9 September 2018.

¹⁸³ Interview with author. On 10 November 2018.

regime collapsed. This sectarian mobilization deepened the Sunni-Shi'a rift and further eroded Hezbollah's support among the Sunni community. According to Bassel F. Salloukh, this is Hezbollah's biggest fear and it has always sought to avoid it.¹⁸⁴

The causal variable leading to Hezbollah's gradual intervention was for the casual observer sectarian identity, while in fact it was less the latter and more the possible tilting of the regional power balance in its rivals' favor. This was a war of necessity for Hezbollah. In fact, its involvement aimed to preserve the survival of the regime and subsequently protect itself from a possible geopolitical loss for the axis that could have extended from Syria to Lebanon. Sullivan (2014) argued that an abundant part of Iran's support came across Syria "making it the primary hub in Iran's power projection in the Levant" (p.9). Therefore, the route that has always bridged Beirut to Tehran via Damascus, was to be protected at any cost. "Hezbollah sought to safeguard its own direct interests: fighting in al-Qusayr and al-Qalamoun areas along the border to create a buffer zone against attacks by Syrian jihadists inside Lebanon, preserving its vital Iranian supply line and protecting two Shi'a shrines in Syria."¹⁸⁵ In any case, the battle was costly for Hezbollah as it lost hundreds of fighters but both the political and military gains erased the battle's scars. Hezbollah has stretched its muscles in al-Qusayr and al-Qalamoun proving to be a vital ANSA for the Middle East order. The standoff in al-Qusayr marked the beginning of its first military alteration into a quasi-army mixing between guerilla and classical army

¹⁸⁴ Interview with author. On 1 October 2018.

¹⁸⁵ "Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum", on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hizbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

tactics. It also used large army formations and learned how to manage large-scale battles from operation rooms to ground offensives.

The post-Uprising political order in Syria was the outcome of conflictual domestic, regional and international agendas. This broke the sect-blind in pre-civil war Syria generating sectarian violence. Haddad (2020) emphasized that “there is a difference between Sunni-Shi’a violence and violence between people who happen to be Sunni and Shi’a” (p.243). In fact, both cases are valid as this chapter has examined. For instance, the siege against Kfarya and al-Fou’a was mainly driven by Sunni-Shi’a violence, while the violence in al-Qusayr happened to be between Sunni and Shi’a armed groups. To be clear, Hezbollah would have intervened even if the rebels were all moderate. By other words, the sectarian discourse and mobilization that Hezbollah adopted and the sectarian hatred animated by jihadist groups helped Hezbollah justify its intervention. Therefore, sectarian dynamics were a mere mobilizational tool for what was in fact a broader geopolitical contest. In coordination with Iran and Syria, Hezbollah rushed headlong to defend its geopolitical interest in Damascus.

Pledging to defend Shi’a shrines and villages, Hezbollah exploited its sectarian identity for political ends. Al-Qusayr, once the den of the rebels, was leveled to the ground by adopting a carpet bombing policy, which had become the prerequisite of each offensive. “Al-Qusayr also began a new phase of overt and substantial Hezbollah involvement in Syria” (Sullivan, 2014, p.16). Hezbollah troops then moved to al-Qalamoun and cleansed all the Lebanese-Syrian borders from jihadist groups. “Of course, sect-centric actors were not the only ones rising against the regime, but the trepidation that such actors caused in some sections of society meant that their presence easily

overshadowed less extreme voices” (Haddad, 2020, p.258). Undeterred in the battlefield, Hezbollah was hence becoming a quasi-army and embedded itself as a partner in the axis that now extends from Lebanon to Tehran, via Syria and Iraq. Further, these two confrontations were among many others that transitioned Hezbollah into a regional ANSA.

5.4.2 All in: A Full-Scale Engagement

Hezbollah’s sectarian-based machinery of mobilization was paramount for its engagement in Syria’s tumult. However, the sect-centric discourse altered later to a more political-centric discourse stressing that this is a pre-emptive war against terrorist organization. Indeed, the mayhem that ISIS and HTS spread across the region benefited Hezbollah in the early stages of its intervention but true causal factor that underpinned this engagement was its fear of an alteration of the regional order would Assad’s regime collapse. This conflict was a war of necessity for Hezbollah threatening to topple its key ally and designed to curtail the influence of the axis. Hezbollah was thereby driven into Syria’s quagmire by the fog of the war. Its triumph in al-Qusayr paved the way for further expansion: stretching its troops from Dar’a in the south all the way up to Deir ez-Zor in the north, via all inland Syria. Unleashed across Syria, Hezbollah further instrumentalized its Shi’a sectarian identity in its bid to protect Shi’a citizens and keep its sectarian mobilization active. This chapter will examine Hezbollah’s operations beyond the Lebanese borders and the variables that helped it transition into a regional ANSA: the instrumentalization of its Shi’a sectarian identity, its embed as a partner and decision-maker in the axis that extends from Beirut to Tehran, via Damascus and Baghdad and the transition into a quasi-army mixing between guerilla and classical warfare tactics.

Since 2013, Hezbollah and the IRGC suggested a new strategy consisting of priorities: Recapturing the strategic cities needed for regime's survival and linking Damascus with the coastal pro-Assad areas, while avoiding the useless exhaustion of the combatting forces in minus vital arenas, namely remote regions. This was a compelling proof that Hezbollah is a partner and participates in the decision-making process even at the highest levels. That said, Hezbollah fought with the SAA in order to strengthen its grip over Damascus, the decision-making capital, and recapture territories which are vital for regime's endurance.¹⁸⁶ Hezbollah's participation –along with the IRGC, a host of domestic and foreign sectarian armed groups, and later on, Russia– to protect its Syrian ally, changed the balance of power on the ground in the regime's favor. One Hezbollah fighter who led military assaults explained that in some battles, they fought alongside the SAA and other factions while in others, it was left entirely for Hezbollah, "from reconnaissance to clean-up."¹⁸⁷ The latter fought fiercely in Damascus and its suburbs, particularly in Rif Dimashq: Douma and Darayya, to protect the capital from rebels' takeover. Further afield, it participated in the siege of Homs that lasted until 2014 and engaged in Dar'a, Quneitra, Deir ez-Zor, Idlib, and Aleppo. Each battle was strategic in its own terms, but Aleppo was the toughest and the costliest in terms of casualties.

Southern Syria, where the tri-borders with Lebanon, Jordan, and the Golan Heights converge, is composed of three provinces: Quneitra, Dar'a and as-Suweida. Understanding the sectarian heterogeneity is key here: As-Suweida is almost entirely

¹⁸⁶ Interview with author. 4 December 2018.

¹⁸⁷ "Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum", on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hizbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

inhabited by the Druze minority, Dar'a is mostly Sunni and Quneitra a mix of both sects. The presence of other sects such as Shi'a and Alawites in these territories is limited. The south is important for the following reasons: First, it is the habitat for the bulk of the Druze minority which is fundamental for the regime's policy of protecting minorities. Second, the Israelis have always been eager to keep it under scrutiny as it converges with their northern border. Third, Dar'a is the city where the wave of the Arab Uprisings disembarked in 2011. Hezbollah has been embroiled, yet unevenly, in all of them. It assisted and trained local inhabitants and pro-regime Druze parties, established small units to target Israel and its units also participated in several clashes.

It didn't take long to militarize and sectarianize the unfolding Uprising that broke out in Dar'a. Quickly, the opposition started forming armed groups that engaged with the SAA, followed by the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Other factions, including jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, later known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), would follow later. As rebels were biting in in Dar'a, the SAA was barely able to keep its positions. In Dar'a, like other provinces in Syria, regional and international powers intervened to fill the vacuum left by the retreat of the SAA and increase their influence by helping overthrow the Assad regime. In 2013, the Military Operation Center (MOC), an operation room hosting military and security personnel from the US, France, the United Kingdom, and Saudi Arabia, had been established in Jordan. This intervention further added to the tumultuous situation that was engulfing Syria: they sponsored rebel groups militarily and financially, trained their troops and directed the confrontations.

The main driver of the conflict was the Iran-Saudi Arabia geopolitical contest. Needless to say that this rivalry pre-dated Syria's civil war: starting with the success of

the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and increasing in post-Saddam Iraq. Further, foreign agendas play prominent roles in deepening sectarian rifts “and endowing sectarian identity with added political relevance” (Haddad, 2020, p.74). As Islamist fighters supported by the CIA and Gulf States formed a coalition and were assertively advancing on the ground, Russia was looking with mounting alarm to situation (Burns, 2019, p.333). Pursuing an increasingly assertive foreign policy and determined to reengage in the Middle East, Russia entered the Syrian conflict in 2015 and struck a deal with the countries operating in the MOC to shut it down (Awad, 2017, p.222). Subsequently, in 2016, the MOC’s role waned and was subsequently dismantled.¹⁸⁸ This imposed a somewhat new balance of power in southern Syria, palpably crippling rebels’ leverage and easing the advance of the SAA and its allied forces. But even with the MOC curtailing its efforts, rebels were putting stiff resistance and didn’t easily succumb.

In parallel, the offensive to recapture Dar’a by the SAA and Hezbollah put them under scrutiny by the IDF. Israeli observers emphasized that by looking at the plan, one can see how the SAA is pushing the rebels towards the Israeli border.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, Israel was keen to leverage the rebels and stop the regime’s biting, especially when this could be an opportunity for Hezbollah by giving them the momentum to operate from closer distance on the Israeli-Syrian border. Hence, some rebels had been in direct contact with the Israelis. Kamal al-Labwani, an anti-Assad political activist, visited Israel pressing to

¹⁸⁸ “Southern Syria: Flame of the region”. 15 October 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel.

Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/723141/-لهيب-الإقليم-الجنوب-السوري>

¹⁸⁹ “Southern Syria: Flame of the region”. 15 October 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel.

Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/723141/-لهيب-الإقليم-الجنوب-السوري>

implement a de facto buffer zone inside Syria,¹⁹⁰ framing Iran, Hezbollah and al-Qaeda as common enemies for Israel and the Syrian people: Collaborating against them is an obligation.¹⁹¹ Further afield, the IDF transported injured rebels to receive treatment in Israeli hospitals where Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's Prime Minister, paid them a visit.¹⁹² The conflictual agendas of all actors were obvious in Dar'a. In fact, the latter provided a perfect example of the complexity of geopolitics in the Middle East: While Iran and Russia backed the regime, the latter well-preserved Israel's interest but the former sought to exploit the chaotic situation to implement its anti-Israel policy with Hezbollah's help. Moreover, suffice it to say here that Syria was not so concerned with this contest.

Bringing the discussion back to the battle for Dar'a, capturing it was not a promenade for pro-Assad forces. Therefore, an armored brigade and an infantry unit of the SAA, along with fighters and prominent generals from the IRGC and Hezbollah, advanced towards the area.¹⁹³ Hezbollah's role on the ground was minor as it merely participated in the offensive to recapture al-Sheikh Miskeen.¹⁹⁴ The former had been under rebels' control for more than two years and given its strategic location on the Damascus-Dar'a road, the battle was extremely brutal for all those involved. In December

¹⁹⁰ "Southern Syria: Flame of the region". 15 October 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel.

Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/723141/-لهيب-الإقليم-الجنوب-السوري>

¹⁹¹ "Kamal al-Labwani is the host of Israeli media: welcome to the symbol of the Syrian resistance", by Muhammad Bdeir. On 11 April 2014. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Arab/29914/كامل-اللبناني-ضيف-الاعلام-العبري-أهلا-برمز-المقاومة-السورية>

¹⁹² "Southern Syria: Flame of the region". 15 October 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel.

Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/723141/-لهيب-الإقليم-الجنوب-السوري>

¹⁹³ "Installation of a defensive line to protect Damascus and a prelude to liberate the suburbs", by Ibrahim al-Amin. On 16 February 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2519/pdf/p02-20150216.pdf>

¹⁹⁴ "Hezbollah fighters seen in Dara'a", by Ahmad Kweider, on 14 June 2013. Syria Direct. Retrieved from: <http://syriadirect.org/news/hezbollah-fighters-seen-in-Dar'a-province/>

2015, the SAA and Hezbollah launched a successful one-month offensive to recapture it. Ahmad Abu Al-Shaim, a rebel leader, asserted that Hezbollah's commander known as al-Shabah was killed in this encounter.¹⁹⁵ The forfeiture of the rebels during this battle implemented mistrust among the opposition.¹⁹⁶ This cleavage had become clearer when Mohammad Saleh al-Harbat, a former FSA leader, injured and receiving treatment in Europe, held HTS responsible for his targeting.¹⁹⁷ In fact, William Burns (2019) argued that in a meeting between US president Barack Obama and his advisors, they discussed how moderate rebels were losing ground for the Sunni extremists (p.333). Such disputes and diverging agendas of opposition groups undermined their military capabilities and leverage pro-Assad forces.

Hezbollah troops also engaged in Kherbet Selem and Izra'. Adjacent to al-Sheikh Miskeen on the eastern side of the Damascus-Dar'a road, both towns were strategically important for the rebels. Had they been captured, the path towards al-Ghouta, a rebel-held city in Damascus' suburbs, would be accessible and therefore a supply route bridging southern Syria with Damascus' outskirts would place the opposition fighters were at the gates of the capital. According to al-Harbat, because of the overlap of these areas

¹⁹⁵ "Forces fight for Strategic Syrian Gateway to South", by Khaled Atallah, Translated by Sami Joe-Abboud, on 8 January 2016. Al-Monitor. Retrieved from: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/syria-regime-advances-al-shaykh-maskin.html#>

¹⁹⁶ "What is the role of the Moc ... The Full Story", 27 August 2016. Orient Net.

Retrieved from: <https://www.orient-news.net/ar/news-show/121424/0/%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D9%83-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B5%D8%A9-%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9>

¹⁹⁷ "Southern Syria: Flame of the region". 15 October 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/723141/الجنوب-السوري-لهيب-الإقليم->

with Rif Dimashk, we [FSA] thought we were closing up on Damascus and Assad's breakdown was imminent.¹⁹⁸ Izra' was challenging for the FSA because large numbers of its inhabitants were pro-regime and were previously trained by Hezbollah who also held ground to fight with them. So when clashes erupted, all civilians were evacuated whereas high ranking officers and their families maintained their positions to engage.¹⁹⁹ Of course, Hezbollah's military bolster crippled rebels' chances of breakthrough. Despite the minor role it played if compared with that of al-Qusayr and al-Qalamoun, Hezbollah was becoming increasingly operational across Syria and transitioning into a regional ANSA.

As the situation disintegrated into chaos, Busra al-Sham, a remote town in Dar'a converging with as-Suweida and inhabited by both Sunni and Shi'a, was divided along sectarian lines: Pro-Assad Shi'a vs anti-Assad Sunni. Sullivan (2014) confirmed that small Hezbollah units were sent to Busra, along with Iraqi groups, to train and arm their Shi'a comrades (2015). This was not a Sunni-Shi'a contest in its sectarian meaning as neither was fighting for doctrinal truths but the instrumentalization of sectarian identity was in its heyday. Subsequently, in March 2015, battles erupted when HTS and the FSA attacked the positions of the SAA and Hezbollah in the village. "Busra sits on the edges of as-Suweida", a Druze fighter who participated in the battle said, "so we feared that its capture could transform it to a base from where HTS and other Islamist groups could orchestrate attacks against us; thereby, a lot of Druze fighters rushed to the battle."²⁰⁰ 21 March

¹⁹⁸ "Southern Syria: Flame of the region". 15 October 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: [http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/723141/-لهيب-الإقليم-الجنوب-السوري/](http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/723141/-لهيب-الإقليم-الجنوب-السوري)

¹⁹⁹ "Hezbollah fighters seen in Dara'a", by Ahmad Kweider, on 14 June 2013. Syria Direct. Retrieved from: <http://syriadirect.org/news/hezbollah-fighters-seen-in-Dar'a-province/>

²⁰⁰ Interview with author. On 5 December 2018.

marked the first confrontation and the Druze fighter confirmed that Hezbollah units were fighting along with the SAA, yet, four days later, Hezbollah retreated accompanied by the Shi'a residents culminating in the capture of some SAA soldiers and taking them hostages by the opposition. Hezbollah lost three fighters in this battle and many Shi'a and Druze citizens were also killed.²⁰¹ Sectarian identity is one, yet important, of an array of factors driving the Syrian conflict; however, needless to say that the Shi'a identity of Busra's citizens was the only reason behind Hezbollah's deployment of its troops in such remote towns.

In the neighboring region of as-Suweida, a Druze enclave, most citizens have remained loyal to Assad's regime. Although Hezbollah did not fight any battle in as-Suweida, nor did it have any presence on the ground, it played a role in training and assisting certain Druze groups in order to protect their villages from ISIS and HTS attacks. Indeed, reports suggested that Hezbollah has trained some local Druze in self-defense.²⁰² It is necessary to mention here that while some Druze fought in the ranks of the SAA and other pro-regime groups, some others preferred to defend their hometowns without further advance. In any case, as-Suweida has barely witnessed confrontations. The costliest attack took place in July 2018 when ISIS raided as-Suweida killing more than 200 Druze and kidnapping 30 women and children.²⁰³ However, the situation in Quneitra

²⁰¹ Interview with author. On 5 December 2018.

²⁰² "Following Killing of Hezbollah Operative Jihad Moughniyeh, New Information Comes to Light Regarding Hezbollah". On 28 January 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.memri.org/reports/following-killing-hizbullah-operative-jihad-mughniyah-new-information-comes-light-regarding>

²⁰³ Hudson, J., "Lawmakers raise alarm about attacks against Syria's Druze population", in The Washington Post, 8 November 2018, accessed on 30 July 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/lawmakers-raise-alarm-about->

was more critical as it was witnessing fierce battles between pro-regime Druze villages and Sunni jihadists, specifically HTS.

Overlooking large distances of southern Lebanon and much of southern Syria and rich in natural resources, particularly water, Quneitra was occupied in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the IDF did not fully withdraw from the area keeping parts of the Golan Heights under its control (Zena Agha, 2018). As mentioned above, Israel scrutinized southern Syria fearing a backlash on its northern border, namely in Quneitra. Netanyahu had warned that Hezbollah fighters are approaching toward the Israeli border to execute Iran's plan through choking Israel.²⁰⁴ His suspicions were in place, however. Saouli (2019) argued that "Hezbollah has sought to transform its presence in the collapsed state into an opportunity to fight Israel. As early as 2013, Nasrallah expressed his willingness to support popular resistance against Israel in Syria. Hezbollah and Iran wanted, in addition to south Lebanon, another base from which to fight their Zionist enemy. Hezbollah dispatched several exploratory missions to the area surrounding the Golan Heights" (p.193). Of course, Israel had pledged frustrate would-be regional threat for its security. Jacob Amidor, former advisor of Israel's Prime Minister, commented that "they [Hezbollah and the IRGC] tried to build a base in Quneitra, and work against Israel and the latter said that it will target anything that threatens it. Golan is sensitive and vital for us and some

[isis-attacks-against-syrias-druze-population/2018/11/07/333c5872-b360-495a-92af-f5ef6ef50a73_story.html?utm_term=.82ac56dca863](https://www.al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2518/pdf/p13-20150214.pdf)

²⁰⁴ "Israel: we are worried of Hezbollah's deployment facing the Golan", by Ali Haidar. On 14 February 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: [https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2518/pdf/p13-20150214.pdf](https://www.al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2518/pdf/p13-20150214.pdf)

settlements are close to the borders. Therefore, we do not plan on letting Hezbollah and the Iranians harm us”.²⁰⁵

Accordingly, on 18 January 2015, Israeli aircraft targeted a convoy in Quneitra, near the Golan Heights, killing 6 Hezbollah members, among them was Jihad, son of Imad Moughniyeh, and Mohammad Issa, a top-notch commander, along with one IRGC General Mohammad Ali Allahdadi.²⁰⁶ Three days before, Nasrallah had denied in an interview with al-Mayadeen channel, a direct role for Hezbollah in the Golan Heights saying that “what is happening in the Golan is Syrian resistance and Hezbollah has no military force carrying out resistance operations there. However, we might be helping, assisting and training some resistance groups, or providing some of their needs.”²⁰⁷ This attack undermined Nasrallah’s pledge and was an evidence of Hezbollah’s maneuvers in southern Syria along with the IRGC.²⁰⁸ Wiam Wahhab, former Lebanese Minister whose party is involved in fighting in Druze areas, stressed that the Hezbollah operatives killed in the airstrike, along with the IRGC members, had trained a lot of Druze in Syria in order to defend their villages from possible forays.²⁰⁹ Targeted in Quneitra, Hezbollah retaliated

²⁰⁵ “Southern Syria: Flame of the region”. 15 October 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/723141/-لهيب-الإقليم-الجنوب-السوري>

²⁰⁶ “Following Killing of Hezbollah Operative Jihad Moughniyeh, New Information Comes to Light Regarding Hezbollah”. On 28 January 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.memri.org/reports/following-killing-hizbullah-operative-jihad-mughniyah-new-information-comes-light-regarding>

²⁰⁷ “Following Killing of Hezbollah Operative Jihad Moughniyeh, New Information Comes to Light Regarding Hezbollah”. On 28 January 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.memri.org/reports/following-killing-hizbullah-operative-jihad-mughniyah-new-information-comes-light-regarding>

²⁰⁸ “The resistance: Turn to the Golan”, by Wafiq Kanso. on 21 January 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Home-Page/14363-المقاومة-الى-الجولان-د>

²⁰⁹ “Following Killing of Hezbollah Operative Jihad Moughniyeh, New Information Comes to Light Regarding Hezbollah”. On 28 January 2015. Retrieved from:

from Lebanon when 10 days later, its fighters attacked an IDF convoy while patrolling the Israeli-Lebanese borders. The point to make by retaliating from south Lebanon rather than Syria was palpably that both fronts are united against Israel in case of war.

