

'The Rise of the 'Resistance Axis': Hizbullah and the legacy of the Taif Accords'

Abstract:

Officially announcing their presence with the Open Letter of 1985, Hizbullah have altered from what Ranstorp called a "rag-tag militia"¹ to a political party with veto power in the Lebanese cabinet. However, Hizbullah's current direct military presence in Syria and Iraq, confirm the geographic expanse of their actions transcends Lebanon as a political stage. But why, on the 30th anniversary of Taif, can Hizbullah still not be contained within the political and geographical boundaries of Lebanon?

Exploring how the Taif agreements both tamed Hizbullah's actions and rhetoric whilst simultaneously laying the conditions for transnational actions, this paper argues that the imperfect conditions set by the Taif accords has assisted in the rise of Hizbullah's self-coined "Resistance Axis". Post-Taif, Hizbullah have tended relations with the same external forces that helped broker the peace while unlocking the potentials contained in the exceptional decision to allow Hizbullah to retain arms in the name of 'resistance'.

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND TO HIZBULLAH'S EMERGENCE

Hizbullah's current direct military presence in Syria and Iraq, confirm the geographic expanse of their actions transcends Lebanon as a political stage. But why, on the 30th anniversary of Taif, can Hizbullah still not be contained within the political and geographical boundaries of Lebanon?

The argument presented is that the imperfect conditions set by the Taif accords both tamed aspects of Hizbullah within Lebanon whilst simultaneously presenting an opportunity for Hizbullah to influence events beyond their own boundaries. This paper will be broken into four sections. The first section will briefly describe the conditions in which Hizbullah emerged. Following from this, the effect of the Taif Accords will be explored with attention to the enduring confessional system, relations with external actors (notably Iran and Syria) before a final analysis of Hizbullah's recent actions beyond Lebanese territory in Syria.

How Hizbullah emerged has been well catalogued.² In brief, Hizbullah officially emerged with the Open Letter of 1985 published amidst an ongoing civil war and the second of Israel's major invasions onto Lebanese soil. From discontent with the secular framework of AMAL, some members of the *Shi'i* community defected to form the leadership and cadres of Hizbullah. In Hamzeh's words, Hizbullah emerged from conditions of 'crisis': "Theses crises have included the Arab defeats by Israel, the failure to achieve balanced socioeconomic development, the pervasiveness of political oppression, gross misdistribution of wealth, and the disorientating psychological impact of Westernization".³ Few of these were sufficiently tackled in the Taif agreement leaving the Lebanese state in perpetual fragility.

The civil war saw the collapse of the Lebanese state in all but name and had a devastating impact on individuals and communities leaving an estimated 144,240 dead, 197,506 injured, and over 17,000 disappeared between 1975 and 1990.⁴ Unwillingness, or inability, to directly combat the after effects of the civil war by the Lebanese state has resulted in what Barak has described as a state project of "amnesia" allowing space for what Deeb has coined as "the just-lived-past" to be remembered under alternative frameworks such as that posited by the religious national ideology of Hizbullah. The crisis conditions were exacerbated by the Lebanese political system itself, ongoing proxy wars against organised Palestinian groups in Lebanon and the demonstrative effect of the 1979 Iranian revolution.⁵

Hizbullah found almost instant notoriety through its use of violence. Between 1982 and 1983, Hizbullah successfully mounted attacks on French, Israeli and United States forces, driving Israel to withdraw to the South of Lebanon by 1985. Through numerous attacks and insurgencies Hizbullah succeeded in their nationalist aims to free Lebanon of direct Western intervention and claimed a self-declared a victory against Israel when the latter unilaterally withdraw from Lebanon in 2000.

The Taif Accords re-instated the Lebanese state and created a tense, but relatively stable peace which has been enjoyed for the past thirty years. The challenge for Hizbullah at the time was to find its place within the new political environment.

The Post-Taif Environment

Hizbullah emerged from the Taif Accords and the experience of the early 1990s as a different entity from what it had previously been. Hizbullah re-formulated itself from a clandestine movement to a democratic political party which retained arms in the name of “resistance”.