Of course, from the regime's point of view this was not the right time, if ever, for such cross-border raids or maneuvers targeting Israeli forces. "In 1974," Henry Kissinger (2014) opined, "Syria and Israel concluded a disengagement agreement to define and protect the military front lines between the two countries. This arrangement has been maintained for four decades, through wars and terrorism and even during the chaos of the Syrian civil war" (p.116). By other words, Syria shared the anti-Israel political stance with Iran and Hezbollah but this does not necessarily mean its willingness to go to war. Suffice it to say that Syria might have wanted to keep Hezbollah at bay on the south. Nevertheless, the state failure and political and military vacuum that was engulfing Syria gave more room to maneuver for all actors, Iran and Hezbollah, for instance. That said, some observers argued that the death of an Iranian commander along with Hezbollah's fighters had given the green light from Iran to react.²¹⁰ Iran gave its blessing: "the retaliation will be firm and decisive."²¹¹ Additionally, Hussein Sheikh al-Islam, advisor to the President of the Iranian Islamic Shura Council, stressed that "the resistance

<https://www.memri.org/reports/following-killing-hizbullah-operative-jihad-mughniyah-new-information-comes-light-regarding>

²¹⁰ "The strategic messages behind Hezbollah's operation", by Sami Kleib. On 29 January 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2505/pdf/p03-20150129.pdf>

²¹¹ "Tehran loomed to open the Golan front: the retaliation will be decisive", on 20 January 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Home-Page/14283/طهران-تلو-ح-يفتح-جبهة-الجولان-الرد-سيكون-حاسما>

(Hezbollah) will activate the Golan front to respond to the Israeli miscalculations.”²¹² This does not mean that Iran was directing Hezbollah’s operation, but was definitely part of the new rules of engagement without interfering in the details. In effect, this imposed a somewhat burden on Hezbollah pressuring it to retaliate. It was more a matter of deterrence against Israel to maintain the power balance. The rapid procedures that followed the operation proved that Hezbollah had taken an immediate decision to retaliate. On 22 January, 4 days after the Quneitra attack, al-Akhbar newspaper alleged that individuals in Hezbollah started putting suggestions on the table and behaving as the retaliation is certain.²¹³ There is no doubt that Hezbollah operated in conjunction with the Quds Force in al-Quneitra but not as a puppet for Tehran.

In September 2017, an Israeli “Patriot” missile shot down an Iranian drone sent by Hezbollah into Israel through the Golan Heights.²¹⁴ Likewise, rockets had been fired into the Golan and the Galilee from Syria in late August and Israel accused the IRGC for orchestrating the operations.²¹⁵ Jihad Moughniyeh and the group that were targeted in the Golan were not the only ones operating in the area, Samir al-Quntar, liberated from Israeli prison during the 2008 exchange, also did.²¹⁶ In cooperation with the IRGC, al-

²¹² “Tehran loomed to open the Golan front: the retaliation will be decisive”, on 20 January 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Home-Page/14283/طهران-تلو-ح-يفتح-جبهة-الجولان-الرد-سيكون-حاسما>

²¹³ “Panic in Israel”, by Yehya Dbouk. On 22 January 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2499/pdf/p02-20150122.pdf>

²¹⁴ “Israel shots down a drone launched by Hezbollah from Damascus”, on 19 September 2017. Al-nahar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://www.annahar.com/article/665112-إسرائيل-أسقطنا-طائرة-من-دون-طيار-فوق-مرتفعات-الجولان>

²¹⁵ “A read into the Israeli escalation”, by Yehya Dbouk. On 22 August 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2672/pdf/p11-20150822.pdf>

²¹⁶ Interview with author. 5 December 2018.

Quntar established a group of local Druze aiming to launch operations against Israel. They were trained and armed by Hezbollah and were tested by conducting clandestine missions against rebel groups. One week after shelling rockets into Israel, al-Quntar's Druze assistant, Mouwafak Badriyye, was assassinated by an Israeli strike while driving his car near Damascus.²¹⁷ In December 2015, al-Quntar was also killed when an Israeli airstrike targeted his apartment in Jaramana, Damascus' outskirts (Saouli, 2019, p.193). Awad (2017) confirmed that Israel had assassinated al-Quntar and other operatives who were involved in forming a resistance group in the Golan (p.221). It appeared as if all those involved in operational work against Israel in southern Syria were killed and as mentioned earlier, of course, with Russia's consent.

Ghaidaa Hetou (2019) argued that the Iraqi group Harakat al-Noujaba', on Iran's request, organized the Golan Liberation Brigade pledging to expel the IDF from the Golan Heights and destroy Israel (p.45). Therefore, Hezbollah and other Shi'a groups, in tandem with the IRGC, were operating for the interest of the axis on Israel's northern borders, an agenda that Assad didn't seem to share with his allies. Nasrallah had clearly stated that "the Israeli enemy must know that if an Israeli war is launched against Syria or Lebanon, it cannot be sure that the fighting will remain Lebanese-Israeli, or Syrian-Israeli, this could open the door for thousands, even hundreds of thousands of fighters from all over the Arab and Islamic world to participate –from Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan."²¹⁸ Few days later, Qais Khaz'ali, secretary general 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq, a pro-

²¹⁷ Interview with author. 5 December 2018.

²¹⁸ "Hezbollah says future Israel war could draw fighters from Iran, Iraq, elsewhere", on June 2017. Reuters. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-middeast-crisis-hezbollah/hezbollah-says-future-war-with-israel-could-draw-fighters-from-across-region-idUSKBN19E1X4>

Iran Iraqi faction, visited south Lebanon and the footage distributed has shown him standing on the Lebanese-Israeli border wearing military outfits. He thereafter said that his visit to south Lebanon wearing his military outfit was a message for Israel, and that “in the event of a military confrontation with the latter and its entire host of supporters, we [the axis] will prevail.”²¹⁹ Needless to say that this was a translation of Nasrallah’s earlier pledge. Further afield, Nasrallah was palpably trusted to speak in the name of the axis extending from Tehran to Beirut, via Damascus and Baghdad and participated in the decision-making to mobilize the armed groups within the axis if needed.

Hezbollah’s troops also engaged along with the SAA and the National Defense Force (NDF), a pro-regime armed group, in the clashes in Damascus and its suburbs. In the early stages of the war, Hezbollah and Iraqi and Afghani Shi’a factions fought in Sayyida Zeinab, in Damascus’ outskirts to protect it from jihadists attacks who had promised to destroy the Mosque located in the city. Sayyida Zeinab converges with the Damascus airport road and sits between western and eastern Ghouta making it a geostrategic town. This was paralleled with its gradual engagement in al-Qusayr. It was hard to escape the sect-centricity of Hezbollah’s engagement due to its binary pledge to defend a Shi’a shrine and Shi’a citizens. It is plainly true that anti-Hezbollah mottos were chanted in many cities from the outset and sectarian narratives started reiterating across Syria such as, for instance, “*al-Masihiyun ila Beirut wa al-Alawiyun fil-tabut*” (The Christians to Beirut, and the Alawites in the coffin) implementing fear among sectarian

²¹⁹ “Iraqi Shiite militia leader Qais Khazali: The true enemies of the Imam Mahdi are the Jews, Israelis and Zionists”, on 20 December 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.memri.org/tv/%3Airaqi-shiite-militia-leader-khazali-south-lebanon-visit-message-to-israelis>

and ethnic minorities (Gabriel Pinto, 2017, p.128), but the mere intervention to protect Shi'a shrines and towns further added to the Sunni-Shi'a rift. This intervention was necessary and Hezbollah was going to engage either way because the implosion of Assad's regime would be a debacle for the axis altogether. To be sure, had it not adopted a sectarian mobilization agenda it would've had to find other justifications to protect its geopolitical interest.

Now settled in Sayyida Zeinab town, Hezbollah built a buffer zone to thwart the advance of the opposition groups and began increasingly biting the surrounding villages that were previously captured by both moderate and jihadist anti-Assad groups, namely the FSA, HTS and Ayn al-Sham, respectively. However, by mid-2013, Jaish al-Islam, backed by the MOC, specifically Saudi Arabia, became the dominant faction in eastern Ghouta,²²⁰ and soon 15000 soldiers would be fighting under the command of its leader, Zahran Alloush.²²¹ Eastern Ghouta is located about 10 kilometers from central Damascus, with a population of 400000, making it vital for both regime and rebels. Sitting at the edges of Damascus, bellicose jihadist groups were eager to make the final move on the regime's decision-making capital. For this reason, securing these adjacent areas was a priority for Hezbollah and the regime to prevent dissent from closing up on the capital. Thus, "the regime, with strong participation from Hezbollah, has attempted to regain control of eastern Ghouta" (Saouli, 2019, p.191).

²²⁰ "Eastern Ghout: Chaos in the conflict and glut of armies", by Laith al-Khatib. On 18 December 2013. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2179/pdf/p08-20131218.pdf>
<https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2179/pdf/p09-20131218.pdf>

²²¹ "Southern Syria: Flame of the region". 15 October 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/723141/الجنوب-السوري-لهيب-الإقليم/>

Sullivan (2014) argued that Hezbollah spearheaded battles in eastern Ghouta in 2013 along with Iraqi Shi'a factions. These offensives helped secure the southern entrance towards Damascus. Subsequently, Sullivan (2014) pursued, the regime rained dissent neighborhoods with barrages of rockets and aerial bombardment and Hezbollah alongside the Iraqi Shi'a militants, were left to lead the ground assaults culminating in the capture of four neighborhoods: Zyabiyeh, Babila, Bahdaliyeh, and al Shamlaneh. They fought alongside the SAA in al-Mouaddamiyeh, southwest of Damascus (p.19). A Lebanese citizen living in Jaramana, adjacent to these areas, said that Hezbollah didn't seize these villages but it only surrounded them to prevent rebels' advance towards Sayyida Zeinab. But Beit Sahem, a strategic village overlooking the airport highway, was used by rebels to shoot at passing cars, therefore, small units of Hezbollah worked on securing it to prevent further assaults.²²² These confrontations were fundamental as Hezbollah helped the regime alter the balance of power in its favor. The sectarian mobilization of both Sunni and Shi'a groups added more salt to the wound. However, saying that such confrontations were primarily driven by sectarian identities is a mischaracterization of the situation. Indeed, Hezbollah leapt first in order to protect Sayyida Zeinab's shrine but it was not seeking religious and sectarian truth. Doctrinal belief was a mobilizational tool but was not the only driver of the conflict. Rather, the conflict was driven, by and large, by both geopolitical and sectarian identity.

Hezbollah's units have undergone some setbacks amid fierce resistance by the opposition in Rif Dimashk. Occasionally, the frontline became a two-lane route of counterattacks between both sides during which many Hezbollah fighters were lost in

²²² Interview with author. 7 December 2018.

battle. One Hezbollah commander in the area confirmed that his forces were overran from several positions by rebel fighters in al-Ghouta (Sullivan, 2014, p.20). In late November 2013, it had lost 24 combatants all at once during a counterattack by rebels in eastern Ghouta (Sullivan, p.22). However, the opposition groups were kept at bay due to the continuous bombardment which crippled them and leveraged the attacking forces. Therefore, Hezbollah deployed field commanders to eastern Ghouta to plan and assist the regime in its assaults continuously clashing face-to-face with the armed groups. In these neighborhoods, Hezbollah had to merge between its experience in guerilla warfare and classical army tactics and formations. While it generally adopted large army formations backed by artillery and aerial bombardments, when necessary, it infiltrated top-notch small units to execute hit-and-run operations. Bit by bit, Hezbollah's modus operandi was shaping it as a quasi-army.

In Douma, a large neighborhood in eastern Ghouta, Hezbollah directed assaults alongside the 4th army division, one of the most trained and well-equipped divisions in the SAA led by Maher al-Assad, Bachar's brother.²²³ Subsequently, they were able to overrun Ajnad al-Sham, an opposition group, in Darayya after months of fierce clashes.²²⁴ The latter was vital for opposition and regime alike, as it is located on the periphery of the Mazzeh military airport which was used by the regime to conduct airstrikes against rebel strongholds. There, Hezbollah's units played a decisive role in altering the balance of

²²³ "From Qusayr to Aleppo: The Syrian Army's 4th Division and Hezbollah Remain Undefeated", by Leith Fadel, on 18 December 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/hezbollah-syrian-army-advance-to-abu-rayal-in-southern-aleppo-as-more-iraqi-paramilitary-arrive/>

²²⁴ "Syrian Army captures over 25 Farms in Southern Darayya", by Leith Fadel, on 24 June 2016. Al Masdar. Retrieved from: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-army-captures-25-farms-southern-darayya-map/>

power in the regime's favor.²²⁵ Further afield, in February 2014, Hezbollah, along with the SAA, orchestrated an ambush at the edge of al-Atiba, in eastern Ghouta, killing dozens of rebels.²²⁶ Needless to say that Hezbollah's special units had shown their unique capabilities in ambushes behind enemy lines as they were accustomed to such types of operations that they executed against the IDF in south Lebanon.

For weeks, Hezbollah and the NDF also led the ground assault in al-Mleha while the Syrian air force bombarded it and rained it with barrages of land-to-land missiles.²²⁷ In mid-September, Hezbollah and the pro-Assad factions participated in the attacks against the rebel-held neighborhoods of al-Hajar al-Aswad and al-Yarmouk (Sullivan, 2014, p.20). The latter was the biggest Palestinian camp in Syria which would be later captured by ISIS fighters. In October, the SAA, Hezbollah, the NDF and Shi'a Iraqi militants captured few more areas such as al-Boueida and Sheikh Omar. In November, they seized Sbeineh, and therefore, by December they had controlled most of Damascus' southern flank (Sullivan, 2014, p.20). All these confrontations reflected Hezbollah's further embed as a partner in the axis proving to be a stalwart ally for the SAA in the battlefield. As a matter of fact, Hezbollah's engagement in al-Ghouta was necessary because rebels

²²⁵ "From Qusayr to Aleppo: The Syrian Army's 4th Division and Hezbollah Remain Undeclared", by Leith Fadel, on 18 December 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/hezbollah-syrian-army-advance-to-abu-royal-in-southern-aleppo-as-more-iraqi-paramilitary-arrive/>

²²⁶ "Damascus declares the death of 175 opposition fighters", on 27 February 2014. Al-nahar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/111886-دمشق-تعلن-مقتل-175-من-مقاتلي-المعارضة-في-غارة-في-الغوطة-المرصد-3300-قتيل-في-في-مكمن-الغوطة-المرصد-3300-قتيل-في>

²²⁷ "Regime Land-to-Land missiles rains al-Mleha and Hezbollah leads the ground Assault, on 23 June 2014. Al-nahar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://www.annahar.com/article/144469-صواريخ-أرض-أرض-النظامية-تمطر-المليحة-وحزب-الله-يهتم-بالحجومات-البرية>

had been biting at the edges of Damascus. These fights generated further nemesis among Sunni rebels, who were mostly Islamists in al-Ghouta and sponsored by Saudi Arabia. With the help of its allies, the regime hardly stopped the advance of the opposition and later managed to encircle anti-regime fighters in al-Ghouta. Yet, the battle for eastern Ghouta wouldn't end until 2018 when the opposition groups bargained a deal with the regime, supervised by Russia, allowing them to journey towards the pro-rebel province of Idlib, in northwestern Syria, putting an end to one of the bloodiest confrontations during Syria's civil war.

Homs was another city where Hezbollah operated. It had been widely detailed in the previous section how Hezbollah started its gradual integration in Syria's conflict through al-Qusayr. The latter, part of Homs's province that converges with Lebanon's Beqaa valey, was one of the most strategic cities. A military commander in the SAA said that by capturing al-Qusayr, one major supply route towards the city of Homs was no longer available for the opposition.²²⁸ Subsequently, pro-regime forces, backed by Hezbollah, recaptured Tal Kalakh, a rebel-held town adjacent to al-Qusayr and the Lebanese border, that was used as a smuggling route for weapons and fighters from Sunni areas in Lebanon. When these areas were secured and the rebel supply route from northern Lebanon was cut off, Hezbollah joined the SAA and the NDF in the battle for the city of Homs. "Mohammad Mroueh, a member of the Syrian National Council, said Hezbollah and Iran have been training the militias Assad is using for street fighting in Homs and have established, together with Iranian officials, operations rooms in the city.

²²⁸ "Al-Khalidiyye: The morale stronghold", by Ogarite Dandash. On 8 August 2013. Al-Mayadeen Channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/662791/-/الخالدية--المعقل-المعنوي>

When there is an area where the army and the militia encounter stiff resistance, they're calling Hezbollah to do the fighting."²²⁹ This does not mean that Hezbollah was getting all jobs done, but its fighters were more accustomed to street fights than the SAA which would develop such skills in the ensuing years.

Bab Amr neighborhood was a symbol of the Syrian uprising as it became a dissent's stronghold from the outset. Hezbollah's role was decisive in regaining Bab Amr but rebels counter-attacked recapturing what they had lost and killed several SAA soldiers while the rest withdrew. However, Hezbollah and the SAA executed a lethal blow against the opposition ending their presence in the area. Isabel Nassif (2014) emphasized that Hezbollah played a main role in regime prevail over Homs. Classical army formations and tactics were less effective in these street fights and the SAA was more accustomed to classical warfare and army formations than these face-to-face street combats. Despite the small numbers of the troops it deployed if compared with the SAA, they were top-notch fighters with more experience in these types of confrontations. Bit by bit, Hezbollah was expanding across vast swathes of the country paving the way for the transition into a quasi-army. This, after all, was one among three variables that transitioned Hezbollah into a regional ANSA.

The fall of Bab Amr was a headshot for the rebels. Next, the SAA, backed by Hezbollah and the NDF, pushed towards Khaled Ibn al-Walid Mosque, located at the end of al-Khalidiyyeh neighborhood. This plan aimed at separating it from the old city, and by

²²⁹ "Insight: By relying on Iran, Syria's Assad risks irrelevance", by Khaled Yacoub Oweis. On 21 July 2013. Reuters. Retrieved from: <https://in.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-assad-insight/insight-by-relying-on-iran-syrias-assad-risks-irrelevance-idINBRE96K03020130721>

doing so, rebel-held neighborhoods in Homs would be disconnected. Sullivan (2014) emphasized that Hezbollah's role in these battles was limited to "specialized military assistance", i.e. snipers and special units (p.17). Needless to say that at this point, Hezbollah's troops had proved their ability to deliver. These battles were fierce as rebels zealously defended their enclave delaying the advance of the attacking forces. Sullivan (2014) confirmed that Hezbollah and pro-regime forces "launched a three-pronged attack on Khalidiyyeh slowly fighting their way through the neighborhood using tanks, rockets and mortars" (p.8). Slowly, Hezbollah units were getting accustomed to this new type of warfare where they were buttressed by a whopping range of artillery.