For many, Hizbullah’s acceptance of the conditions offered by the Taif Accord led to what has been coined Hizbullah’s “Lebanonization” process. Saouli has stated that “in seeking domestic legitimacy, Hizbullah has conformed to Lebanese civil notions and discourse”.⁶ Yet, this perceived normalization has not prevented Hizbullah to act without the Lebanese state permission, or prior notification, as evidenced in Hizbullah’s abductions of Israeli personnel prior to the Israel-Hizbullah war of 2006, Hizbullah’s self- initiated violence within Lebanon in 2008 in the Beirut siege and Hizbullah’s ongoing activities in Syria and beyond.

Various positions exist regarding the acceptance of the Lebanonization thesis. One position argues that Hizbullah’s seeming accommodation into the Lebanese political system is nothing more than a veneer disguising the real power and decision maker of the group – Iran. This sentiment was expressed succinctly by Zisser who stated that Hizbullah’s internal turn towards Lebanon is nothing more than ‘sham Lebanonization’: “The fact that in recent years its military power has grown to strategic proportions, with the aid and encouragement of Iran, proves that the Lebanese ‘veil’ worn by Hizbullah is exceedingly thin”.⁷ Currently the thesis that, Hizbullah are simply a tool of Iran, suits certain current state interests, for example Saudi Arabia and other Gulf state suspicious of the increased Iranian presence and influence in the region. As such, Hizbullah become embroiled in regional rivalries and power plays.

The thesis of an emergent “*Shia crescent*”, controlled by Iran, has become a dominant narrative to explain the current balance of power rivalries in the region. However, the homogenous nature of the so-called “*Shia crescent*” has aroused criticisms and challenges. On the one hand, after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the regional balance of power shifted towards Iran resulting in new power dynamics which threatened the security and legitimacy of the Gulf States. This saw the boundaries between *Sunni* and *Shia* raising in importance as states (both Arab and Persian) instrumentalized sectarian divisions for their own interests.⁸ On the other hand, the construct of a ‘*Shia crescent*’ disguises the internal rivalries within the alliance between Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and Iraqi *Shia* actors.⁹ Terhalle outlines four aspects that constrain the emergence of a homogenous monolithic *Shia* block led by Iran which includes: political, nationalist, religious and economic tensions. Pertinently, Terhalle reminds us of the divisions between Arab and Persian and the differing nationalist memories regarding the Iraq – Iran war, which acts as an obstacle to Iran’s influence within *Shia* Iraq. Perhaps the most salient argument against the narrative of the *Shia Crescent* is that outside of Iran (with the notable exception of Hizbullah), Khomeini’s concept of the rule of jurisprudent (*wilayat al-faqih*) is rejected by most Syrian and especially Iraqi *Shi’i*.¹⁰

Hizbullah’s assertive *Shi’i* identity and continued adherence to the Iranian *wilayat al-faqih* cannot be understood solely in consideration of Iran but must be placed in context of both the circumstances of Hizbullah’s emergence and the conditions created by Taif. During the civil war when no functioning Lebanese state existed, and communities were drawn on sectarian identity, it made pragmatic sense to mobilise *Shia* identity around a recently successful revolution and one willing to act as material and ideological backers. Post Taif, ensured that Iran continued to play a role in the fragile peace. The retention of the confessional system and endurance of sectarianism assist in unlocking the capabilities to legitimately (in religious, if not state terms) draw from Iranian material support and religious authority.

However, Hizbullah have always denied that political affiliations with Iran override Lebanese interests. Nuanced work (offered by for example by De Vare and Stahli¹¹ and Samil¹²) argue that far from being mere agents of Iran, Hizbullah are engaged in sustained efforts at creating a national identity and thus fully absorbed into the Lebanese state setting. Only the national identity created and reproduced by Hizbullah is an alternative vision of Lebanese identity. Saouli offers some insights into why conformity to Lebanese shared norms is not always apparent in the broad movement of Hizbullah. Important to its formation and continued existence is its broad appeal to *Shi'ism*. Drawing upon *Shi'ism* allows alternative identity constructions in addition to wider theological and historical ideas to be reinterpreted in contemporary times.

Any social actor carries with it memories and experiences transmitted from the past which are built into its system and which shape its world outlook and behaviour as it faces contemporary struggles... While Shiism does not determine Hizbullah's socio-political conduct, it does figure crucially in the organisation's identity, consciousness and memory...¹³

Constructions of identity and ideology, derived in part, from *Shia* history and memory have been allowed to cultivate in the era post-Taif. Ongoing sectarian assemblages permitted, and some¹⁴ would argue, deepened by Taif, has unlocked the transnational potential of Hizbullah's identity narratives. Pre-empting discussion of Anderson's focus on the role of census and identity categories, Anderson espoused that the census had immense capacity to shape the way in which the colonial state imagined itself and thus had enormous effect upon how the Lebanese understood their state and each other.¹⁵ Arguably, the continuation of religious groupings, further legitimized by the Taif Accords, has ensured that sectarian divisions endure. In this sense, what the Taif Accords achieved was a deepening of Lebanon's understanding of itself as a fragmented nation. Instead of accentuating its "Lebaneseness", the accords cemented further the sectarian divisions installed in the original 1932 French census, adding "national" legitimacy to the colonial legacy.

An important *Shia* collective memory is of the battle of Karbala and the Martyrdom of Imam Hussein. According to Saouli this has left two primary legacies. The first being for the fight for injustice and the second for self-protection.¹⁶ Both such legacies have been drawn upon regarding Hizbullah's recent involvement in Syria, specifically in relation to Husayn's sister and daughter to martyred Ali, Sayyida Zaynab.¹⁷ Shrines to Zaynab, particularly the shrine in Damascus, were sites of intensive fighting between Hizbullah and anti-Assad and Daesh affiliated groups. In the name of both justice and self-protection, Daesh forces were thwarted in amongst rhetoric of fighting against oppression for justice and in the name of protection of both the Lebanese state and *Shia* communities and sacred sites. Slogans such as "*Zaynab thaniyaton*" ("Zaynab won't be captured twice")¹⁸ has assisted in the mobilization of *Shia* individuals derived from multiple Arab and non-Arab states assisting in what has been referred to as 'defensive *jihad*'.¹⁹ The importance of Zaynab to *Shia* mobilization generally and Hizbullah's articulation of defensive 'resistance' can be demonstrated by the lyrics of a popular Hizbullah affiliated song "*Fidaki Ya Zainab*":

O' *takfiri*, listen,
Our nation will never surrender!
O'Zaynab, we will sacrifice our souls for you,
Troops of Hizbullah will obey you.²⁰

From the above, concepts such as national resistance are intermingled with *Shia* cultural memory. While sectarian differences are highlighted with reference to *Shia* history such as the battle of Karbala, the martyrdom of Husayn, and the struggle of Zaynab, Hizbullah do not set themselves against *Sunni*'s widely but '*takfiri*'s – a reference to Daesh's use of ex-communication ('*takfir*') and denunciation of the *Shi'a* as 'heretics'. In this sense, Hizbullah can utilise wider *Shia* understandings which transcend nation-state geographies to legitimate their activities in Syria and beyond whilst maintaining credentials towards Lebanon's national goals.

From the above perspective, Hizbullah are not necessarily utilizing their *Shi'i* identity against their *Sunni* and Christian co-nationals at the behest of Iran. An alternative reading is offered by both Saade and Deeb, who argue that Hizbullah are simply engaging in their own formulation of what it means to be “Lebanese” within the frame provided by the divisions (re)established by the Taif Accords. Saade for instance argues that, “What Hizbullah has engaged with since its inception is a redefinition of what it is to be Lebanese, stranded by the experience of occupation, the marginalisation of the state, and alienation from a portion of the population”.²¹

As discussed earlier, Hamzeh stated that Hizbullah were born of “crisis” which the Taif Accords did not attempt to solve. Ongoing political tensions and uneven socio-economic developments continue to marginalize *Shia* communities in Lebanon. Accordingly, Hizbullah’s project is to conceive of a Lebanese nationalism that positions the *Shia* community in a more central role, which, by doing so, is hoped to include rather than exclude *Shia* communities.

Deeb, similarly, has argued that Hizbullah’s “alternative nationalism ...views Lebanon as an Arab state that cannot distance itself from causes like that of Palestine”.²² Deeb views Lebanon as a site of contested representations of what it means to be “Lebanese” with Hizbullah’s position just being one narrative “among many competing ones”.²³ Drawing on social and collective memory studies²⁴, Deeb posits that Hizbullah are attempting to construct alternative imaginings of Lebanese nationalism and Lebanon’s place in the region and beyond. Hizbullah draw on their role against Israeli occupation focusing on their resistance as a sacrifice for the nation (not solely for the *Shi'i*) and their role in liberating Lebanon from Israeli occupation. According to Deeb, Hizbullah’s accentuation of its role against Israeli aggression not only positions it regionally with Palestine and other states positioned against Israel, but is intended to “incorporate the long-marginalized *Shi'i* community into the nation-state”.²⁵

Through this lens, it is possible to infer that Hizbullah's use of *Shia* political identity, is at least in part, about incorporating *Shia* narratives into the Lebanese national imagination.