Capturing al-Khalidiyyeh led to the domino demise of the city's districts. Further afield, Hezbollah and other pro-Iran groups, such as Quwwat al-Ridha and Badr Organization, joined the SAA in recapturing Homs in May 2014. The latter groups were Shi'a armed factions that adopted *wilayat al-faqih* doctrine and operated under Tehran's supervision. Of course, most actors that meddled in Syria's chaos adopted a policy of sectarian mobilization and instrumentalization of sectarian identity, but, for our purposes, Hezbollah instrumentalized its Shi'a sectarian identity by recruiting Shi'a fighters where possible. The focus on recruiting Shi'a fighters in order to rout rebels who happened to be Sunni, culminated in increasing Sunni-Shi'a antagonism. The more Hezbollah implemented a sectarian mobilization agenda, the more Sunni animus skyrocketed, the less room was left for reconciliation. In fact, if anything, this sectarian agenda was vital for Hezbollah's transition into a regional ANSA.

By extension, "the Fifth Storming Corps spearheaded the pro-regime offensive that recaptured Palmyra from ISIS in March 2017 with backing from Russia, Iran, and

Lebanese Hezbollah” (Christopher Kozak, 2017). Al-Hassan (2017) opined that Hezbollah participated in the decision-making process and planning along with Russia and Syria’s regime, and this meant a recognition of its partnership not only in battles but also in leadership (p.138). Sullivan (2014) seconded that the IRGC, leaders from the SAA and Hezbollah coordinated operations in Syria at a headquarter in Damascus (p.23-24). This was a damning proof that Hezbollah is a partner in the axis rather than a surrogate. In short, day by day, Hezbollah was delving into a conflict that was only shaping power relations in Syria, but also that of the region, and for our purposes, shaping Hezbollah as a vital regional ANSA.

Alexander Corbeil (2017) contended that Hezbollah got also engaged as far as Deir ez-Zor. In 2016, it helped establishing Zain al-Abideen Brigade, a group of almost 120 fighter who were transported by regime Helicopters to the city.²³⁰ Brief though it was, its presence in Deir ez-Zor was significant. In some ways, it was a message for regional and international players that Hezbollah is operating in this remote area which stands on the strategical route from Iraq to Syria. It is necessary to mention here that when ISIS poured into Syria from Iraq, they captured most of Deir ez-Zor alerting all players operating in Syria. Further afield, the US-backed Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria had prevailed in al-Hasaka and were eyeing to advance towards al-Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. All this did not diverge the attention of state and non-state actors fighting in tandem with Assad regime who were hence rushing to recapture it. The battle for Deir ez-Zor had become a race for geopolitical leverage between rivals. In fact, the SAA hadn’t fully

²³⁰ “Hezbollah forms Zein al-Abideen Brigade Militia in Deir el Zor”, on 20 June 2016. Retrieved from: <http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/31210/Hezbollah-Forms-Abedeen-Brigade-Militia-Deir-Zor-Activist>

retreated from the city and small troops were trying to maintain positions. Nevertheless, SAA troops and Hezbollah fighters were besieged in the airport of Deir ez-Zor for 8 months. By extension, in September 2017, the axis forces backed by the Russian air force, launched a successful offensive to break the siege against the airport. This in turn has driven a shift in the course of the battles in northwestern Syria. What the axis, namely Iran and Hezbollah, cared for in such a remote city was its strategic location at the border between Iraq and Syria; therefore, bridging the overland route from Beirut to Tehran in this area.

The significance of Hezbollah's presence there was directly reflected as one of Hezbollah's field commanders, a.k.a. Abou Mustafa, appeared before cameras in an unusual act for Hezbollah's military personnel. To illustrate, this appearance was a precedent for Hezbollah but it revealed the importance of the battle for Deir ez-Zor. "I want to thank Iran and Russia", Abou Mustafa stressed, "for their support during the siege and amid the daily raids that ISIS conducted against us." Thereafter, he opened a small piece of paper and read what was written on it: "Deir ez-Zor wouldn't have been able to resist without the courage of the entrapped fighters and those who came from the outside to help break the siege imposed on the airport. This includes all partners within the axis: Syrians, Russians, Iranians and Lebanese. This is a strategic triumph." The point to make here is that this was not merely an arm-stretch by Hezbollah, but the latter was palpably participating in the reshaping of the new regional order. The reporter then asked him about the reason of this first time appearance: "Hezbollah", he answered, "is a partner in this axis that contains Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine and therefore my appearance is a decision taken by Sayyed Nasrallah and the leadership. We wanted to

make it clear that we are not hiding, on the contrary, we are fighting all over Syria and the current situation needed our appearance before cameras”.²³¹

The fact that such statement came from a military commander, it meant that Hezbollah was declaring itself a regional player and not only a partner and decision-maker, but also one that speaks on behalf of the whole axis. Directly after opening the road towards the airport, Hezbollah, along with Iranians and Iraqi Shi'a factions, stressed that its fighters are heading to liberate 'Abu Kamal', a city in eastern Deir ez-Zor that converges with Iraq's borders. Hezbollah's media described it as a highly strategic town and the operation was named "Fajr 3" (Dawn 3).²³² "The meeting of Iraqi and Syrian forces in the Abu Kamal border region in late 2017 reflected a strategic transformation in the Middle East: the carving of a Tehran–Baghdad–Damascus–Beirut land route" (Saouli, 2019, p.200). After all, geography matters. And as mentioned in the previous section, the determination to capture certain routes and strategic cities were at the core of the conflict.

Further north, Hezbollah played minor roles in both Lattakia and Hama where fights were not as heavy as other provinces. It helped the SAA regain Kasab, a mostly Armenian-inhabited town on the shores of Lattakia, the Alawiite dominated protectorate and the reservoir that continuously poured regime forces with fighters.²³³ For them, it was

²³¹ "Hezbollah's field commander in Deir ez-Zor: Braking the siege of the airport is a strategic triumph", on 9 September 2017. Al-Mayadeen Channel. Retrieved from:

<http://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/822848/details>

²³² "Would the American-Russian competition on Deir ez-Zor heat up?", on 18 September 2017. An-Nahar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from:

<https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/663833-التي-تتحول-هل-الزور-دير-الروسى-على-دير-الزور-هل-يتحول>

ساختنا

²³³ "The Syrian army retakes Kasab in Lattakia and air raids on ISIS in Raqqa and al-Hasaka", on 16 June 2014. An-Nahar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from:

<https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/142055-الجيش-السوري-استعاد-كسب-بالاذقية-وغارات-على-داعش-في-الرقعة-والحسكة>

a matter of existence and there was no middle ground. From their point of view, they either win or the blowback will be insurmountable. Anyhow, Hezbollah was able to capture the hills that overlooks the town giving the SAA leverage for their advance,²³⁴ easing the recapture of the village by the advancing forces. Besides, the Russians buttressed an offensive that aimed at recapturing territories from the sea of Lattakia to the shores of the Euphrates river on the Iraqi borders; therefore, the operation was dubbed “From Sea to River”. Hezbollah did not only participate in the ground battles, but was also a partner in the operation room that included Russian, Iranian and Syrian officers.²³⁵ This day by day on-the-ground coordination was a reflection of a broader political and military partnership within the axis, and in certain cities, a coordination with Russia. “Most Hezbollah units and Iranians were concentrated in Sahl al-Ghab, namely Jurin front, and from their they were also able to advance towards Aleppo. However, they faced fierce rebel resistance and Hezbollah lost many fighters during these battles.”²³⁶ Hence, these confrontations were a cul-de-sac and Hezbollah’s troops were unable to prevail. It was mentioned earlier that there was no limit for Hezbollah’s firepower as they were bolstered by large quantities of ammo, in addition to the aerial and rockets support. That said, the loss of certain battles, such as in Sahl al-Ghab, makes one wonders if Hezbollah’s fighters would have been able to triumph without this backup.

²³⁴ “The Syrian army retakes Kasab on the Turkish borders and the air force attacks ISIS positions, on 16 June 2014. An-Nahar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/142015--على-الحدود-مع-ترمع-الجيش-السوري-يستعيد-كسب-على-الحدود-مع-ترمع>
[تركيا-وسلاح-الجو-يغير-على-مواقع-لدا-عش](https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/142015--على-الحدود-مع-ترمع-الجيش-السوري-يستعيد-كسب-على-الحدود-مع-ترمع)

²³⁵ “The Beginning of the big operation: From sea to river”, by Ibrahim al-Amin. On 8 October 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2710/pdf/p02-20151008.pdf>

²³⁶ Interview with author. On 23 November 2018.

Although each battle conducted in Syria was strategic in its own terms, Aleppo, like al-Qusayr, was a turning point for the course of the conflict. The Capital of northern Syria and converging with Turkey, Aleppo became ground-zero in the confrontation between most actors which were directly and indirectly engagement in Syria's civil war. While the southeast of Aleppo's countryside was dominated by ISIS, and the west by Turkish-backed factions such as HTS, Ahrar al Sham, Liwa' al Tawheed and Nouredin al-Zanki, in the northern countryside, the SAA's presence was limited to Minigh military airport which was later lost to the opposition, and two Shi'a villages, Nubbul and al-Zahra'. Afrin was controlled by the Kurds. In 2013, the SAA and the opposition equally shared the control of the city of Aleppo. "For long stretches of 2013 there was only one area where residents of the divided city of Aleppo could pass between the rebel-held east and the regime-held west: Bustan al-Qasr checkpoint nicknamed the Crossing of Death" (Phillips, 2018, p.147). Further, Salah el-Deen, the first neighborhood where rebels surfaced in Aleppo, was equally split between both sides. And when the axis forces overran the opposition groups in December 2016, it was from this neighborhood that the last rebel retreated.²³⁷

Where Hezbollah is concerned, its troops were deployed to Aleppo in the aftermath of al-Qusayr's battle,²³⁸ and played a central role, in tandem with the SAA and NDF, in recapturing it. Reports suggest that 3000 Hezbollah fighters were transferred to Aleppo,

²³⁷ "From the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo", by Ogarite Dandash. On 23 March 2017. Al-Mayadeen Channel. Retrieved from:

<http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/743031/من-الاحياء-الشرقية-في-حلب->

²³⁸ "The Battle for Aleppo", by Liam Durfee, Conor McCormick & Stella Peisch. On 13 June 2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/battle-aleppo>

including the Military Academy and Nubbul and al-Zahra'.²³⁹ Elaborating about the latter towns is necessary here to understand Hezbollah's maneuvers in the area. Needless to say that sectarian identity was one of an array of factors driving the conflict despite, of course, not being the causal factor. Nowhere have sectarian dynamics been more visible than in Syria, and due to the Shi'a identity of the inhabitants of Nubbul and al-Zahra', they have captured the attention of Sunni jihadist groups and pressed Hezbollah to rush headlong in order to safeguard their Shi'a brethren. It has been mentioned many times by now that Hezbollah did not only adopt a sectarian mobilization agenda to justify its engagement in the civil war but it was also eager to protect Shi'a citizens where possible.

By mid-June 2013, reports started confirming that jihadist factions were conducting assaults against the Shi'a towns 35 km from the Turkish borders.²⁴⁰ In fact, since the SAA retreated from their positions in Aleppo under heavy rebel attacks, Nubbul and al-Zahra' were besieged and only accessible by helicopters. Tensions surfaced when Shi'a civilians were kidnapped and their families retaliated by abducting Sunni civilians for a bargain. Stating this is not meant to malign Sunnis and highlight a Shi'a victimhood. Rather, this was part of the broader Sunni-Shi'a schism that emerged in the post-2003 Iraq and metastasized into Syria in the post-conflict environment. Further, violence against Shi'a in the area was an extension of the tensions that emerged in other Syrian cities such as al-Qusayr and Sayyida Zeinab and Hezbollah's engagement that generated further

²³⁹ "Hezbollah's Deeper Involvement in the Battle for Syria", Nicholas Heras, on 28 June 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle-east-north-africa/hezbollahs-deeper-involvement-syrian-civil-war/>

²⁴⁰ "Rebel Brigades check loyalist advances in Aleppo: opposition", by Khaled Yacoub Oweis. On 16 June 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-aleppo/rebel-brigades-check-loyalist-advances-in-aleppo-opposition-idUSBRE95F0BA20130616>

nemesis among Sunnis. That said, Hezbollah took advantage of the jihadist attacks against Shi'a to deploy units, estimated as much as 200 strong, to fight and train the Shi'a in Nubbul and al-Zahra' (Sullivan, 2014, p.17). Therefore, it helped establish and buttress a faction dubbed Imam al-Hijja regiment that aimed to protect both towns (Phillip Smyth, 2016). As mayhem was spreading, Hezbollah didn't help calming tensions, on the contrary, it used both villages as a linchpin for its operations in the area which culminated in further fomenting sectarian tensions.

By extension, the SAA, Hezbollah, the NDF, Shi'a Iraqi groups, and the Quds Force, launched an offensive to retake Aleppo in 2013 that would prove to be the costliest for Hezbollah. Although one military commander in the organization maintained that the ground assault was conducted by the SAA and the NDF and Hezbollah concentrated only on advising, planning, and supervising (Sullivan, 2014, p.17), there was damning evidences that Hezbollah went all-in in Aleppo's confrontation. At the beginning, pro-Assad forces recaptured few villages such as Azzan and Ebteen. Afterwards, Hezbollah and the SAA advanced to al-Eiss hill, a high peak that overlooks the area. In these battles Hezbollah top-notch units appeared in some footages using motorcycles, All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) and armed quadricycles. However, al-Eiss hill would only be captured three years later but many Hezbollah fighters were lost in battle,²⁴¹ and even then, they could not hold their grounds for long as waves of rebels were on the counter-attack pressing them to retreat. Sullivan (2014) argued that if compared with the success achieved in al-Qusayr, the summer offensive on Aleppo was a shortcoming (p.17). In

²⁴¹ Retrieved from: <https://www.annahar.com/article/670860-حزب-الله-يستعيد-جثامين-5-من-مقاتليه-سقطوا-في-ريف-حلب>

parallel, the axis forces broke the siege of Aleppo's Central Prison and advanced towards to the industrial city further north, to Seifat and al-Mallah Farmalands and therefore reducing the distance with Nubbul and al-Zahra' (Christopher Kozak, 2015, p.23). During these years, Hezbollah had been shaped as a quasi-army fighting with large army formations, using heavy weapons including tanks, orchestrating communications between ground troops and operation rooms and transmitting locations for Syrian aircraft to bombard.

An added, but key factor to the battle was Russia's intervention in Syria's chaos in 2015, accelerating the slow advance of pro-regime forces since 2013. That year, "Iran and its proxies reportedly provided more than half of the 10,000 fighters assembled for the year-long regime campaign to seize Aleppo City" (Christopher Kozak, 2017). The axis has deployed thousands of troops, along with sophisticated weapons that entered Aleppo for the first time, in the bid to end the geostrategic battle.²⁴² From September 2015 to February 2016, under heavy bombardment by the Russian air forces, Hezbollah fiercely fought in Aleppo's neighborhoods, in tandem with the SAA, NDF and other pro-regime factions. Russia's engagement had a profound impact as it caused an increasing tilt in the balance of power in the course of the war. In fact, Syria was the door through which Russia reengaged in the Middle East after more than two decades of absence.

By extension, in early February 2016, the SAA, Hezbollah and other Shi'a groups, broke the three years' siege on Nubbul and al-Zahra' after capturing the town of Maarset

²⁴² "Did Aleppo's Hour Come?", by Sohaib Anjarini. On 16 September 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2716/pdf/p10-20151016.pdf>

al-Khan.²⁴³ The original plan consisted of encircling the eastern part of the city which would cut the supply line between Turkey and opposition groups. However, this could have been accomplished without stretching all the way up to Nubbul and al-Zahra' further north. But Hezbollah micromanaged these operations and diverged the direction of the operation towards the twin villages. Bringing the discussion back to Hezbollah's instrumentalization of sectarian identity, this was clearly visible in the diversion of the offensive to safeguard a route towards Nubbul and al-Zahra'. Despite Hezbollah's denial of assisting and training armed groups in the villages, its flags were obviously seen covering the coffins of those killed in battle and therefore the cooperation was palpable.²⁴⁴ Nowhere was Hezbollah's and Iran's instrumentalization of Shi'a sectarian identity more visible than in the illustrative examples of Nubbul and al-Zahra'.

Subsequently, Hezbollah helped the SAA surround the rebel-held eastern part of the city. The opposition groups counter-attacked hoping to break the siege. However, Corbeil (2017) argued that their attempts to retake what had been lost failed but Hezbollah, participating in the defense of the city, lost 32 fighters. Now that city is confined, it was time for negotiations. On December 2016, Russia, Turkey and Iran, bargained a deal allowing rebels to retreat from the city towards Idlib along with their families. Hetou (2019) emphasized that by mid-December, Iran, Russia, SAA, Hezbollah and other armed groups, had retaken Aleppo and declared victory (p.44). Mohammed

²⁴³ "Syrian army and allies breaks rebel Shi'ite towns: army", by Laila Bassam, on 3 February 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-idUSKCN0VC1VQ>

²⁴⁴ "Nubbul and al Zahraa in the Middle of the Storm", on 28 October 2012. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/536296/—نبل-والزهراء-في-قلب-العاصفة>

Nuruzzaman (2016) opined that the triumph in Aleppo was the greatest victory for the regime in the Syrian civil war. Hezbollah played a major role in this battle, in close cooperation with the IRGC and the Russian air forces.²⁴⁵ Speaking about Hezbollah in the pre-Syrian conflict was the different on the military level. What is meant here is that Hezbollah's presence in operation rooms as well as on the ground and operating in tandem not only with Syria and Iran, but also with Russia, was unexpected. Of course, it had previously executed operations on Iran's behalf and acted as a proxy in countries such as Iraq, but in Syria its role was major as it became accustomed to classical warfare and large army formations. The point to make here is that war-making in Syria's turmoil has changed Hezbollah into a quasi-army.

Idlib was the left to the end for the obvious reason and that is its location but also because until the moment of writing this thesis, it has remained under rebels control. Located on the Syrian-Turkish borders, Idlib has been the final safe haven for the opposition and their families where all defeated anti-Assad fighters had journeyed throughout the war. More to the point, opposition fighters who risked being overran by regime forces bargained their transfer to Idlib. All these facts do not mean that Idlib remained isolated from the flanking chaos. Battles were harsh in the province and Hezbollah has taken part in it as its fighters engaged in eastern Idlib and in the industrial district, in addition to its key role in protecting the twin Shi'a towns: Kfarya and al-Fou'a. Similarly to Nubbul and al-Zahra' in Aleppo, Kfarya and al-Fou'a had been surrounded and Shi'a citizens fought back against Sunni jihadist factions which were designed to rout

²⁴⁵“Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum”, on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hizbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

their opponents. In fact, sectarian otherness had become a key factor in the conflict as inter-sect relationships deteriorated. To illustrate, in Homs, Sunni houses were looted and furniture was sold in Alawite districts. In Idlib, Churches and Shi'a mosques were destroyed and Alawite houses were allocated for Sunni families (Christopher Phillips, 2015).

One military commander in the villages said that they started arming and training when Shi'a citizens were being kidnapped by jihadists located in the adjacent town of Binnish. Although it was palpable that Hezbollah had trained and equipped the Shi'a of al-Fou'a and Kfarya, one fighter denied these premises claiming that they were trained by former SAA soldiers and fought with light and medium weapons: "I personally hit a tank with 11 Rocket Propelled Grenade (RBG) shells."²⁴⁶ This was plainly not the case, however. Hezbollah's sponsorship was obvious for two reasons: First, while the SAA had merely distributed light and medium weapons for self-defense such as Ak47s or RBGs, especially for sect-centric groups, fighters in these towns were armed with heavy weapons. A spokesman of the media office in the twin villages avowed that they used the 'Burkan' missile, launched by Hezbollah during al-Qusayr's battle, during the standoff.²⁴⁷ This was a compelling proof of Hezbollah's meddling because there was no other way for fighters in both villages to received such weaponry except from Hezbollah. Second, fighters were filmed running one by one towards a guy holding the Quran, kissing it,

²⁴⁶ "Al-Fou'a and Kfarya: a mother and a doctor and a gun", on 16 August 2018. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/897723/-من-الأرض-القوقعة-وكفريا-أم-وطبيب-وبندقية>

²⁴⁷ "Al-Fou'a and Kfarya: Lonely in Idlib", by Ogarite Dandash. On 1 September 2016. Al-Mayadeen Channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/736826/-القوقعة-وكفريا-وحيدتان-في-إدلب>

putting it on their forehead and then passing under it. This maneuver was transmitted by Hezbollah.²⁴⁸ The deployment of sect-specific symbols and anthems thus generated further sectarian violence and deepened the Sunni-Shi'a split.