CONFESSIONALISM

Lebanon's confessional and sectarian divisions can be read as a legacy of both European and Islamic imperial understandings. A census taken in 1932 by the French administration framed Lebanon's communities in religious groupings. While the Ottoman Empire had categorized its subjects in terms of Muslims and *dhimmi*s (derived from the concept of *ahl al-kitab* ("People of the Book")); normally pertaining to Christians and Jews), the French bound religious identification with that of the nation-state. The framing of the census in religious groupings is diametrically opposed to Anderson's assertion that "as the colonial period wore on the census categories became more visibly and exclusively, racial. Religious identity on the other hand, gradually disappeared".²⁶ Anderson espoused that the census had immense capacity to shape the way in which the colonial state imagined itself and 'the legitimacy of its ancestry' and thus had enormous effect upon how the Lebanese understood their state and each other.²⁷

Arguably, the continuation of religious groupings allowed the imperial and Islamic organization of Lebanon's *dhimmi* populations to endure. A concrete example of this confessional structuring can be seen (amongst others such as memorandums of understanding with other religious parties) in the creation of the "Multi-confessional Lebanese Brigades" that have allowed resistance fighters that are non-*Shia* to fight alongside Hizbullah's resistance forces without the need for conversion to any sect of Islam while simultaneously being under the "umbrella" leadership of Hizbullah.

Hizbullah's self-identification as specifically *Shia*, and the institutionalized sectarian divisions within Lebanon allowed for the construction of identities which imaginatively exceed nation-state borders. As Deeb argues, Hizbullah's articulation of Lebanese national identities is just one in a "field of competing and negotiated histories and identities that has always

characterised Lebanon”.²⁸ Seaver has argued that the creation of national identities becomes further complicated where groups are divided into identities which transcend state boundaries.²⁹ The consequences of dividing Lebanon into groupings of religious affiliations has meant a continuation of solidarities with other “group” members across nation-state boundaries. The imagined *Shia* community when connected to the political theological concept of the *wilayat al-faqīh* (jurist -theologian as constructed by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran) creates the hierarchical structuring that grants autonomous (sub)national actions which are subsumed under a larger hierarchical order emanating from the Supreme Guide of Iran.

Regarding the hierarchical structuring, Nasrallah stated “Should the jurisprudent ruler be the one to appoint the leaders and bestow legitimacy upon them in all Muslim countries? Yes, because his jurisprudence is not limited by geographic boundaries, it extends to wherever Muslims may be”.³⁰ Islam’s hierarchical imperial legacies have been re-interpreted in light of the realities of the nation-state international structure. The hierarchical structuring can be evidenced more recently in what the Secretary General of Hizbullah has termed the “Resistance Axis” in actions against Daesh (ISIS) and other *Sunni* militia movements in Iraq and Syria. Nasrallah stated that “The resistance Axis started to be formed... Its main support is the Islamic Republic of Iran and Syria...”³¹ Yet Hizbullah are careful not to undermine their own national autonomy and make the separation between religious authority and political authority in Iran. In 2015 Nasrallah emphasised that

I claim that we – Hizbullah – have had ties of friendship and adoration with Iran since 1982.... I believe that his Eminence Imam Sayyed Ali Khamenei is the Imam and leader of Muslims. Still... Iran never ordered us or informed us of an order... We are independent leadership... Iran is an Islamic Republic. It is the state of Islam. It is the state of Imam Khomeini... Iran helps Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and other places and still, it does not dictate...³²

The incorporation of several autonomous (national) realms evidenced by the inclusion of “Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and other places” with the “main support” from the “Islamic

Republic of Iran” consequently grants evidence for the hierarchical imperial structuring identified. Saad has stated that “Force integration among Hizbullah’s Resistance Army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Syrian armed forces and Iraqi militias has led to the emergence of a single military front”.³³ This single “military front” is possible due to the hierarchical structuring that links Hizbullah to the legal supra-state of the Iranian Supreme Guide. Nasrallah himself announced that “The fusion of Lebanese – Iranian blood on Syrian soil reflects the unity of cause and the unity of fate of the countries of the resistance Axis... We no longer recognize the separation of arenas or battlefields”.³⁴ Saliently, Nasrallah in this instance does not draw on *Shia* identity and religious ideology, but on national identity (Lebanese and Iranian) and mutual “cause” and “fate”. Here the “resistance Axis” is constructed around common goals and interests which align the two states regardless of sectarian affiliation. Again, a dualism can be observed where *Shia* hierarchical structures allow for Hizbullah’s alignment with Iran to be religiously legitimized whilst careful not to undermine their own nationalist credentials within Lebanon itself.

Consociational Structures

The 1989 Taif Accords stipulated that sectarianism in Lebanon be abolished; yet, not only has this not been achieved in many ways sectarian divisions have both spread and deepened. The 1943 National Pact affirmed confessional political arrangements, but borrowed from the Ottoman’s division of peoples into separate *millets* (or communities) based on religious orientation and sect.

In Lebanon’s diverse social mix, the Taif Accords were designed to ensure that no group had dominant sway over any others. However, Taif was incomplete, leaving particulars to be dealt with at a later date. Particulars have been ever evolving and often negotiated in tense periods of conflict and fragility and resulted in fragmented and complex power relations. One important such incident occurred in 2008 after Hizbullah initiated a six-day armed takeover of

parts of central Beirut. Following negotiations with the March 14 Alliances, Hizbullah were granted major concessions the most important being veto power in the cabinet.

The Taif accords not only failed to dismantle confessional arrangements but strengthened them by sealing the constitutional arrangement that the president be a Maronite Christian and the prime minister a *Sunni* Muslim. A tentative concession was granted to the *Shia* by allocating them the position of speaker of the house. These sectarian arrangements are still based on the only national consensus taken in Lebanon by the French in 1932 and thus fail to reflect contemporary demographic realities.³⁵ In short, *Shia* communities in Lebanon remain as politically marginalized post-Taif as prior to it. Despite ongoing, and increasing, sectarian tensions, dialogue and understandings are possible between groups evidenced in the 2006 Hizbullah alliance with Michael Aoun's Christian Free Patriotic Movement Party.

One of the unintended consequences of the continuation of confessional systems is that different groups are proposing different "nationalist imaginaries". Saade has argued that through Hizbullah's commemorative activities (Jerusalem day, etc.) Hizbullah are writing a "project of resistance" that goes "beyond the boundaries of state".³⁶ Saade maintains that what Hizbullah are engaged in is a form of "ideological activism" which is most likely to occur in environments of competition where one or more group is contending for dominance.³⁷ While the Taif accords ideally were to rid Lebanon of competition between sects, what was left uncertain and undetermined have become areas of contestation and competition for resources, legitimacy and power.

TAIF AND EXTERNAL ACTORS

The Taif Accords were an incomplete experiment pregnant with internal contradictions. Whilst the Accords explicitly call for reforms that would promote and build national solidarities and consensus the Accords themselves gave little indication of how this could be achieved practically or in what time frame.³⁸

Lebanon, in its relatively short period since independence, has consistently suffered from a sovereignty deficit. As Strindberg and Warn suggest “Lebanon has never been left to run itself but has repeatedly been sucked into the vortex of regional and global power politics”.³⁹ Taif, augmented the sovereignty deficit by ensuring external powers involved in the brokering of the peace, remained as a visible presence in Lebanon (specifically Syria and to a lesser extent, Iran). Strindberg and Warn go on to argue that perhaps for Hizbullah, Islamism is not merely for power and control but a tool of resistance “against some other kind of order”.⁴⁰ In a way, Strindberg and Warn compliment Saade and Deeb’s concept of Hizbullah constructing “alternative nationalisms” in an environment of competing and contested concepts of what it means to be Lebanese. In resisting dominant norms and regimes of order, Hizbullah’s external relations can be viewed less through the lens of shared *Shi’ism* and more appropriately through the frame of Third World nationalism that seeks to challenge Western domination in pursuit of self-determination and dignity. This also deepens understandings of Hizbullah’s transnational actions as an attempt to surface above Western dominant norms and Israeli occupation. In this quest for dignity, Syria and Iran as backers of the resistance, act as pragmatic collaborators rather than directors of Hizbullah.