One more evidence was the use of fighters in these towns what Hezbollah called 'al-e'lam al-harbi' (media war) to film and distribute footage of the confrontations in order to boost the moralities of their fighters.²⁴⁹ Suffice to say here that units in these villages were very-well organized in a clear sign of the training they received. It was shortly mentioned in the previous section that Hezbollah had besieged rebels in al-Zabadani village in al-Qalamoun, western Syria, in order to pressure the opposition to open a safe passage for citizens in Fkarya and al-Fou'a. Therefore, in 2017, an agreement between Iran and Turkey and supervised by the United Nations, led to the deployment of rebels from al-Zabadani to Idlib and the release of opposition inmates in regime's prison, in exchange for the evacuation of the two villages.²⁵⁰ With the de-escalation of the conflict in 2018, a trilateral deal between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, dubbed Sochi agreement, has taken place agreeing to establish a buffer zone under Turkey's protection with a demilitarized line of 15 to 20 kilometers depth that will be patrolled by Turkish and Russian

"Al-Fou'a and Kfarya: a mother and a doctor and a gun", on 16 August 2018. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/897723/-من-الأرض-الفوعة-وكفريا-أم-وطبيب-وبندقية>²⁴⁸

²⁴⁹ "Al-Fou'a and Kfarya: The passing", by Ogarite Dandash. On 2 August 2018.

²⁵⁰ "Pro-Assad Kfarya, Al-Foua set for evacuation", on 19 July 2018. The Daily Star: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2018/Jul-19/457117-pro-assad-kfarya-al-foua-set-for-evacuation.ashx>

forces.²⁵¹ In the ensuing years, this agreement would be violated leading to the escalation of hostilities every now and then.

Needless to say that Hezbollah was perhaps the only ANSA that participated in the regime's battles across much of the Syrian territory.²⁵² "Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria had a strong impact on the war, contributing to maintaining Assad's regime in the war-torn country" (Saouli, 2019, p.192). Al-Hassan (2017) seconded that Hezbollah had a major impact in tilting the balance of power during the conflict by putting an end to the advance of the opposition in mid 2012 and by dealing rebels a psychological blow in Bab Amro, al-Qusayr and Yabrud, by executing counter-classical warfare tactics such as the ability of its elite fighters to quickly move in the battlefield and their fast aiming at all kinds of targets, in parallel to the pressure they put against the supply route of their enemies and their commanding bases to thwart further reinforcements (p.139). These facts heralded the shift of Hezbollah into a quasi-army. Further Hezbollah has participated in various decision-making on all levels: it took part in convincing the Syrian leadership to stop deploying the SAA in useless and remote regions and instead relocate them to recapture cities that are key for the regime's survival and "played a foundational role in building the NDF based on the Iranian 'Basij'" (Christopher Kozak, 2017).

In the early months of Syria's cataclysmic conflict, Hezbollah was looking with mounting alarm before delving into a zero-sum confrontation. Bit by bit, it engaged in what

²⁵¹ "Iran hails Russia-Turkey agreement on Idlib buffer zone", on 18 September 2018. Al-Jazeera. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/iran-hails-russia-turkey-agreement-idlib-buffer-zone-180918070652074.html>

²⁵² "Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum", on 14 March 2017. Middle East and North Africa, Report Number 175. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hizbollah-s-syria-conundrum>

was by and large a war of necessity. First, it deployed units to protect Sayyida Zeinab's shrine in Rif Dimashk and Shi'a towns on the Lebanese-Syrian borders by instrumentalizing its Shi'a sectarian identity and adopting a sectarian mobilization policy to justify this intervention. This has put Hezbollah on a collision course with Sunnis across the Arab world further deepening the Sunni-Shi'a split. However, the conflict was not sectarian as many have falsely framed it but all actors played the sectarian card into what was in fact a geopolitical contest. With the partial unfolding of the civil war in 2018, it had become clear that Assad's collapse was not an option anymore and the overland route from Tehran and to Beirut through Syria was secured. Saouli (2019) emphasized that "Hezbollah's strategy contributed to Syria's aims to avert strategies of encirclement by its regional adversaries. Hezbollah served to break the encirclement" (p.151). Having said that, Hezbollah, along with its partners in the axis, thwarted the attempt to tilt the regional order in their rivals' favor. Most importantly, the engagement in Syria's tumult had culminated in transitioning Hezbollah into a regional ANSA.

5.5 Hezbollah in the Saudi Backyard: Yemen

The geopolitical contestation between Saudi Arabia and Iran came to a climax when the groundswell of the Arab Uprisings reached the Saudi backyard, Yemen. The Uprising in 2011 very quickly disintegrated into a civil war leading to the collapse of president Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime and a Saudi backed president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, was hence appointed. This nomination, however, turned to be a fiasco. The Houthis, a Shi'a Zaidi sect in northern Yemen, coalesced with former President Saleh, and orchestrated an armed upheaval against the new pro-Saudi administration. In fact, the causal factors of the Zaydis' upheaval were the culmination of old-age grievances and

victimhood. Since 2004, the Houthis, keen to play a bigger role in the country, had tried more than once to fight for what they thought to be as their social and economic rights. Farther back to the post-1962 Yemen civil war, Zaydis had meticulously demanded the central government to endorse equality among its citizens rather than privileging Salafism over Zaydism (Stacey Philbrick Yadav, 2017, p.193). Having explained this, we bring the discussion to the Yemeni conflict.

The escalation was somewhat shaped by the regional Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry. The former leapt at the chance of assisting the Houthis against the Saudi Arabia backed-regime in a bid to set foot on the shores of the Gulf of Eden and therefore counterbalancing Saudi Arabia on its southern border. In fact, had the Yemeni government and the Saudi regime endeavored a solution for the Houthis and engaged them in the pre-civil war era, they might have pre-emptively prevented Iran's involvement. Notwithstanding their mutual antagonism, in March 2015, the Houthis and Saleh's forces captured large swathes of Yemen, including the capital San'a and forced Hadi to take refuge in Saudi Arabia. This step generated further nemesis provoking Riyadh to intervene directly in Yemen hoping to frustrate would-be regional threat on its border. Of course, from Iran's point of view it was supporting the righteous cause of those who are seeking for equality. This, however, were a mere cover for its regional expansion and its biting game with Saudi Arabia. For our purposes, Hezbollah, acting as a proxy for Iran in Yemen, played a role to implement its regional agenda, *déjà vu* in Iraq.

Saouli (2019) maintained that "the gradual rise of the Houthis, who are renamed as Ansar Allah (God's Supporters), and their controlling of San'a in September 2014, offered Iran and Hezbollah another opportunity to extend their strategic regional reach; in

this case, to inflict pressure on Saudi Arabia from the southern tip of the Arab Peninsula. Saudi Arabia accused Iran and Hezbollah of transferring weapons and military expertise to Ansar Allah” (Saouli, 2019, p.200). In 2015, Saudi Arabia started sanctioning Hezbollah commanders who it accused of micromanaging the organization’s operations in Yemen.²⁵³ These figures were also sanctioned by the US Department of Treasury for spearheading Hezbollah’s activities in Yemen.²⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Hezbollah’s proxy role in Yemen was minor. Before the March 2015 clashes, Hezbollah’s Unit 3800, started shipping weapons to Yemen and trained Ansar Allah along with the Quds Force. Khalil Harb, a close advisor of Nasrallah and a Hezbollah commander, was leading the unit.²⁵⁵ This was by denied Hezbollah claiming that Harb came back from Yemen in 2014 and was injured in Mosul, Iraq.²⁵⁶ However, on the contrary, avowing that he came back in 2014 was a damning proof that Hezbollah had been assisting the Houthis and executing Iran’s geopolitical agenda in Yemen even before closing up on San’a.

Hezbollah limited its intervention in Yemen to advisors and trainers and its units have not engaged in direct battles against anti-Houthi forces. A Hezbollah commander speaking of his experience to the *Financial Times* in training Houthis in Iran, Yemen, and

²⁵³ “Why the Saudis just blacklisted two Lebanese militants”, by Matthew Levitt. On 29 May 2015. The Hill. Retrieved from: <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/defense/243408-why-the-saudis-just-blacklisted-two-lebanese-militants>

²⁵⁴ Treasury Sanctions Hezbollah Leadership”, on 22 August 2013. US Department of Treasury. Retrieved from: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2147.aspx>

²⁵⁵ “Hezbollah in Iraq: A Little Help Can Go a Long Way”, by Matthew Levitt and Nadav Pollak, on 25 June 2014. The Washington Institute. Retrieved from: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-in-iraq-a-little-help-can-go-a-long-way>

²⁵⁶ Interview with author. 28 November 2018.

Lebanon, argued that “they are intelligent and fierce fighters.”²⁵⁷ Also the Saudis claimed that Hezbollah has lost fighters in Yemen. This has been rejected by Nasrallah who assured that if Hezbollah will have martyrs in the future it will be proud to officially declare it.²⁵⁸ However, Yemeni officials claimed the arrest of Iranian experts and Hezbollah personnel in al-Jawf Governorate.²⁵⁹ In fact, Houthi officials had been spotted in Beirut as they were hosted by Hezbollah.²⁶⁰ Furthermore, Nasrallah has bolstered the Houthis in his speeches and in parallel, Hezbollah’s channels were constantly covering the operations conducted by the Houthis and hosted pro-Houthi analysts in their TV episodes.

Gradually, Hezbollah shifted from urging the Saudis towards a political solution,²⁶¹ to badmouthing the Saudi government and mobilizing its supporters against the Saudi Royal family. At the 10th of Muharram (10th day of ‘Ashoura) in 2015 and 2016, tens of thousands of Hezbollah’s supporters, aroused by Nasrallah’s speeches, had reiterated “*Al-Mawt li al-Saoud*” (Death for Al-Saud). Nasrallah declared that thousands of brave and courageous Yemeni fighters will achieve victory by “rubbing al-Saud’s nose in the

²⁵⁷ “Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Yemen’s Houthis open up Links”, by Erika Solomon, on 8 June 2015. Financial Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/e1e6f750-f49b-11e4-9a58-00144feab7de>

²⁵⁸ “Sayyed Nasrallah reject coalition allegations over killing of Hezbollah fighters in Yemen”, on 30 June 2018. Iraq: ABNA. Retrieved from: <https://en.abna24.com/news/middle-east/sayyed-nasrallah-reject-coalition-allegations-over-killing-of-hezbollah-fighters-in-yemen-video-899756.html>

²⁵⁹ “Iran and Hezbollah Prisoners Captured by Yemeni Army”, on 16 December 2016. Al Arabiya English. Retrieved from: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/12/16/Iran-and-Hezbollah-prisoners-captured-by-Yemeni-army.html>

²⁶⁰ “Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Yemen’s Houthis open up Links”, by Erika Solomon, on 8 June 2015. Financial Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/e1e6f750-f49b-11e4-9a58-00144feab7de>

²⁶¹ “Nasrallah: The destiny of the aggression is a fiasco”, on 28 March 2015. Lebanon: Al-Akhbar newspaper. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Home-Page/18211/نصرالله-مصير-العدوان-الهزيمة>

sand and make them loose the battle.”²⁶² Such narratives raised the stakes rubbing more salt to the wound. In 2018, in parallel to the prevail of the axis on many fronts, Nasrallah met a delegation of Ansar Allah in Beirut.²⁶³ That year, Syria’s conflict had partially unfolded and Bashar al-Assad’s regime was triumphant, the PMF in Iraq had become stronger after the defeat of ISIS and more infiltrated in Iraq’s politics and the Houthis had not only survived the war but had also crippled their rivals. aware of the overall posture of the axis, Nasrallah’s heralded meeting with the Houthis was clearly a message to regional foes, namely Saudi Arabia, that the Houthis are key allies within the axis.

Iran and Hezbollah have not blatantly declared their engagement in Yemen’s civil war, but on the contrary, they have both denied sending arm shipments to the Houthis.²⁶⁴²⁶⁵ This, according to many pundits, allowed Iran to adopt a plausible deniability policy. However, Saudi media have broadcasted a video for one Hezbollah military commander during a conclave with Houthi fighters in which he appears giving them military instructions.²⁶⁶ This was a damning proof of Hezbollah’s proxy role on behalf of Iran. Although the Houthis fought for their own rights and rebelled against their

²⁶² Youtube: Nasrallah during Ashura Final Day. 12 October 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4cvtGYrNGc>

²⁶³ “The Meeting between Hezbollah and Ansar Allah: The end of an era and the beginning of another”, by Lukman al-Abdallah. On 21 August 2018. Lebanon: Al-Akhbar newspaper. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Yemen/256500/لقاء-حزب-الله-أنصار-الله-نهاية-حقبة-وبداية-آخر>

²⁶⁴ “Iran rejects allegations of arms dispatch to Yemen”, on 31 March 2015. Tehran: Mehr New Agency. Retrieved from: <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/106431/Iran-rejects-allegations-of-arms-dispatch-to-Yemen>

²⁶⁵ “Lebanon’s Hezbollah denies sending weapons to Yemen”, by Ellen Francis and Leila Bassam. On 20 November 2017. Beirut: Reuters. Retrieved from: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-nasrallah/lebanons-hezbollah-denies-sending-weapons-to-yemen-idUKKBN1DK220>

²⁶⁶ Youtube: New Evidence; Hezbollah is training the Houthis. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NmLhAzRj8o>

marginalization by the Yemeni government rather than in pursuit of Iran's geopolitical interest, Tehran saw an opportunity in this conflict and decided to set foot in Saudi Arabia's backyard. It was a chance to counter-balance Saudi Arabia which tried to tilt the balance of power in both Iraq and Syria in its favor in an attempt to curtail Iran's influence. Needless to say that the relationship was mutually beneficial as Iran and Hezbollah were implementing the geopolitical agenda of the axis in the Middle East and in return the Houthis were benefitting from this back up to increase their domestic supremacy. Thomas Juneau (2016) best described it: Yemen represented Saudi Arabia's soft underbelly, and this was an opportunity for Tehran which played a minor role in the country. Furthermore, as Zaydis, a Shi'a offshoot, the Houthis were perceived, or at least pictured, as a sectarian threat. This allowed Saudi Arabia to malign the Houthis and mobilize Sunni support against its rivals. Although Saudi Arabia played the card of the sectarian other, the conflict was in fact geopolitical and was not a sectarian conflict. Obviously, the Houthis were not seeking religious or sectarian truth in Yemen and doctrine does not explain the causal factor of the conflict. Further, the late Sunni president Saleh had allied himself with the Houthis for political purposes, but was killed by them when he tried to change sides.

The avalanche of transformative regional events played out in Saudi Arabia's backyard. However, the Zaydi-Regime rivalry dates to the developments in northern Yemen, when al-Islah party, backed by Saudi Arabia, sought to implement Salafi religious institutions aiming at converting Zaydis into Sunnism (Yadav, 2017, p.187-188). That said, the chaos in post-war Yemen was not Iran's creation but it has its root causes dating back to decades of an overlap of sectarian and political contest. Further afield, when the US-Iran tensions escalated in 2018, the Houthis increased their attacks inside Saudi

Arabia, either by launching missiles or drones into Saudi provinces. Of course, Iran was accused of micromanaging these attacks to pressure the US in order to lift the embargo against it. For our purposes, Hezbollah's meddling in the Yemeni conflict didn't help calm tensions at a time of rising confrontation between both camps but on the contrary, it exacerbated the Sunni-Shi'a schism and caused further chaos.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter inspected Hezbollah's operations in four theatres: Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Except for Syria, Hezbollah acted as a proxy for Iran and sought to implement its regional geopolitical agenda. Saouli (2019) argued that "Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria, Iraq and Yemen had a religio-political meaning. In addition to the strategic threats these wars posed, the war presented a threat to the *wilyat al-faqih*, represented in the Islamic Republic" (p.189). While bolstering Palestinian factions is Hezbollah's *raison d'être* and can be perceived from an Arab stance as supporting them against Israel's occupation, Hezbollah wouldn't have the means to act if it wasn't for Iran. In Iraq and Yemen, it helped establish, fund, and arm Shi'a factions and the Houthis, respectively, who became part of the axis. It was clear that Iran was immersed in the region's turmoil in its bid to increase its clout through proxies allowing it to play the card of plausible deniability but at the same time giving it notable leverage at the negotiation table. In these theatre of operations, Hezbollah's *modus operandi* presented it as an appendage for Iran in a mutually beneficial relationship. However, all Hezbollah's maneuvers in the Middle East were minor if compared with its full-scale engagement in Syria's conflict.

Henry Kissinger (2014) best described the overlap of sectarian and geopolitics in Syria: “Regional powers poured arms, money, and logistical support into Syria on behalf of their preferred sectarian candidates: Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states for the Sunni groups; Iran supporting Assad via Hezbollah” (p.127). The tilt in the regional order that would have occurred had Assad’s regime been removed would have caused an insurmountable geopolitical debacle. Therefore, for its own survival and for the interest of the axis, it had to be immersed in the conflict to frustrate would-be regional menace. As Sullivan (2014) maintained, Hezbollah’s continued commitment to Syria’s regime meant that they believe the benefits of this participation outweigh the costs (p.26). This chapter examined Hezbollah’s operations across Syria, stretching from its early offensive in al-Qusayr, to Dar’a and Quneitra in the south and Deir ez-Zor and Idlib in the northwest and northeast, respectively, through Aleppo, al-Qalamoun, al-Ghouta and many other cities. The chapter argued that to justify its intervention, Hezbollah adopted a sectarian mobilization agenda and instrumentalized its sectarian identity. This served as a machinery of mobilization for Hezbollah but at the same time deepened the Sunni-Shi’a schism and undermined Hezbollah among the Sunni community. That said, the war of necessity in Syria transitioned Hezbollah into a regional ANSA.

This chapter examined Hezbollah’s transition into a regional ANSA based on three variable catalysts: First, the turmoil was the conduit to tilt Hezbollah into a quasi-army mixing guerilla and classical warfare tactics and adopted large army formations or small top-notch units depending on the operation it conducted. Second, from south to north via inland Syria, it instrumentalized its sectarian identity to justify its intervention and to protect all Shi’a citizens across Syria. Third, this standoff embedded Hezbollah as a

partner and decision-maker in the axis that extends from Beirut to Tehran, via Damascus and Baghdad, and to a lesser extent, Yemen. The point to close with is that Hezbollah had reached its heyday with the partial unraveling of Syria's conflict and transitioned into one of the most prominent regional ANSAs.

6 The Transition: A Regional ANSA

6.1 Introduction

Al-sha'b yurid eskat al nizam (The people want to overthrow the system), hustled across the Arab world faster than the light since late 2010. Although each country had its specificity, this slogan was common for all protestors. It was hoped that these protests will bring economic prosperity and democracy to the authoritarian-ruled countries across North Africa and the Middle East. But on the contrary, all it did, with the exception of Tunisia, was either further embed authoritarianism or inflame chaos. The plurality in Islam, as Geneive Abdo (2017) opined, and competition among Islamic schools, have always existed, but this wave of uprisings "brought identity and religion once again to the fore" (p.1). More importantly, it resurfaced the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry that was instigated in the post-Saddam Iraq. Haddad (2020) opined that "the intersection of sectarian identity and Arab-Iranian rivalry has seen regional strategy instrumentalizing markers of sectarian identity to foster sectarian solidarity and mobilization by portraying geopolitical issues as existential threats confronting all Sunni and Shi'a (p.116). Moreover, Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (2017) argued that the geopolitical confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran played out in Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon, but "the conflict in Syria has become ground zero in the war of position between the two regional hegemons" (p.13).

Post-Uprising Syria became an arena for contest between opened domestic, regional, and international states and a myriad of ANSAs. “Regional powers,” Haddad (2020) emphasized, “facilitated the flooding of foreign militants into Syria to fight and let their support to anti-regime insurgents while Iran’s and particularly Lebanese Hezbollah’s involvement in the conflict went a long way towards further sect-coding the Syrian civil war and validating the narrative of a regional Sunni-Shi’a struggle” (p.254). Eyeing to stand as a bulwark against those wishing to remove Bashar al-Assad’s regime, a close ally of Iran and Hezbollah, the latter rushed headlong to prevent such outcome. Damascus is the bridge linking Tehran to Beirut that was used to ship weapons en route to Hezbollah and therefore, Assad’s collapse would deal the axis an immense strategic blow. That said, this was a war of necessity for Hezbollah and there was no escape from the engagement in this zero-sum geopolitical confrontation that further embedded Hezbollah in the axis. However, as Abdullah Anas (2019), former jihadist and son-in-law of Abdullah Azzam –Ossama Bin Laden’s mentor, placed it: “When you share life and death experiences and war, a bond is certainly formed” (p.61).

This chapter will first examine Hezbollah’s necessity to intervene in the Syrian conflict stretching from Dar’a in the south, through inland Syria, all the way up to Deir ez-Zor in the east and down to Lattakia in the west. It will then examine its instrumentalization of its Shi’a sectarian identity to justify its engagement, pledging to protect Shi’a inhabitants on the Lebanese-Syrian borders at the outset and across Syria in later stages, and to defend Sayyida Zeinab’s mosque, in Damascus’s suburbs, from Sunni jihadist groups which were determined to destroy it. This further added to the Sunni-Shi’a schism but sectarian identity was one, yet paramount, of an array of factors driving the conflict.

However, the primary motive of the intervention of all actors including Hezbollah was more geopolitics than doctrinal factors. More to the point, Hezbollah used its sectarian identity as a mobilizational tool in what was in fact a geopolitical contest. Rather, key driver of the conflict but sectarian identity. Further, the chapter will scrutinize the shift of Hezbollah into a quasi-army mixing between guerilla and classical warfare tactics. Subsequently, it used large military formations – which it wasn't accustomed to use during its previous confrontations with Israel, in some confrontations, while it infiltrated top-notch small units to execute quick operations, in others. The chapter will close by underscoring Hezbollah's participation in the decision-making process on all levels: from operations on the ground to the operations rooms, all the way up to the leadership level. The overarching aim of this chapter is to unpack these variables to explain Hezbollah's transition into a regional ANSA during Syria's civil war.

6.2 Syria: The Choice of Necessity

The alliance between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah pre-dates the 2011 civil war to when the late Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father and then Syria's president, rushed to support the Islamic Republic with weapons in its war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Assad and Saddam were sub-regional rivals competing to implement their geopolitical agendas and therefore Assad found a chance to impede Saddam by supporting Tehran. In parallel, Syria had reached a quid pro quo with Iran allowing 1500 IRGC members to cross the borders into Lebanon on conditions that the former would control the timing of the operations that Hezbollah would conduct against the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Subsequently, the Quds Force, the external wing of the IRGC, had set foot in the Beqaa valley in 1982, a mostly Shi'a area that converges with Syria, to help establish and

organize Hezbollah. While Tehran was concerned with founding an organization bearing a Shi'a Islamic identity and swearing allegiance to *wilayat al-faqih*, Assad was only hoping to micromanage the geopolitical confrontation with Israel in the Lebanese theatre.

Despite few nuances, the creation of Hezbollah became the linchpin of a relationship that would develop in the ensuing decades into a partnership straddling the geopolitical fault-lines of the Middle East. Further afield, Syria started supporting Hezbollah with ammo and weapons, but also became the harbor where shipments of armaments from Tehran anchored before being transferred to Lebanon. Needless to say that Syria under Assad became a stalwart ally for both Iran and Hezbollah and the tripartite Iran-Syria-Hezbollah partnership withstood and hardened through time. Stating this was necessary before bringing the discussion to the engagement in Syria's conflict. That said, when the rebels were closing up on Damascus in the second year of the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah and Iran began their gradual intervention to prevent the unbearable debacle had Assad's regime collapsed. In 2011, few months after the eruption of the demonstrations, the echo of anti-Hezbollah discourses started reverberating across the region. Rebels were promising to reassess the relationship between Syria and Hezbollah once they remove Assad as they burned Hezbollah's flags and chanted against it,²⁶⁷ putting the dissent at a collision course with Hezbollah who started looking with suspicion at these events.

Two other events also rushed Hezbollah's intervention: First, the closing up of the jihadist fighters on the Mosque of al-Sayyida Zeinab, the daughter of Imam Ali and one

²⁶⁷ "The Choice of necessity: Hezbollah in Syria". On 23 January 2016. Al-Mayadeen channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/724564/---الخيار-الضرورة-حزب-الله-في-سوريا>

of the most important figures for the Shi'a, at the outskirts of Damascus, and their promises to destroy it once they seize the town. Second, the sectarian clashes that were escalating on the Lebanese-Syrian border, namely in al-Qusayr, between the Sunni and the Shi'a inhabitants who have always lived peacefully in these villages. Hezbollah was acutely aware of the sectarian hatred in Syria that was hibernating since the 1982 clash in Hama between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood during which the former ended a rebellion that had started against Alawites since the mid-1970s (Sam Dagher, 2019, p.81). "Rather than innate antagonisms, ancient hatreds or doctrinal incompatibility," Haddad (2020) emphasized, "the reason that the sectarianization of the Uprisings in countries such as Syria, "was something of an inevitability due to very recent history spanning less than half a century and accentuated by the post-2003 environment. (p.257)."

Further, many Sunnis rejected the idea of being ruled by an Alawite president in a Sunni-majority country. Haddad (2020) stressed that "while Sunnis in Syria are a majority in both national and transnational terms, the hierarchies of power in Ba'hist Syria have nevertheless created a profound sense of Sunni victimhood among significant sections of Sunni society, who resent what they regard as sectarian oppression by an Alawi-dominated regime" (p.172). These events were plagued with rising sectarian tensions across Syria which were exacerbated by Hezbollah's bold intervention. However, scholars such as Abdo (2017) who argued that the Syrian conflict developed into a civil war between Sunni and Shi'a with spillovers into Lebanon and Iraq (p.45), have mischaracterized the overall situation. Indeed, the engagement of a Shi'a group to support the Alawite regime further mobilized Sunnis across the Arab world to fight

alongside the opposition. This is plainly not the case, as will be explained in the following section. Grudgingly, Hezbollah had to diverge its arsenal from fighting Israel to confronting anti-Assad groups which happened to be Sunni Muslims varying from moderate such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to jihadists such as Da'esh (ISIS) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), previously al-Nusra.

Confined to its regional partnerships and pegged to the fate of Iran and Syria, Hezbollah had no choice but to engage in an inevitable war of necessity. Hezbollah's secretary general Hassan Nasrallah reasoned that "Syria is not anymore a space for a popular uprising against a political regime but a space for the US, the west and their proxies to implement their agenda. Syria is the backbone of the resistance and we cannot stand still while our back is vulnerable. If Syria falls in the hands of the Americans, the Israelis and the takfirists, Lebanon will be surrounded and we will enter again into the Israeli era. Al-Qusayr, Nasrallah pursued, is the back of the resistance and stupid is he who watches his own confinement."²⁶⁸ At this time, Nasrallah was blatantly declaring Hezbollah's intervention in Syria's conflict despite its earlier engagement. Christopher Phillips (2018) considered that Nasrallah declared the organization's participation in Syria's civil war in April 2013 for three reasons: "Firstly, the regime's inability to repel rebel advances raised the prospect of Assad's defeat. Secondly, the rise of jihadists and Salafists among the rebels represented a force along Lebanon's border that would not just be anti-Assad, but threatened Shi'a presence in the Levant. Finally, Iran appealed to Hezbollah for a greater help". He argued that the final point cannot be confirmed but

²⁶⁸ Wafiq Kanso. On 27 may 2013. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/PDF-Files/2013/pdf/p02-20130527.pdf>

Nasrallah flew to Tehran twice in April to meet Khamenei and Suleimani, and “soon after openly declared Hezbollah’s presence in Syria” (p.157). Anti-Hezbollah former Member of Parliament seconded by saying that the intervention was a pure Iranian decision and Hezbollah was forced to obey.²⁶⁹ However, this grossly mischaracterized the nature of the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah. Of course, Hezbollah has to cooperate its intervention with Iran, but this does not mean that the latter dictates the former. Rather, Hezbollah is part of the axis and Syria’s regime is a stalwart ally; therefore, the former’s leap into Syria was a *fait accompli* as the regime’s collapse would deal them a strategic blow.

Hezbollah’s former private universities spokesman contended that the Americans and their allies wanted to destroy the axis by toppling Assad as a prelude to end Hezbollah and then change the regime in Iran.²⁷⁰ That said, conspiracy theories have always prevailed in the Middle East and any imminent threat against one’s interest can be easily framed as a conspiracy to thwart such attempts. And this is the case here. Correspondingly, Hezbollah’s minister emphasized that they waited for a year but when the conspiracy to surround and choke Hezbollah through Syria increased, they were obliged to interfere and fight to protect themselves and the regime that had always supported them.²⁷¹ Similarly, Hezbollah’s deputy head of political relations opined that they were preparing new units to combat Israel but they were forced to deploy them to Syria when the war erupted. This confrontation, he explained, is a world war between two

²⁶⁹ Interview with author. 9 October 2018.

²⁷⁰ Interview with author. 5 September 2018.

²⁷¹ Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

camps on Syria's soil.²⁷² Sullivan (2014) emphasized that "the war in Syria presents a significant, even existential, threat to this strategic alliance by endangering one of its primary members and the chief conduit for Iranian support to Hezbollah. At the same time, Iran cannot afford to lose its most important foothold in the Levant, and Hezbollah cannot risk losing its access to critical Iranian and Syrian support. Maintaining the Axis of Resistance is also a matter of great ideological importance for Iran and its commitment to exporting its Islamic revolutionary principles" (p.9). This was surprisingly approved by some Hezbollah opponents. A spokesman of the "Lebanese Forces" argued that Hezbollah was convinced of the necessity to intervene because the interest of the axis was a priority.²⁷³ Likewise, the Future Movement deputy secretary general argued that Hezbollah is a rational and pragmatic actor and wouldn't throw itself under the bus. The engagement, he pursued, became necessary and was a calculated step to safeguard the regime whose survival wasn't guaranteed at that time.²⁷⁴ In fact, for its own security, Hezbollah had to immerse in the conflict in order to frustrate would-be regional threat had the rebels prevailed.

Bringing the discussion back to the causal factors driving Hezbollah's intervention, the latter was looking with awe to the facts on the ground. From the Sunni-dominated areas in northern Lebanon, rebels were smuggling weapons and fighters into al-Qusayr and the fall of the latter in the hands of the opposition "threatened to isolate Lebanon from Syria, thus endangering Hezbollah's own lines of communication: Beirut–Damascus–Tehran" (Saouli, 2019, p.192). The battle for al-Qusayr was unpacked in chapter 5.

²⁷² Interview with author. 8 September 2018.

²⁷³ Interview with author. 20 October 2018.

²⁷⁴ Interview with author. 10 November 2018.

Suffice it to say here that it was not only Hezbollah's first offensive in Syria, but also its first confrontation with what happened to be Sunni rebels, stretching from moderate groups to radical ones. The battle was of extreme importance for the course of the civil war as it came at a time when the regime was losing ground for the opposition which was closing up on Damascus. Unaccustomed to such type of confrontations, Hezbollah did not predict the outcome, but its triumph proved its ability to deliver. Fortified and thought to be unbreakable, Al-Qusayr was the rebels' den. Nevertheless, Hezbollah dealt them an immense psychological blow by capturing it in less than a month and therefore leveraging the regime which was then at its steepest military posture. That said, from Hezbollah's point of view, had it not pre-emptively engaged in al-Qusayr, it would have been forced to fight ISIS and HTS in Lebanon because they latter were planning to expand over vast swathes of the region (Muhammad Mohsen, 2017, p.140).

Al-Qusayr's encounter paved the way for further expansion of Hezbollah's troops. Bit by bit, they went a long way towards further validating their presence from south to north, via inland Syria. Saouli (2019) emphasized that "the intervention was gradual and dictated by the changing military balance on the ground. The weaker the regime and the higher the threat of its fall became, the more Hezbollah stepped in to fill the void and to offer the necessary backing" (p.190). Therefore, in the ensuing years, Hezbollah pursued an increasingly assertive and more engaging policy starting from the south of al-Qusayr, the Qalamoun mountains, and spreading as far as Deir ez-Zor in the northeast. This is not meant to picture Hezbollah as the only actor which helped tilting the balance of power in the regime's favor, as the latter has lost thousands of fighters in these battles, and Russia has put as much effort. But taking into consideration the limited number of its units,

its effectiveness on the ground was paramount. By and large, the forces within the axis were outnumbered by the flux of bellicose rebels who were pouring into the battlefield from all over the world. In earnest, this was an existential threat for the axis of which Hezbollah became more embedded. Hezbollah came to believe that the intervention in Syria was a double-edged sword, eroding its support among the Sunni community, but also guaranteeing its survival.

The sectarian mobilization agenda was a short-term policy to justify its intervention into what was in fact a geopolitical confrontation. Therefore, Nasrallah's early pledge of protecting the Shi'a shrines and inhabitants in al-Qusayr and Sayyida Zeinab, respectively, altered. "Wherever we must be", Nasrallah said, "we will be."²⁷⁵ By other words, this marked a transition in Hezbollah's discourse raising the stakes and opening the door for further engagement wherever it sees necessary. This does not mean a full sidelining of the sectarian discourse, however. Where possible, it kept engaging to safeguard Shi'a citizens, as was elaborated in chapter 5. The rhythm of the mobilization was always at its apogee. "The confrontation in Syria", Nasrallah believed, "is a war of existence and survival."²⁷⁶ Phillips (2018) argued that "Hezbollah faced a grave, even existential threat should Assad be toppled. Syria provided it with strategic depth, including the essential supply to Iran, and legitimacy: The Syrian-Iranian alliance was presented as part of a wider resistance on behalf of all Muslims and Arabs against Israel and the West.

²⁷⁵ Al-Jazeera. (2013) Hezbollah leader vows to continue Syria fight. Retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/20136141719617527.html>

²⁷⁶ Abbas al Sabbagh. "Nasrallah: Sourya ma'rakat wujoud Hezbollah wa Loubnan wa Falasteen, laisa ladayna al waqt li 14 azar, wa 'aduwuna Israel". On 21 December 2013. Beirut: Annahar newspaper. Retrieved from:

<https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/93384--نصرالله-سوريا-معركة-وجود-حزب-الله-ولبنان-وفلسطين>
[ليس-لدينا-الوقت-ل-14-آذار-وعدونا](https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/93384--ليس-لدينا-الوقت-ل-14-آذار-وعدونا)

Like Iran, it feared a Sunni-dominated regime emerging in Damascus, but with further domestic reason: it might shift Lebanon's delicate sectarian balance in favor of Sunnis, at the expense of the Shi'a and Hezbollah" (p.157). However, this alliance never represented the Muslim world especially since the 2003 wave of sectarianism and the post-Arab Uprisings, both causing an eroding support among Sunnis.

From mid-2012 until 2018, Hezbollah's units had fought from Dar'a in the south, through inland Syria, all the way up to Lattakia in the northwest and Deir ez-Zor in the northeast. Operating across vast swathes of the country, their engagement was decisive in four regions: Al-Qusayr, al-Qalamoun, Aleppo and Rif Dimashk. Continuing to rise unabated, they were not confined to these areas as they fought in more remote cities such as Deir ez-Zor. The chaotic situation that engulfed Syria and the peak of the geopolitical contest between regional and international actors to gain more ground leverage, left no room for setbacks. Samir al-Hassan (2017) argued that the confrontation is between two camps and therefore it was ordinary for all actors in the axis, primarily Hezbollah as its troops are the most prepared and well trained force, to defend their geostrategic interest (p.129). A Lebanese Shi'a pro-Saudi journalist, close to Hariri and opposed to Hezbollah, argued that facts on the ground forced them interfere. After all, the Syrian regime is a strategic ally and the fear of its collapse rushed their engagement.²⁷⁷

Syria's mayhem was the conduit for Hezbollah's transition. More to the point, the intertwinement of sectarian identity with geopolitics played an instrumental role in transitioning Hezbollah into a regional ANSA. This was not part of a grandiose plan. Rather, Saouli (2019) emphasized that Hezbollah exploited the looming opportunity to

²⁷⁷ Interview with author. 13 November 2018.

advance its agenda and achieve its goals (p.214). Further, as Chafik Choukair (2016) reasoned, Hezbollah waged a war that impacted “its organizational structure and strategic position in the region, as well as its internal ethics” (p.5-6). By the end of 2018, Hezbollah had accomplished the transition into a regional ANSA that now stretches from Beirut to Syria and Iraq. This transition was not an opportunity that Hezbollah grabbed, but a war of necessity that it had to fight to guarantee its survival which is, by and large, pegged to the fate of both Iran and Syria. That year, Hezbollah had reached its apogee and it was hard to escape the sense of its emergence triumphant from the regional turmoil. Sectarian mobilization and the instrumentalization of sectarian identity was one of three main factors that helped Hezbollah transitioning.

6.3 Hezbollah’s Sectarian Mobilization and Instrumentalization of Sectarian identity

The death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD ignited a dispute over his successor. While one group insisted that the Caliph –recognized leader of the Muslims, and heir, must be one of the Prophet’s companions, in reference to Abou Bakr who became the 1st Caliph, another group argued that the upcoming leader must share kinship with the Prophet, in reference to Imam Ali –the 4th Caliph (Fouad Ibrahim, 2018, p.123). This disagreement led to the emergence of two sects which came to be known as the Sunni and the Shi’a, respectively. Having said that, the causal factors of the Sunni-Shi’a split was political rather than doctrinal. Ali mabrouk (2018) stressed that the emergence of a sect occurs when contest between people alter from political to divine and therefore becomes the tool that shifts the contest from “temporary” to “eternal” (p.89). Subsequently, Abdo (2017) argued that “the Shi’a have long been a poignant reminder to

Sunni Muslims of the unresolved differences within Islam since the death of the Prophet Mohammad”.

Generally speaking, abiding by a creed and being part of an Islamic sect means reviving the historical symbols of each sect, their splits and antagonism, as if these symbols are still alive and they need their followers to carry this mutual rivalry as perpetual (Abd al-Majid al-Sharfi, 2018, p.63). More to the point, “the Shi’a telling of the death of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet and champion of the future Shi’a, at the hands of the Umayyads in a battle near Karabla in 680 CE, has created the narrative many Shi’a have lived by ever since” (p.8). Hamid Dabashi (2016) narrated how a Mulla [Muslim cleric] would come to their house and “start chanting songs in praise of Imam Hussein”. Dabashi (2016) pursued that the battle of Karbala is “the most sacrosanct traumatic event on the Shi’a calendar” and when the Mulla starts singing to “Seyyed al-Shohada” (Master of the martyrs) – acronym of Imam Hussein, his mother sits to listen (p.3). Since then, the Shi’a commemorate the death of Imam Hussein, praising him as a symbol for sacrifice who was oppressed by his foes until the moment of his death. Furthermore, sect-symbolism is paramount for mobilization and motivation during, for instance, military confrontations where Shi’a fighters use mottos such as “Oh Hussein” ahead of each battle. This does not mean that the confrontation is sectarian, but fighters like Hezbollah had been raised on these sect-symbols and grievances and they refer to them as a sense of doctrine.

The sectarian card, namely the Sunni-Shi’a schism, has been a tool for each geopolitical contest in the Middle East during the 20th and 21st centuries. This does not, as should be clear by now, that the conflict is sectarian. Scholars relying on sectarianism to justify every skirmish in the region are Orientalists (Nader Hashemi & Danny Postel,

2017, p.4). In fact, the intertwining of geopolitics with sectarian identity is the key driver of the confrontations. Hashemi & Postel (2017) maintained that the rise of modern sectarianism was triggered by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia sought to thwart the spread of revolutionary Islam into the Gulf countries by labeling Iran as a Shi'a/Persian state (p.10). Dabashi (2016) seconded that the Islamic Republic radically Islamized the revolution of 1979 and spread sectarianism in the region (p.182). Sitting at each other's throat, Iran and Saudi Arabia instrumentalized sectarian identity hoping to thwart any attempt for regional leverage and tilt the power balance in their favor.

Denied publicly but obvious on the ground and in sect-centric discourses, both states invested in the sectarian card. Abdo (2017) opined that "sectarianism in the Arab world remains an inescapable presence that ignites whenever there are social or political upheavals, such as the Islamic Revolution, the US invasion of Iraq, or the more recent Arab Uprisings and the resulting Syrian and Iraqi civil wars"; and "without religious identification the conflicts would not have flared to the degree they have done today" (p.7). This, however, is plainly not true. In Libya, for instance, the conflict is as ferocious as in Syria but there is no presence for sectarian identity as both sides are Sunni. Bringing the discussion back to Hezbollah, it is hard to ignore the role it has played in igniting the sectarian tumult in post-civil war Syria. Being Iran's Islamic Republic ideological replica and part of the Islamic *umma* [nation] under the guidance of the *faqih* [jurisprudent], every now and then, Hezbollah played a proxy role on Tehran's behalf in tandem with the Quds Force, the external branch of the IRGC. Key among them was its participation in Iraq and Yemen, undermining its argument that focuses on its maneuver based on Lebanon's best

interest. Of course, there was no interest for Lebanon by engaging this far in the regional conflict and therefore Hezbollah prioritized the interest of the axis. These engagements fanned the flames of sectarian tensions.

However, this thesis focused on Syria's civil war that deepened the Sunni-Shi'a schism and where sectarian identity was one, yet key, of an array of factors driving the conflict. It is necessary to mention here that in 1317, Ibn Taymiyya, a radical Muslim Sunni scholar, had declared "Nusayris" (Alawites) to be "more disbelieving than Jews and Christians" (Ali Farouq-Alli, 2018, p.32-33). Then, Ibn Taymiyya's edict was based on doctrinal beliefs rather than political motives. Nevertheless, in the 1970s, these sectarian hatreds were revived in Syria when the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) accused the Alawites of apostasy legitimizing the attacks against them (Sam Dagher, 2020, p.81). Abdo (2017) seconded that during that era, the MB had labeled the Alawites as unbelievers (p.55). These accusations, however, were politically driven because it seemed unacceptable for the majority-Sunni community to be ruled by an Alawite minority (10% of Syria's population) (Heiko Wimmen, 2017, p.68). Subsequently, in 1982, Assad crushed the MB rebellion (Abdo, 2017, p.55), in the city of Hama killing thousands. Having said that, in communities where sectarian identity has played instrumental roles in historical conflicts, it can be easily reinvigorated. Moreover, Abdo (2017) argued that Hafez al Assad's alliance with Iran in the Iran-Iraq war made things worse as Sunnis considered this a bold and threatening step (p.55).

That explained, we bring back the discussion to the chaotic civil war. In the early days of the 2011 Uprising, "the deployment of religious vocabulary and symbols to express political opposition to the Assad regime reflected the importance of Islam as a

moral framework for action in Syrian society” (Paulo Gabriel Hilu Pinto, 2017, p.126). Bit by bit, as sect-specificity increased and tensions mounted, Islamist activists resurfaced and Sunni jihadist groups started prevailing among the opposition. These groups started spreading mayhem against minorities and Sunni-Assad loyalists accusing them of apostasy. Saouli (2019) confirmed that “the sectarian discourse of jihadist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State– who perceive Shi’a as infidels– and the horrendous violence they inflicted on minorities and political opponents in Syria and Iraq, pushed many members of targeted groups to support Hezbollah and Assad. When Nasrallah announced that the battle in Syria was existential in nature, many attributed this not only to the survival of the resistance alliance, but also to the mere survival of various minority groups” (p.189-190). Furthermore, a Sunni elder was filmed shouting after a raid in al-Qusayr against Shi’a inhabitants: “No more lands for the Shi’a here from now on.”²⁷⁸ Pinto (2017) explained the growing fear among Alawites, Christians, Druze and Ismailis amid the rise of sectarian narratives and mottos: In Homs, for instance, protestors were chanting “al-Masihiyoun ila Beirut wa al-‘Alawiyoun fi al-tabout” (The Christians to Beirut and the Alawites to the coffin) (p.132).

Of course, Assad’s regime and the Syrian Ba’ath are generally framed “as defenders of secularism, guarantors of the safety of minority groups, and the surest defense against ‘sectarianism”” (Haddad, 2020, p.256). Needless to say that where possible, “regimes will immediately reach for the tried and tested method of isolating and containing political threats emanating from sectarian outgroups by employing the vilifying

²⁷⁸Youtube: AL-Jadeed searches for Hezbollah. 24 February 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7R1DI1Hy1c>

and delegitimizing language of ‘sectarianism’ and foreign collusion, thereby portraying the political mobilization of sectarian outgroups as a threat not just to the regime but to the rest of citizenry and to the nation as well” (Haddad, 2020, p.248). Moreover, anti-Hezbollah former Member of Parliament reasoned that Hezbollah benefited from the rise of sectarianism advertising a coalition of minorities against the Sunni majority. The latter sect, he followed, has no prominent figures anymore such as Jamal Abdel Nasser or Yasser Arafat and they were transformed to terrorists in Iraq, to refugees in Syria and to underdogs in Lebanon.²⁷⁹ However, al-Mayadeen TV reporter who covered Hezbollah’s raid to recapture al-Qusayr argued that some voices within Hezbollah objected the intervention at the outset, but when sectarian identity started driving the conflict, namely against Shi’a, they were all convinced.²⁸⁰ This is plainly valid as the Shi’a community sensed the menace caused by the increasing clout of terrorist organization such as HTS and ISIS.

Unpacked in chapter 5, Hezbollah adopted a sectarian mobilization and instrumentalized its Shi’a sectarian identity to justify its engagement in Syria’s conflict focusing on the attacks against Sayyida Zeinab’s mosque and Shi’a villages on the Lebanese-Syrian borders. However, sectarian identity cannot explain the causal factors of the conflict. Although it was the primary driver in certain cases, it remained an exception. In fact, if anything, what was falsely framed as a sectarian conflict was a geopolitical contest driven by an array factors stretching from political and economic grievances to sectarian identity. Tawfik al-Saif (208), for instance, argued that all modern

²⁷⁹ Interview with author. 9 October 2018.

²⁸⁰ interview with author. 11 September 2018.

and primordial sectarian conflicts were caused by political contest. This, however, is not always the case. There are many examples that can dispel such narrative: take the clearest one that is ISIS's mischief-making or other conflicts that are driven from below rather than above. Bring the discussion back to the main argument, Pinto (2017) opined that the engagement of Hezbollah, Iraqi groups, and Iranian brigades in Syria mirrored a strategic alliance, but commingled with sectarian overtones (p.140). According to Bassel F. Salloukh, the Sunni-Shi'a divide was Hezbollah's biggest fear and in the grand scheme of things, it maligned them because they always sought to portray themselves as a pan-Islamist movement fighting against invading forces, namely the west, rather than a sectarian organization.²⁸¹

Hezbollah's former private universities spokesman seconded that they didn't benefit from the rise of sectarianism because they lost support among Sunnis in the Arab world.²⁸² This was approved by the spokesman of the Lebanese Forces, an anti-Hezbollah Christian party, who added that Nasrallah's pictures were raised in Cairo and various other Arab cities following the 2006 war against Israel, but needless to say how much this support decreased in parallel to the rise of sectarian bickering and Hezbollah's framing as a sectarian group.²⁸³ Conversely, the deputy secretary general of the Future movement stressed that Hezbollah benefited from the Sunni-Shi'a schism by promoting itself as a transnational NSA maneuvering in new theatres where it proved to other Shi'a constituents that they all belong to the same ideological and intellectual school.²⁸⁴ The

²⁸¹ Interview with author. 1 October 2018.

²⁸² Interview with author. 5 September 2018.

²⁸³ Interview with author. 10 October 2018.

²⁸⁴ Interview with author. 10 November 2018.

point to make here is that the regional role that Hezbollah played on Iran's behalf or as a partner in the axis delegitimized it in the eyes of the Sunni but at the same time endeared it among Shi'a.

The engagement in Syria's turmoil, according to Saouli (2018), increased the Sunni-Shi'a animosity and had broader ramifications within Lebanon (p.196). The demonization of Hezbollah had started with the assassination of Lebanon's former prime minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. In 2019, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, officially accused Hezbollah for orchestrating the operation.²⁸⁵ Further adding to the Sunni-Shi'a dynamics in Lebanon was the 7 May clashes when Hezbollah and its allies took over Beirut after overriding the pro-Hariri supporters who happened to be Sunnis. Although Abdo (2017) upheld that Hariri's assassination was a rallying point for Sunnis against the threat of the Shi'a Hezbollah, in addition to the Hezbollah takeover of Beirut that fueled anti-Shi'a discourses (p.57-58), this is somehow misleading as it was framed as if Sunni-Shi'a identities were the key driver of these tensions. In fact, paralleled with the rise of sectarian discord in post-Saddam Iraq and its spillovers, domestic power relations were easily framed as sectarian contest.

So when the clashes erupted in Syria, "many of Lebanon's Sunnis, instinctively sided with the mostly Sunni anti-Assad rebels" and thought to challenge Hezbollah at home (Phillips, 2018, p.157). Subsequently, sectarian violence erupted in Tripoli, northern Lebanon, between pro-Assad Alawites and pro-rebels Sunnis; in Arsal, a Sunni town in

²⁸⁵ "Suspect in killing of former Lebanese PM Rafic Hariri charged with three more political murders", The New Arab, on 16 September 2019, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/9/16/rafic-hariri-murder-suspect-charged-with-three-more-killings>

the Beqaa valley, between Sunni armed groups, including ISIS and HTS, and the Lebanese army and Shi'a neighbors; in Saida, southern Lebanon, with the rise of the radical Sunni sheikh, Ahmad al-Assir, who fought Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) (Phillips, 2018, p.159). The notorious sheikh generated its nemesis during the early days of the Syrian civil war and accused Hezbollah of butchering brethren Sunnis in al-Qusayr, and blamed the LAF for covering for it. After clashes with both Hezbollah and the LAF, al-Assir ended a fugitive until his capture while trying to escape through the Lebanese airport with a fake passport.²⁸⁶ Assir and his parallels are altogether convinced of the virtuous cause they are praising and it is hard to escape the sense of Sunni victimhood in Lebanon and in the Levant as well.

Above all, there was a regional dimension for sectarianism: The Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry. The distort created by the Uprising in Syria, similarly to other countries such as Yemen and Libya, created a vacuum which Iran and Saudi Arabia sought to fill. Abdo (2017) argued that Iran and Saudi Arabia both have a sectarian agenda that bolster their geopolitical contest (p.13). "The Saudis have made a conscious decision to increase the salience of the Sunni-Shi'a divide since the beginning of the Arab upheavals, to increase support for their allies, and to isolate Iran and its allies in the Arab world" (Gregory Gause, 2011, p.21). Marc Lynch (2013) opined that the "Saudi regime, most obviously, systematically uses sectarianism in order to intimidate and control its own Shiite citizens at home and to combat Iranian influence regionally. Saudi leaders might or might not genuinely hate Shiites, but they know that sectarian conflict is a useful strategy."

²⁸⁶ Kareem Traboulsi, "Ahmad al-Assir's arrest in Lebanon raises many questions", The New Arab, on 17 August 2015.

However, both countries are to be blamed for exacerbating the Sunni-Shi'a divide and instrumentalizing sectarian identity.. Other regional countries, namely Turkey and Qatar, have also played cardinal roles in the sectarianizing the conflict.

Furthermore, both Sunni- and Shi'a-sponsored TV channels participated in fueling sectarian tensions. For instance, a documentary organized by Kata'ib Abdullah Azzam, called "Al-Ta'ifa al-Mazlouma" (The Oppressed Sect), circulated among Sunnis in the Arab world and galvanized them (Mohsen, 2017, p.188). Al-Manar, Hezbollah's channel, followed up with the regional conflicts by boosting sect-specific symbols, myths, songs working as a machinery of mobilization. Of course, Hezbollah denied these accusations. Hezbollah's minister stressed that they oppose sectarian confrontations even among non-Muslims and they have always tried to unite Muslims and prevent internal fighting. We, he pursued, are eager to protect all Muslims and Arabs, not only Shi'a, from conspiracies and our bolster of Sunni Palestinians offers a damning proof of this policy. But the takfirists and our rivals, held grudges against the Shi'a, so protecting them was our duty.²⁸⁷ This is plainly not the case, however. Since its emergence, Hezbollah was built as a sect-centric group adopting a sectarian mobilization agenda. Saouli (2019) opined that "by supporting Assad and Iran, Hezbollah's foes reaffirmed their narrative of Hezbollah as a sectarian movement that is determined to preserve and deepen Iranian infiltration of the Arab world in the hope of creating a Shi'a or Persian crescent, trying Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut" (p.196). Thus, Haddad (2020) stressed that "Arab regimes and less charitable Arab voices tend to overstate the commonalities between Arab Shi'a and Iran and to exaggerate their potential to act as a vehicle for Iranian penetration of the Arab world"

²⁸⁷ Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

(p.212). In fact, this partnership is mutually beneficial, providing Iran with a regional partner/proxy –depending on the arena, but also leveraging Hezbollah on the domestic and regional theatres.

Sect-specific symbols and mottos such as “Oh Hussein” generate further antagonism among the opposition which happened to be Sunnis. Dai al Islam al-Shahhal, the Lebanese Salafist leader, frequently tweeted that the Shi’a articulate “Oh Hussein” as a prelude to butcher, rape and burn Sunnis (Abdo, 2017, p.65). Such arguments are misleading and only serve as a mobilizational tool because Hezbollah was not seeking religious or sectarian truth in Syria despite the sectarian mobilization policy it adopted. Phillips (2018) emphasized that “it was the regime and the emerging radical Islamists that drove the gradual sectarianization of the conflict and Hezbollah helped exacerbate this trend once it entered the war” (p.158). Furthermore, the sense of Sunni victimhood increased with the establishment of the mostly-Shi’a *al-Hashd al-Sha’bi* or PMF as a response to the emergence of ISIS. More to the point, the PMF became “resented by Sunnis and just as fiercely defended by many Shi’a” (Genieve, 2017, p.25). Hezbollah’s role in tandem with Iran in Iraq facilitated its demonization in the eyes of the Sunnis across the Middle East. Adnan al-Ar’our, a Syrian Salafist leader, has devoted his TV channel called *With Syria Until Victory*, to pinpoint Hezbollah’s and Iran’s support to Assad’s regime against what he described to be Sunni rebels (Abdo, 2017, p.78).

Further afield, Hezbollah, in tandem with the Quds Force, was eager to thwart any attempt by the opposition to attack Shi’a citizens across Syria. Nowhere was this clearer than in the sectarian narrative they used to justify their intervention in order to protect the Shi’a inhabitants in al-Qusayr or Sayyida Zeinab’s shrine, but more importantly, their

engagement in Nubbul and al-Zahra' in Aleppo, Kfarya and al-Fou'a in Idlib and Busra al-Sham on the borders between as-Suweida and Dar'a. How then did they not operate on a sectarian-based agenda? Both Hezbollah's deputy head of political relations and private universities spokesman argued that they [Hezbollah] feel more comfortable to maneuver in Shi'a areas and they are more accepted within the Shi'a community than among other sects. Our image, they pursued, was harmed by anti-Hezbollah propaganda because they labeled us as invaders, especially among Sunnis; however, we fought in many other places that are not Shi'a, such as Lattakia, Idlib and Homs.²⁸⁸ This is plainly not the case, however. Hezbollah was unyieldingly determined to protect each and every Shi'a in Syria. A spokesman of the "Lebanese Forces" argued that this is normal because Hezbollah's ideological priority is protecting any Shi'a entity.²⁸⁹

In 2015, Hezbollah encircled rebels in al-Zabadani village, in al-Qalamoun, starving them and cutting water supplies in order to reach a quid pro quo that would guarantee the withdrawal of the Shi'a citizens from Kfarya and al-Fou'a.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, they fought in Busra al-Sham, a village co-habited by both Sunni and Shi'a, but retreated after few days along with the Shi'a residents. In a similar manner, during the offensive to retake Aleppo in 2015, Hezbollah diverted the direction of the operations from the city up to Nubbul and al-Zahra' which have been surrounded and bombed by jihadist factions for more than two years. In these 5 villages, Hezbollah was keen to stand as a bulwark

²⁸⁸ Interview with author. On 5 September 2018.

²⁸⁹ Interview with autho. On 20 October 2018.

²⁹⁰ "Syrian army, rebels reach deal on zabadani, Idlib Vilages: source", on 24 September 2015. The Daily Star Lebanon. Retrieved from:

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Sep-24/316543-hezbollah-syria-army-reach-deal-with-rebels-on-fate-of-zabadani-idlib-towns-sources.ashx>

against all attempts to overrun them. Of course, Hezbollah had trained fighters from these towns and armed them to fight alongside the SAA and the NDF. Reports have confirmed that Hezbollah and Iran were seeking to establish “a second Hezbollah” in Syria.²⁹¹ By other words, they were establishing Shi’a groups under their leadership. However, Mikhael Awad (2017) opined that using a Shi’a identity was doomed among Syrians because of the shared patriotism and the secularity of the community and the elite. Further, the Russian intervention appeared as a call to prevent further Iranian involvement (p.201). Sharing the same geopolitical agenda with Iran and Hezbollah, Syria’s regime was neither part of *wilayat al-faqih* nor Iran’s subordinate. This imposed a somewhat divergence in certain political and sectarian matters.

From a Salafist point of view, Hezbollah committed atrocities against Sunnis in Syria to prevent Assad’s collapse and this was no different than ISIS’ mayhem in Iraq. Consequently, Hezbollah was being maligned by calling it Hezb al Shaytan (Party of the Devil), instead of Hezbollah (Party of God) (Abdo, 2017, p.69). Abdo (2017) quoted Adnan Imama, a Salafist Sheikh in the Beqaa saying that “if a Sunni were committing these massacres in Syria, we would call for him to be killed, even if he were killing Alawites, Christians, and Shi’a. We are not against Shi’a as Shi’a, we are against political Shi’ism” (p.105). On another side, Nasrallah accused jihadist organizations, which he labeled as extremists, for butchering Sunnis as much as Shi’a offering multiple examples, i.e. the invasion of ‘Adra, a town in Rif Dimashk where ISIS slaughtered families in their houses. Nasrallah also argued that many Sunnis are fighting in the ranks of the SAA assuming

²⁹¹ “Hezbollah thanen fi Sourya.. Hakika am Khayal”, by Mhamad Nemer. Beirut: Annahr newspaper. 19 May 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.annahar.com/article/134708-حزب-الله-ثاني-في-سوريا-حقيقة-أم-خيال>

that the conflict is not sectarian.²⁹² Although Nasrallah's argument is valid and sectarian identity is merely a mobilizational tool, paradoxically, Hezbollah's maneuvers on the ground reflected the instrumentalization of Shi'a sectarian identity.

For our purposes, where possible Hezbollah had always sought to build alliances with Sunni groups to dispel the narrative that labels it a sectarian organization. After the 2018 parliamentary elections in which Hezbollah and its allies won the majority of seats, it insisted on representing its Sunni allies in the cabinet. Nasrallah refused to hand the names of the Shi'a ministers if prime minister Saad Hariri didn't accept to include Sunni minister representing their allies.²⁹³ Needless to say that the geopolitical triumph of the axis in Syria provided Hezbollah with notable leverage at the negotiation table amplifying its clout in Lebanon. Furthermore, from Nasrallah's point of view confining Hezbollah to the Shi'a and labeling it a sectarian organization is a false premise because it has operated and supported over time many Sunni factions, namely Palestinians and Bosnians (Abdo, 2017, p.94). Hezbollah's deputy head of political relations seconded that the more Hezbollah focused on a patriotic, Islamic and Arab discourse, the more it gained popularity; therefore, it didn't exploit its sectarian identity but western states worked to introduce Hezbollah as a sectarian movement.²⁹⁴ This narrative can hardly convince any observer as facts on the ground proved the contrary and Hezbollah would even endure without the politicization of its Shi'a sectarian identity.

²⁹² Youtube: "Press conference- Hassan Nasrallah". On 20 December 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9-yH3xFqng>

²⁹³ Youtube: "Kalimat al-amin al-'am li Hezbollah al-Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah fi mahrajan yawm al shouhada". On 10 November 2018. Retrieved from:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSIGI8WOFDM>

²⁹⁴ Interview with author. On 8 September 2018.

Saouli (2019) dismissed Hezbollah's discourse by arguing that its intervention was based on sectarian fears (p.189). Armenak Tokmajyan (2014) opined that Hezbollah's sectarian mobilization served its geopolitical interest by safeguarding its strategic route that crosses through Damascus. In fact, Nasrallah was deeply interested in de-sectarianizing the conflict at least in his discourses because any kind of sectarianization would undermine Hezbollah's popularity among the Sunnis. Nasrallah even picked his words carefully when addressing Osama Bin Laden in his speeches or al-Qaeda as a sign of respect. In parallel, Hezbollah enjoyed a good relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.²⁹⁵ Nevertheless, his attempts to mend ties with the wider Sunni Arabs were a fiasco. This was obvious when Hamas one of its closest Sunni allies, distance itself from the axis when the Sunni-Shi'a discord reached its apogee during Syria's chaotic years. Not only did Hamas remove its offices from Syria which had given it refuge for years despite the international pressures on Assad's regime to expel Hamas and its leaders, but it also supported the jihadist anti-Assad groups, namely HTS.

The climax occurred with the rise of sectarianism and the brutal confrontations. "Sectarianism thus has no explanatory power to make sense of the Syrian conflict. It is, rather, a political tool that was shaped and fostered by many actors in the conflict" (Pinto, 2017, p.124). Bassel F. Salloukh (2017) seconded that "the explosion of sectarianism in the Middle East is not a consequence of immutable or timeless religious differences but is, rather, driven by the sectarianization of otherwise realist geopolitical battles and the consequent post-uprising collapse of state's coercive, institutional and ideological capacities in a number of countries with plural societies" (p.49). The Sunni-Shi'a schism

²⁹⁵ Interview with author. On 11 September 2018.

was exacerbated by both Iran and Saudi Arabia across the region, and “the conflict in Syria has become ground zero in the war of position between the two hegemons” (Postel & Hashemi, 2017, p.13). “Both sides of the conflict were territorializing religious identities and producing a more homogeneous religious landscape, inscribing their sectarian dynamic in the social reality through violence, dispossession, and expulsion of parts of the local populations” (Pinto, 2-17, p.141). Sectarian dynamics and conflict since 2003 “has been driven as much by foreign actors as by local protagonists, by victims as by perpetrators, by elite instrumentalization as by popular fear and prejudice, and as much from above as from below.” (Haddad, 2020, p.220).

While leaders recognized that this was a political contest using citizens as a tool, the masses were conducting a pure sectarian conflict (Fouad Ibrahim, 2018, p.143-144). For our purposes, Hezbollah instrumentalized its sectarian identity widening the Sunni-Shi’a schism. However, as Lynch (2013) argued, the “Sunni-Shi’a conflict in recent years has very little to do with intrinsic religious differences or with 1400 years of Islamic history”, on the contrary, the sectarian cleavages were exploited during the confrontations in the Middle East for “cynical purposes.” Doctrinal beliefs do not explain the intervention of Hezbollah and are not a causal factor of the conflict. Rather, sectarian identity served as a machinery of mobilization for what was in fact a geopolitical confrontation. It was, however, a key driver of the civil war. Of course, it is hard to escape the generated nemesis among the Sunni community which will hold grudges for the ensuing decades. Palpably, the Syrian conflict transitioned Hezbollah into a regional ANSA that played a flamboyant role in changing the power balance in the country, in tandem with its allies. That said, sectarian identity and mobilization served this transition and further embedded

Hezbollah as a partner in the axis that straddles the geopolitical fault-lines in the Middle East.

6.4 The Shift to a Quasi-army

The deterrence that Hezbollah imposed during the 2006 war against Israel established it a significant player in the regional power balance. Accustomed to fight from defensive positions in south Lebanon against the IDF where each fighter defends his village launching missiles from underground tunnels, Hezbollah's mission in Syria was different: They are now on the offensive fighting Arab opponents who happened to be fellow Sunni Muslims. This is imposed a somewhat new tactic where Hezbollah adopted large army formations mixed, occasionally with guerilla tactics that depended on smaller units with great agility and efficient firepower (al-Hassan, p.139). What is guerilla warfare? Omar Ashour described guerrilla warfare as small units involving slight mobile units and hit-and-run strikes on security and military targets. The units are lightly armed and avoid any prolonged direct confrontation with the incumbent's forces.²⁹⁶ Wherever possible, for instance, small top-notch units executed operations behind enemy lines. This merge between classical and guerilla warfare tactics shaped Hezbollah as a quasi-army. According to a strategic military analyst close to Hezbollah, "they have indeed been trained by Iran but they benefited from all military schools, including the Israeli. They know how to learn even from their enemies."²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ "Sinai's Stubborn Insurgency: Why Egypt Can't Win", by Omar Ashour. On 8 November 2015. The Foreign Affairs. Retrieved from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2015-11-08/sinai-stubborn-insurgency>

²⁹⁷ Interview with author. On 18 December 2018.

Al-Hassan (2017) argued that Hezbollah had offered in 2006's war a creative example that varied between guerilla and classical warfare: it turned caves into operation rooms and underground tunnels to missiles Launchpad, its fighters used the B10 cannon on shoulders instead of vehicles and the explosive devices instead of rockets when it was a better option while preserving the missile for other confrontations, they used their milieu for camouflage and moved on motorcycles between villages and livestock in order to transport food and equipment, they knew how to take advantage of unsophisticated missiles like, for example, launching the Katyusha on short distances and lower altitudes so that it wouldn't be detected by the Israeli Patriot Defense System and they transformed the B-M 21 rocket launcher into one nozzle, the Russian Malotca into mobile launchers and the Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) into wirily detonated instead of remotely (p.181-182). Hezbollah adopted a mix of guerilla tactics with classical army's weaponry such as anti-armor and anti-battleship missiles and was able to hack the Israeli communication devices (Al-Hassan, 2017, p.182). In regards to the arsenal, Hezbollah has indeed introduced new method to use it but in 2006, it was still fighting in guerilla formations, namely small top-notch unit, while in Syria the situation was different as they adopted large army formations to breach the fortifications of their opponent.

Furthermore, "after Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel, Iran and Syria rearmed Hezbollah with vastly expanded and more sophisticated weaponry" (Sullivan, 2014, p.9). Hezbollah's minister considered that it transitioned into a regional ANSA during the 2006 war, yet, unintentionally. We, he maintained, didn't want this transition, but when the world conspired against us in 2006 in order to annihilate us, the war transformed Hezbollah to

a regional power.²⁹⁸ Then, Hezbollah imposed deterrence against Israel but it was still confined to the domestic theatre with small proxy roles elsewhere on Iran's behalf. In a comparison between Hezbollah in 2006 and 2017, al-akhbar newspaper pointed to the following: First, Hezbollah has mobilized more than tens of thousands of fighters and became more embedded within Lebanon's society. Second, Hezbollah has now more than 150.000 missiles instead of the 12.000 it possessed in 2006. Third, it possesses precision missiles with longer ranges and larger impact. Fourth, Hezbollah's fighters have gained more experience during their engagement in Syria's conflict and became "a professional army". Fifth, it is present with much more regional influence clout.²⁹⁹

Al-Hassan (2017) opined that Hezbollah developed its tactics and structures during Syria's cataclysm. It used a combination of guerilla-classical warfare tactics: it upgraded its formations to a quasi-army which gave it leverage ahead of offensives to recapture large cities and towns, on one hand, while it preserved guerilla tactics for its efficiency in the battlefield, on the other. The new formations included: infantry, artillery, rockets, drones, armored, commandos that are organized, well-trained and malleable with all sorts of firepower, supply lines, logistical assistance and quick actions, and can fight with both guerilla and classical styles and tactics (Al-Hassan p.198). "Hezbollah's training since 2006 focused on developing urban warfare skills. Some of these training courses were held in Iran, where they were conducted in mock cities." Shortly after Hezbollah's first battle in al-Qusayr, its "fighters told journalists that they were able to implement these

²⁹⁸ Interview with author. On 12 September 2018.

²⁹⁹ "Baina Hezbollah 2017... wa Hezbollah 2006", by Ali Haydar. On 15 July 2017. Beirut: al-Akhbar newspaper. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/234918/بين-حزب-الله-2017-وحزب-الله-2006>

new practices” (Sullivan,2014, p16). Nicholas Blanford seconded that “since 2006, Hezbollah fighters have trained in Lebanon and Iran in tactics of both offensive and defensive urban warfare.”³⁰⁰ Sullivan (2014) argued that Hezbollah’s urban warfare tactics were efficient as they “used snipers, RPG-7s, and improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMs) made from 107mm Katyusha rockets and other explosives. IRAMS, which are essentially rocket-propelled IEDs, were first used by Iranian-backed Shi’a militants against US forces in Iraq” (p.16).

Hezbollah’s pre-2011 arsenal contained:

- SCOD D-Y missiles, caliber: 880, range: 700 km
- Katyusha missiles (BM-21, BM-27): ranging from 12 to 22 kilometers.
- Fajr (Dawn) missiles: it is an improved generation of Katyusha by Iran that reaches between 25 and 75 kilometers.
- Raad (Thunder) missiles: Iranian similar to its Chinese counterparts that reaches 75 kilometers.
- Zelzal (Earthquake) missiles: Iranian that ranges between 150 and 200 kilometers.
- Anti-battleships missiles: Chinese Land-to-sea C802 missiles that reaches 100 kilometers.
- Anti-battleships missiles: “Yakhont” missiles, and SA14, SA22 and Patetsear S1.
- Anti-aircraft missiles: land-to-air directed missiles, similar to the SAM 7 but shorter and lighter and can be launched on the shoulder.

³⁰⁰ “Hezbollah applies new training practices in Syria,” by Nicholas Blanford, The Daily Star, June 8, 2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Jun-08/219769-hezbollah-applies-new-training-practices-in-syria.ashx>.

- Anti-armor missiles: Russian made Spigot AT4 and Sogost AT3 and the western fabricated Tow.

- Anti-tank missiles: directed Cornett Sager (ATGM)
anti-aircraft defenses

- Drones: Iranian from the category “Mouhajer” (migrating) called “Mersad”; It has 3 cameras, one radar and an electronic system, and can fly up to 6000 feet with a maximum speed of 120 kilometers (al-Hassan, 2017, p.132-133).

Israeli sources opined that Hezbollah possess hundreds of drones, and some are loaded with explosives to attack Israeli targets.³⁰¹

-Khaibar-1; caliber: 302 that range 100 km.

-Fateh-110: short range ballistic missiles; caliber: 600, range: 250 km.

-The Russian Yakhont missile, caliber: 700, range: 120-300 km.

Reports suggested that Hezbollah can now launch 1500 missiles a day in case a war erupted with Israel.³⁰² Further afield, its armored regiment possesses:

-Tanks: T-54, T-55 and T-72.

-Automatic guided rockets Launchpad.

-M113 APCs with 14,5 mm machine guns.

-ZSU-57-2 SPAA, SA- 6 Gainful (251 Gvozdika) KS-12 85 mm Gun useful as fire support against land target.

³⁰¹ “Yadi’ot Ahranot: Hezbollah yamlikou 200 ta’ira bila tayyar”, on 1 February 2014. Beirut: An-nahar newspaper. Retrived from:

<https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/104659-طائرة-بلا-طيار-200-يملك-الله-حزب-نوت-يديعوت-أحر-ونوت-حزب-الله-يملك-200-طائرة-بلا-طيار>

³⁰² “Hezbollah: Capabilities and role in the Middle East”, South Front. 18 November 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzBZpNxxui8>

-“Kornet” ATGMs mounted on Quadricycles that can fight any modern tank.³⁰³

During Syria’s tumultuous conflict, Hezbollah witnessed deep structural changes: It edged the strength of an army and its force is estimated to be 20000 strong while it was 5000 in 2006. In fact, if anything, Hezbollah is known for being reticent to reveal any information so these numbers are approximate. Its infantry forces transformed to a small army with new tactics and sophistications. In the pre-2011 era, the observation and discovery ahead of each operation used to take longer, but with the insertion of the drones during Syria’s civil war, the completion of these missions became faster. In parallel, the military formations altered in a way that each unit possesses all kinds of specializations which accelerates the pace of any operation. That said, Hezbollah’s units now work within the following process: first, they gather the information needed using drones; second, they divide the offensive into two steps: Launching missile salvos and rockets against rebel areas which has become a prerequisite ahead of each foray, then comes the exhaustion of the rivals’ human capabilities without any direct combat followed by confrontations micromanaged through operation rooms; third, its top-notch unit, al-Rodwan – named after the acronym of its late military leader Imad Moughniyeh– enters the battle to conduct face-to-face clashes while leaving a safe passage for the opponents to withdraw (al-Hassan, 2017, p.137).

Of course, Hezbollah was not the reason behind the regime’s survival, but it was one of an array of actors which helped turn the tide of the war in the regime’s favor. As a matter of fact, the SAA and other Syrian pro-regime forces, namely the NDF, lost more

³⁰³ “Hezbollah: Capabilities and role in the Middle East”, South Front. 18 November 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzBZpNxxui8>

fighters than Hezbollah and the Russian intervention was even more eloquent than that of Hezbollah. But for our purposes, by and large, Hezbollah's early engagement in a zero-sum conflict starting from al-Qusayr on the Lebanese-Syrian border, through inland Syria, all the way down to Quneitra in the south and up to Deir ez-Zor in the northeast, was unyieldingly determined to prevent regime's breakdown. In al-Qusayr, Mohsen (2017) argued, Hezbollah succeeded by raining the city with barrages of airstrikes and rockets as a prelude for its ground offensive (p.93). Its fighters had launched 132 mm Katyusha rockets, 57 mm cannons, 12,5 and 23 mm anti-aircraft heavy weapons to cover their ground advance (Mohsen, 2017, p.91-92). Christopher Phillips (2018) argued that "given Hezbollah's reputation as the most impressive military force in the Arab world, this sapped rebel morale and boosted the regime" (p.158).

The strategic military analyst who's close to Hezbollah argued that the latter adopted the "carpet bombing policy" that aimed to destroy everything. Hezbollah, he pursued, enjoyed an unlimited support that no other ANSA ever did in regards to the ammo they received and the ammunition their fighters were allowed to use giving them intensive firepower.³⁰⁴ In fact, Syria and Iran were pouring ammos of all kinds: from small and medium to large weapons, to missiles and rockets. This abundant arsenal leveraged Hezbollah curtailing the chance of succeeding for their foes. Mikhael Awad (2017) opined that the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah military cooperation on the ground constituted a vital shift in managing the current war and the future conflicts that might take place. Hezbollah's military competence and field coordination had increased with Russia's intervention which introduced new technological, sophisticated and strategical arms. The efficiency of

³⁰⁴ Interview with author. 18 December 2018.

Hezbollah's fighters on a personal and group level increased because of the experience it gained throughout daily confrontations (Awad, 2017, p.200). For instance, al-Hassan (2017) emphasized that "al-Radwan" unit – named after the alias of Hezbollah's late leader Imad Moughniyeh– fought side by side with the Unit 810 of the Russian Naval Infantry in many battles (p.138). The point to make here is that Hezbollah can now count on a new generation of experienced fighters that continued to rise unabated proving its credentials in Syria.

"The conflict in Syria has affected Hezbollah's military arm positively and negatively. Hezbollah fighters are gaining valuable combat experience in Syria. They have employed the tactics that they have trained on over the past few years with an eye towards the next conflict with Israel. Hezbollah now has a cadre of fighters that has experience conducting offensive operations in urban environments. And the rotation of fighters into Syria has given its newer recruits or reservists experience on the battlefield. Moreover, Hezbollah units have also gained experience coordinating with allied forces in combat, as well as logistical sustainment over longer periods. Another military drawback of the fighting in Syria is the casualties sustained on the battlefield. The group has lost hundreds of its elite fighters over the last year, with many more likely wounded. Hezbollah's killed in Syria have included veteran military commanders. A number of these individuals had fought against Israeli troops during the 1980s and 1990s, and brought years of combat experience to conflict in Syria" (Sullivan, 2014, p.26). It has now units that can operate in all environments: inhabited, mountainous, maritime and deserted; and can also organize drills containing 3000 to 5000 strong (al-Hassan, 2017, p.131). This is considered a huge number for orthodox ANSAs which had always operated clandestinely

and in small numbers. During Syria's turmoil, Hezbollah had lost 1650 fighters,³⁰⁵ including many leaders. However, it built a new generation of experienced fighters who will serve within its ranks for years to come.

"In November 2016, Hezbollah published a military parade, including convoy of tanks, that it organized in the Syrian town of Qusayr. It was not clear whether the parade aimed to flex Hezbollah's muscles, presumably to deter enemies, or whether it was a sign of developing hubris" (Saouli, 2019, p.201). Most obviously, the tilt of Hezbollah into a quasi-army, al-Mayadeen channel reporter stressed, overlapped with the peak of ideologies as Hezbollah proved its determination to preserve the agenda of the axis at the expense of Lebanon's best interest. Further afield, as a close observer of their forays, he argued that its units showed a high level of discipline obeying military orders without budging an inch.³⁰⁶ That said, where possible, Hezbollah still adopted guerilla tactics by infiltrating small top-notch units behind enemy lines, but generally, it used large army formations to capture large cities such as al-Qusayr. To close, Hezbollah became a quasi-army mixing between classical and guerilla warfare tactics and formations. More to the point, this tilt was one among three variables that transitioned Hezbollah into a regional ANSA and a key player in the regional order.

6.5 From Beirut to Tehran: Partners in the axis

A key variable that transitioned Hezbollah into a regional ANSA was its further embed in the axis as a partner and decision-maker. From ground offensives to the leadership level, via operation rooms, Hezbollah participated in the decision-making

³⁰⁵ Interview with author. 18 December 2018.

³⁰⁶ Interview with author. 11 September 2018.

process and became a central partner in the axis that now extends from Beirut to Tehran, via Damascus and Baghdad, and Yemen to certain extent. It should be stated here that one should not mischaracterize the partners within the axis. To illustrate, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a groups are Iran's ideological replicas and abide by the rule of the Jurisprudent. Syria's regime, however, often described as "Alawite regime", (Haddad, 2020, p.26) shared the same geopolitical agenda, yet not totally, with Iran and its ideological replicas. By other words, there are points of conflict within the axis despite the partnership they shared that was always confined to the political level.

Bringing the discussion back to Hezbollah, the latter, with Iran's approval and assistance, rushed to prevent regime's breakdown. Concerns about blowbacks had Assad been removed highlighted the importance of the intervention. It was not possible for Hezbollah to lose a strategic ally and therefore giving its opponents the opportunity to encircle it by interrupting its arms supply from Iran en route to Beirut. Aware of these facts, Hezbollah had to intervene and there was no need for Iran to issue an order. Needless to say that during Syria's civil war it became clear that the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah is not that of a senior-subordinate. A spokesman of the Lebanese Forces, an anti-Hezbollah far right Christian party, dismissed the narrative that accuses Hezbollah of taking orders from Iran.³⁰⁷ Similarly a Shi'a pro-Saudi journalist close to Hariri emphasized that Hezbollah neither receive orders from Iran nor is its puppet, rather it is organically part of Iran. Hezbollah is a Lebanese/Iranian hybrid organization: It is part of the Lebanese society and part of the Iranian military apparatus. More importantly, Nasrallah is a decision-maker in the axis and one of the most prominent leaders, similarly to Qasem

³⁰⁷ Interview with author. On 20 October 2018.

Suleimani, head of the Quds Force, who was killed by a US airstrike in January 2020.³⁰⁸ For our purposes, coming from Hezbollah's rivals, these arguments are so significant that they confirm Hezbollah's partnership in the axis and its participation in the decision-making process.

Adham Saouli (2019) argued that "Hezbollah's growth, development and major role in driving Western and Israeli presence in Lebanon did not only realize Hezbollah's goals, but also were integral to Iran's strategy in the region. Hezbollah, thus, reflects Iran's military and political reach in the Levant, one that is only located on the Lebanese-Israeli border, but is, as we shall see, crucial for the survival of the Syrian regime. Therefore, the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah has with time developed into one of interdependence" (p.150). Sam Dagher (2019) emphasized that decisions were taken by hard-liners operating under Assad in coordination with Iran and Hezbollah and then passed to field commanders for execution. "Iran and Hezbollah", he stressed, "weighed on key decisions, since both had direct lines to Bashar and his tight circle" (Dagher, 2019, p.289). Choukair (2016) opined that despite Hezbollah's justification for its early engagement, it has indeed become a partner with Assad's regime, Iran, Iraq, and Russia to certain extent (p.5). Russia's stance had been previously unpacked, but suffice it to say here that Hezbollah is far from becoming a partner with Russia. The latter enjoys a much better relationship with Israel than with Tehran and Hezbollah. It's a matter of interest, in fact. Assad, though, vowed that the political, financial and military support of his allies –Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, provided momentum and lessened the casualties

³⁰⁸ Interview with author. On 13 November 2018.

in the battlefield.³⁰⁹ This is true from Assad’s point of view as all these actors participated in keeping him in power, along with, of course, the SAA and other pro-regime factions.

To illustrate, a set of events produced Hezbollah as a partner in the axis. In 2017, Hezbollah, along with the SAA and other allied forces entered Deir ez-Zor, northeastern Syria, breaking a siege that was imposed by ISIS against their comrades at the airport. What was abnormal was that, despite being known for being reticent to appear before cameras, a Hezbollah military commander stated through live streaming on al-Mayadeen channel: We are not hiding, we are fighting all over Syria and Hezbollah is a partner in this axis that includes Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.³¹⁰ Speaking as far as Deir ez-Zor, Hezbollah’s military commander was trusted to speak for the axis, a job usually assigned to Syrian soldiers. However, this was a geostrategic message to all forces who were fighting in Syria, including the US who was closing up on northeastern Syria along with the Kurds. Furthermore, he did not refer to Russia which brings us back to the previously mentioned argument about the latter’s distancing from Hezbollah and Iran at some point. More obviously, this alliance was underscored by Bashar al-Assad who – speaking about Iran and Hezbollah, stressed that “we are certain that our battle, along with our allies, is the frontline for all actors within the axis of resistance.”³¹¹ Saouli (2019)

³⁰⁹ “Al-Assad yashjor Russia wa Iran wa Hezbollah, Putin wa Netanyahu younakishan al-wade’ fi Sourya”, on 21 August 2017. Beirut: Annahar newspaper. Retrieved from: <https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/644100--الأسد-يشكر-روسيا-وإيران-وحزب-الله-بوتين-وننتياهو-يناقشان-الوضع-السوري-الأربعاء>

³¹⁰ “Hezbollah’s field commander in Deir ez-Zor: Braking the siege of the airport is a strategic triumph”, on 9 September 2017. Al-Mayadeen Channel. Retrieved from: <http://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/822848/details>

³¹¹ “Assad: we have what blinds Israel in seconds”, by Elie Chalhoub. On 16 September 2013. Al-akhbar newspaper: Lebanon. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Arab/58066/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%A7->

argued that “Hezbollah’s allies hailed the strategic depth that now tied all members of the resistance alliance” (p.200). During the war, “Iran arranged for other foreign Shi’a militants to fight for the regime, mostly Iraqi militia until 2014 and from as far as Afghanistan and Pakistan after Iraqis returned home to fight ISIS” (Phillips, 2018, p.150). The harder the geopolitical contest, the more relevant sectarian and political mobilization and, hence, the closer the actors within the axis had become.

Most obviously, Nasrallah spoke on behalf of the axis threatening Israel: The Israeli enemy must know that if a war is launched against Syria or Lebanon, it is not guaranteed that the fighting will remain Lebanese-Israeli or Syrian-Israeli, rather, this could open the path for thousands, even hundreds of thousands of fighters, from all over the Arab and Islamic world to engage: stretching from Iraq, to Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.³¹² Few days after this speech, Qais Khaz’ali, secretary general of the Iraqi ‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq who fought in Syria, strolled near the Lebanese-Israeli border wearing a military uniform. Khaz’ali emphasized that his visit was a message for Israel not for the Lebanese people.³¹³ As obvious as it looks, Khaz’ali’s appearance was to approve Nasrallah’s discourse. The facts stated above, ensured Hezbollah’s central partnership in the axis.

[%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%80%D9%80%D8%AD%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%AA](#)

³¹² “Hezbollah says future Israel war could draw fighters from Iran, Iraq, elsewhere”, on June 2017. Reuters. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-hezbollah/hezbollah-says-future-war-with-israel-could-draw-fighters-from-across-region-idUSKBN19E1X4>

³¹³ “Iraqi Shiite Militia Leader Qais Khazali: The True Enemies of the Imam Mahdi are the Jews, Israelies, and Zionists”, on 20 December 2017. Memri TV. Retrieved from: <https://www.memri.org/tv/%3Airaqi-shiite-militia-leader-khazali-south-lebanon-visit-message-to-israelis>

More broadly, the axis has now the ability to garner hundreds of thousands of fighters, mostly Shi'a controlled by Iran, except for those fighting under the command of the Assad regime, in case of conflict. Through this chain of proxies/partners Tehran can threaten Israel and use this card as leverage on the negotiation table. Generally speaking, the spokesman of the Lebanese Forces party argued that Hezbollah takes its decisions based on the interest and agenda of the whole axis.³¹⁴ To further illustrate, all groups which have sworn allegiance to the *wilayat al-faqih* do not need daily guidance by Iran's leadership because they are central to this partnership. One Hezbollah combatant has best put it: "We abide by the instructions of the Sayyed Khamenei [Iran's Supreme Leader] and Sayyed Hassan [Nasrallah]. We fight wherever they ask us to, be it against Israel, in Syria or even in Honolulu. It is true that we fought in Sayyida Zeinab to protect our sacred shrine, but here [in al-Qusayr], they cut the route of our sacred weapons" (Mohsen, 2017, p.105). The point to make here is that the loyalty of the fighters within the axis is unquestionable and becomes blind at some point.

After all, "the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah trilateral partnership has been decades in the making. It pre-dates the Syrian civil war, has strengthened as a result of the war and will likely endure in the post-war years."³¹⁵ Hezbollah has proven during the Syrian havoc that it is a partner in the axis rather than an appendage. This was reflected in the military triumphs which further embedded Hezbollah in the axis and its increased its participation in the decision-making process that stretched from ground offensives to

³¹⁴ Interview with author. 20 October 2018.

³¹⁵ "Why Assad's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah will Endure?", by Randa Slim. On 6 February 2019. The Atlantic Council. Retrieved from: <https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/why-assad-s-alliance-with-iran-and-hezbollah-will-endure-2/>

operation rooms all the way up to the leadership. That said, Hezbollah's partnership was key to its transition into a regional ANSA eyeing to play a prominent role in the puzzle of the regional order.

6.6 Conclusion

When Syria's civil war erupted, "outside powers entered the conflict; atrocities proliferated as survivors sheltered in ethnic and sectarian enclaves" (Kissinger, 2014, p.126). After six years of confrontations, there is too great distance between Hezbollah in the pre- and post-civil war environment. The Syrian conflict was a double-edged sword, maximizing Hezbollah's triumphs, but also fomented further animosity that can re-surface in the future. However, its engagement in the conflict was a necessity driven by geopolitical calculations as it fought "what it perceived to be an existential war next door."³¹⁶ Hezbollah pedaled ahead slowly. First, it adopted a sectarian mobilization agenda to justify its engagement in order to protect Shi'a villages on the Lebanese-Syrian border and Sayyida Zeinab's shrine in Damascus's suburbs. It later moved away from this argument focusing further on the narrative of a pre-emptive war against "takfirists" in order to avoid falling for the likes of ISIS and facing the same fate of the suffering Iraqi people (Tokmajyan, 2014).

Salloukh (2017) explained that by its intervention in Syria to protect its strategic and geopolitical interest and that of Iran, Hezbollah risked increasing the Sunni-Shi'a schism in the Middle East (p.230). In fact, as this chapter examined, sectarian power relations

³¹⁶ "Hezbollah's Journey from Syria's Battlefield to Lebanon's Political Minefield", by Ali Hashem. On 28 August 2018. Carnegie Middle East Center. Retrieved from: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/08/28/hezbollah-s-journey-from-syria-s-battlefield-to-lebanon-s-political-minefield-pub-77115>

were key in the conflict, yet, not the primary driver and are not causal factors. Rather, it was a geopolitical contest in which almost every actor played the sectarian card as a mobilizational tool. Sectarian identity being the primary driver of certain confrontations remains the exception. ISIS, for instance, was indeed driven by doctrinal beliefs but this is not the norm. That said, this chapter opened by unpacking the reasons behind Hezbollah's engagement in what was a war of necessity before examining the sectarian mobilization policy and the instrumentalization of sectarian identity that Hezbollah adopted. The chapter then moved to survey the transition of Hezbollah into a quasi-army mixing between guerilla and classical warfare tactics and formations and how Hezbollah became further embedded as a partner and decision-maker in the axis, along with Iran and Hezbollah.

To conclude, these variables altogether have transitioned Hezbollah into a regional ANSA straddling the fault-lines of the Middle East. Brian Katz (2019) argued that both, Nasrallah and Secretary of State Pompeo, agreed on the fact that "Hezbollah was growing more powerful" stating that Hezbollah's experience on the frontlines, namely in Syria, shifted the organization into a regional player.³¹⁷ This transition was not a grandiose plan that Hezbollah was planning to implement. Rather, Syria's civil war and the regional geopolitical contest was the conduit of this tilt. As Hezbollah's minister stated: "Fighting for us [Hezbollah], is not a hobby that we do in our free time. We fight for political purposes and for the righteous causes of our countries. We didn't spark any war, we only defended

³¹⁷ "Will Hezbollah's Rise be its Downfall?", by Brian Katz. On 8 March 2019. Foreign Affairs. Retrieved from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2019-03-08/will-hezbollahs-rise-be-its-downfall>

ourselves.”³¹⁸ In fact, it doesn’t matter who started the war, what matters is that Hezbollah, maligned by its rivals and praised by its supporters, gained the attributes of a regional ANSA playing a key role in altering the regional power balance. Now that Hezbollah reached its apogee regionally and domestically, the true question remains: What comes next?

7 The Heyday: What Next?

Even the most prominent and optimistic scholars haven’t expected the eruption of the contagious Arab Uprisings. However, a common feeling emerged at the outset hoping to achieve economic prosperity and end authoritarianism paving the way for democracy in the Middle East and North Africa. This was not the case, however. The more the Uprisings spread, the more conflicts mounted and mayhem engulfed the region and hence, the less optimism became. Facts on the ground, ranging from ethnic and sectarian splits, to regimes’ security and regional geopolitical contest, stood as bulwarks against the changes that the Arab Uprisings were expected to bring. More importantly, for our purposes, “the rise of armed, sectarian, local or transnational non-state actors is one of the main consequences of geopolitical contests unleashed after the popular Uprisings” (Bassel F. Salloukh, 2019).³¹⁹ William Burns (2019) stressed that “non-state actors – from the benign, like the Gates Foundation, to the malign, like al-Qaeda – have steadily eroded what was once the near monopoly of power enjoyed by states and government” (p.12).

³¹⁸ Interview with author. On 12 September 2018.

³¹⁹ “From State-Building to State-fraying Permeability: NSAs in the Post-Popular Uprisings Arab World”. By Bassel Salloukh. Project on Middle East Political Science. Retrieved from: <https://pomeps.org/2019/03/15/from-state-building-to-state-fraying-permeabilitynsas-in-the-post-popular-uprisings-arab-world/>

This thesis, however, examined one among an array of ANSAs in the Middle East: Hezbollah.

Henry Kissinger (2014) opined “radical groups promised to replace the existing system in the Middle East with a religiously based Middle East order reflecting two distinct universalist approaches to world order: the Sunni version by way of the regionally extensive Muslim Brotherhood founded in 1928, Hamas, the radical movement that gained power in Gaza in 2007, and the global terrorist movement al-Qaeda; and the Shi’a version through the Khomeini revolution and its offshoot, the Lebanese “state within a state” Hezbollah. In violent conflict with each other, they were united in their commitment to dismantle the existing regional order and rebuild it a divinely inspired system” (p.117). This is plainly not the case, however. In Iraq, for instance, it was the US that disrupted the regional order and these groups competed to fill the vacuum in the post-Saddam environment. Hezbollah, acting as proxy for Iran in the Iraqi theatre of operations, helped it implement its regional agenda. More to the point, this thesis was concerned with researching Hezbollah’s operations in multiple theatres: Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, and Iraq, but the main focus was on Syria.

The overarching aim was to understand the transition of Hezbollah into a regional ANSA. Over time, “Hezbollah has transformed itself from a little-known, secretive apparatus founded by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards into one of the most powerful non-state domestic actors in Lebanon and a major player in the regional politics” (Shoghig Mikaelian & Bassel Salloukh, 2015). However, Hezbollah’s deputy head of political relations commented that the transition was not tangible on the inside because most of the organization’s personnel are generally focused on domestic politics while the regional

portfolio is confined to the leadership. Nevertheless, he contradicted himself when he mentioned that from the outset, an internal discussion vis-à-vis the name of the organization had taken place of whether it should be called Hezbollah or the Umma of Hezbollah (The Nation of Hezbollah). We [Hezbollah] consider ourselves the party of the Umma but this frightens many Lebanese so we preferred to stick to Hezbollah.³²⁰ The point to note here is that despite Hezbollah's focus to increase its domestic influence, it was never confined to the Lebanese theatre and considers itself part of a larger Islamic nation guided by *al-waliyy al-faqih* or Guardian of the Jurisprudence.

Having said that, we bring the discussion back to the transition of Hezbollah into a regional ANSA which wouldn't have been feasible without its engagement in Syria's conflict. "Without the ability to operate within Syria, Iranian support to Hezbollah becomes much more difficult and risks interdiction. And Hezbollah's own military capabilities and readiness would suffer without access to this military and financial assistance." (Sullivan, 2014, p.9-10). Therefore, Iran insisted on keeping Assad in power and keeping the overland route open from Tehran to Beirut via Damascus and Baghdad.³²¹ Henceforth, bit by bit, "Hezbollah became a vital component of Assad's forces and greatly shaped the conflict" (Phillips, 2018, 158). This thesis emphasized that Hezbollah, the Quds Force, Iraq Shi'a groups and the SAA have become more experienced not only in joint training and planning, but have also learned how to better operate alongside each other. The conflict in Syria, which began as a major test for the axis, has, in fact, made it a more

³²⁰ Interview with author. 8 September 2018.

³²¹ "Hirak bila nata'ej... wa al awlawiyya lel midan", by Wafik Kanso, on 7 August 2015. Al-akhbar newspaper: Beirut. Retrieved from: <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/9135/حراك-بلا-نتائج-والاولوية-للميدا>

integrated and capable fighting force. The ability of the axis forces to deploy troops across borders in order to conduct sustained operations in varied terrain has given Iran and its allies a vital instrument to advance their interests. It is for this reason that Hezbollah's role in Syria is such an important development and one that is no doubt alarming for Hezbollah's and Iran's regional rivals (Sullivan, 2014, p.26). In regards to the losses, many elite fighters and commanders were killed in battle, but from Hezbollah's point of view, the need to prevail in such a zero-sum conflict was more fundamental than any other damage.

The thesis unpacked Hezbollah's role in deepening the Sunni-Shi'a schism. However, it was made clear in chapter 5 and 6 that sectarian mobilization and the instrumentalization of sectarian identity were merely a mobilizational tool that Hezbollah used to justify its intervention in what was in fact a geopolitical confrontation to prevent tilting the power balance in its rivals' favor. Kissinger (2014), for instance, argued that with Syria's uprising, "age-old tensions broke out to reawaken the millennial conflict between Shi'a and Sunni" (p.126). Sectarian violence, however, was an outcome rather than primary driver. As should be clear by now, Sunni-Shi'a animosity does not explain the causal factors of the conflict. Rather, the sectarian card was deployed by most actors operating in Syria for their own interest for what was in fact a political contest. Phillips (2018) opined that "for Hezbollah, increased involvement came at a cost, albeit manageable one. Regionally, its popular reputation among Sunnis was shattered. A symptom of this was the strain placed on its relationship with Hamas. Domestically, a series of attacks on Shi'a areas by Sunni radical groups occurred in 2013 and early 2014, the first within a month of Hezbollah's open declaration of its Syria operations" (p.159).

Further afield, “Hezbollah’s military intervention in Syria formed an opportunity for its regional foes to delegitimize and fight the Shi’a movement” (Saouli, 2019, p.198). Hamid Dabashi (2016) emphasized that both Iran and Saudi Arabia are counterrevolutionary regimes that inflamed Sunni-Shi’a tensions in the region (p.199-200), and Hezbollah, as this thesis deliberately explained, was part of this overlapping sectarian and political confrontation. To dispel the false argument of casual observers and prominent scholars, such as Genieve Abdo (2017) who maintained that “one of the many reasons sectarianism is so intractable and will, unfortunately, plague the Middle East for years to come, is that all players in the violent conflict claim to have a monopoly of religious truth” (p.1), this thesis unpacked Hezbollah’s instrumentalization of its Shi’a sectarian identity to justify its engagement for what was rather a zero-sum geopolitical contest. In fact, “there is no end to the story of sectarianism in the modern Middle East” (Ussama Makdisi, 2017, p.34). Sectarian and ethnic identities can never fade because these are cultural and historical identities that are protected, shaped and reshaped by institutions, rituals and habits. What can alter, however, are the boundaries and the politicization or militarization of these identities (Faleh abd al-Jabbar, 2018, p.52). Fouad Ibrahim (2018) emphasized that while leaders recognized that this was a political contest using citizens as a tool, the masses were conducting a pure sectarian conflict (p.143-144).

Furthermore, there were conflictual points of view within Hezbollah on the matter of the Sunni-Shi’a divide and the shape of the should-be relationship with Saudi Arabia. Hezbollah’s private universities spokesman stressed that they will always seek to mend ties with their Sunni counterparts and although Saudi Arabia is their political rival, he does

not expect to fight them in the future; even internally, a direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia was never mentioned.³²² Similarly Hezbollah's minister argued that they support a Saudi-Iranian reconciliation and restoring ties will mirror positive regional results.³²³ However, when asked if Hezbollah might fight against Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah's deputy head of political relations rhetorically answered: "Who said that if a battle erupted in Saudi Arabia our intervention is needed?"³²⁴ By other words, it seemed that Iran and Hezbollah had already mobilized Shi'a groups inside Saudi Arabia and maybe in the countries that converge with it, such as Iraq, to engage in a would-be devastating conflict. On the contrary,

In 2018, with the de-escalation of the Syrian civil war and the unfolding political prevail in Lebanon, chiefly represented in the win in the ballot box, Hezbollah emerged victorious. This thesis attempted to put forth the three variables that helped Hezbollah transition into a regional ANSA during what was somewhat a war of necessity: its embed as a partner within the axis that extends from Beirut to Tehran via Damascus and Baghdad, the instrumentalization of its Shi'a sectarian identity and the transition into a quasi-army. The year 2018 provided a set of conditions, surely impossible to reproduce, that allowed Hezbollah to blossom regionally and domestically. Of course, after every rise there's a chute. This brings us to a main question: Will Hezbollah' rise be its demise? There is definitely no answer for this query but it is hard to escape the sense that it will not play in the future such regional roles in the same scale as it did in Syria. In 2019, tensions mounted between Iran and the US as the latter's president, Donald Trump, was

³²² Interview with author. 5 September 2018.

³²³ Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

³²⁴ Interview with author. 8 September 2018.

pressuring Tehran in order to reach a new bargain. Lebanon, Hezbollah's habitat, is undergoing an economic crisis as part of the US pressure to force Hezbollah and Iran to yield. Moreover, Israel was targeting Iranian warehouses in Syria and weapons en route to Beirut, with Russia turning a blind eye to these attacks. It is clear that pressure is mounting against Hezbollah but its culminations are yet to be defined. Hezbollah's maneuvers in the future are bound to the increase and decrease of the geopolitical contestation in the Middle East and the seismic shifts amid a changing regional order. In regards to its future roles, Hezbollah's minister opined that after thwarting the conspiracy in Syria all what Hezbollah wants is to come back to Lebanon and diverge its focus on confronting Israel.³²⁵ This, however, did not seem the case and in the post-2018 era Hezbollah and Iran were struggling to preserve leverage in Damascus. To be sure, a regional consensus spearheaded by Iran and Saudi Arabia can ease bickering in the Middle East but this is not in the US best interest because managing the conflict can achieve more benefits for Washington than a full-scale agreement.

To conclude, this thesis contributed to the following literature: First, groups and organizations can undergo transitional periods and Hezbollah is not an exception in this sense. Second, ANSAs are playing prominent roles in the Middle East order, in some cases, greater than the role of states and therefore more attention should be given to these actors. Where possible, ANSAs are bound to participate in changing the power balance in the region and contribute to the regional order. A balance of power, Kissinger (2014) emphasized, "needs to be recalibrated from time to time" (p.31). "The balance of power can be challenged when a heretofore secondary state seeks to enter the ranks of

³²⁵ Interview with author. 12 September 2018.

the major powers and sets of a series of compensating adjustments by the other powers until a new equilibrium is established or a general conflagration takes place” (Kissinger, 2014, p.33). Taking this into consideration, not only the rise of sectarianism has no clear end in the 21st century but also chaos in the Middle East has no endgame. Moreover, “if order cannot be established, vast areas risk being opened to anarchy and to forms of extremism that will spread organically into other regions.” (Kissinger, 2014, p.145). “The Middle East has a distinct history, culture, and geopolitical logic, with local powers locked in an eternally shifting great game. Too weak to avoid temporary domination by outsiders, they are nevertheless strong enough to resist full absorption. As a result, grand schemes for regional order inevitably go up in smoke, the exasperated foreigners eventually leave, and the game continues.”³²⁶ That said, Hezbollah is not a foreign power and its annihilation is palpably the hardest milestone for its regional and international foes and, therefore, it is likely to endure.

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³²⁶ “What’s inside: A Guide for the Perplexed”, November/December 2019. By the Foreign Affairs. Retrieved from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-10-15/trumps-middle-east>

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