Syria

The October Taif Accords of 1989 effectively both ended the civil war and undermined Lebanese sovereignty by ensuring Syria was left as the dominant power in Lebanon.⁴¹ Hizbullah’s relations with the Syrian government are largely pragmatic rather than ideological. Syria’s shared border with Lebanon and Iran ensures that flows of arms, finance and logistical support can easily be transported across borders. This pragmatic material arrangement suits both party’s interests in so much as they share the common enemy of Israel. However, this pragmatic alliance is not as ‘natural’ as often popularly portrayed.

Tensions between the two actors have at times escalated to violent conflict such as in May 1986 when kidnappings and shoot outs emerged between Syrian soldiers and Hizbullah members resulting in the detention of several Hizbullah members.⁴² Another such incident involved the killing of 26 Hizbullah militants at the hands of the Syrian army in 1987 in what became known as the “Fathalla Massacre”.⁴³

Relations are further complicated between Syria and Hizbullah if the relations between AMAL and Syria are also taken into the equation. In many ways, the *Shia* (yet secular) party of AMAL are closer to Syria than the movement of Hizbullah. The AMAL/Hizbullah war which broke out in 1988 was essentially ended due to the external pressures from Iran and Syria with Iran supporting Hizbullah and Syria leaning more heavily towards AMAL.⁴⁴ The relationship between Hizbullah and Syria is also troubled by Syria’s perception of Greater Syria that includes territories in Lebanon (amongst others).⁴⁵ Nonetheless, pragmatism comes to the fore as without Syrian backing it would have been extremely difficult for Iran to transfer material supplies to Hizbullah.

Relations between Hizbullah and Syria took a new turn after the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 following both domestic and international pressure on Syria for its alleged involvement in the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. Opponents to Hizbullah had hoped that the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon would leave Hizbullah exposed and isolated within the region. However, Hariri’s demise and Syria withdrawal split Lebanon internally with the emergence of the March 8 – derived from the Hizbullah led demonstrations in solidarity to Syria – and the March 14 Coalition – named after the larger demonstration compiled of a variety of anti-Syrian actors.

Ayoob has argued that Hizbullah’s affiliation with Syria is less about religious solidarities and far more about the creation and sustainment of an alternative counter-hegemonic movement that recognizes international power is heavily swayed against Muslim

majority states. Hizbullah alongside states such as Iran and Syria, continue an anti-colonial stance against the Israeli state but also against international norms perceived to be in the interests of Western (especially, U.S) interests. Syria has stood alone amongst its Arab neighbours in offering support to Hizbullah which was especially apparent after the 2006 invasion of Lebanon. During and directly after the Israel-Hizbullah war of 2006, Arab states did little to condemn Israeli action causing the vast majority of Arab regimes being categorised as “half -men”: a term originally espoused by Bashir Assad to characterize those figures and regimes in the Arab world unsupportive of Hizbullah’s resistance against Israel.⁴⁶

Hizbullah and Syrian relations have thus been historically tense and thus should not be read as a ‘natural’ sectarian alignment. However, the conditions of the Accords, which granted Syria a firm place within Lebanon and impacted upon its territorial sovereignty, assisted greatly in firming Syrian-Hizbullah relations. Assistance and rhetorical support from Assad’s regime towards Hizbullah must be placed within the context of the post-Taif framework. Syria’s direct presence within Lebanon granted the pragmatic opportunity to allow material support to flow from Iran in addition to bolstering Assad’s anti-Israel position *vis a vis* other Arab states. From the internal perspective of Lebanon however, Syria’s physical presence was a visible reminder of Lebanon’s sovereignty deficit in addition to providing further fuel for sectarian and ideological divisions within Lebanese national frames.

Iran

As well as material support, Iran has provided important political influences specifically in line with the concept of the *wilayat al-faqih*. The first set of elections held in Lebanon following the Taif accords resulted in internal debates regarding whether Hizbullah should participate in the flawed and highly compromised sectarian assemblage. The internal strife -a consequence of the new power sharing arrangement - resulted in Hizbullah turning to the *wilayat al-faqih* in Iran to pronounce the legitimacy of participating in the parliamentary process.

The dilemma of the new situation that arose from Taif was espoused by Qassem as:

‘Participation in parliamentary elections is an expression of sharing in an existing political structure...It does not, however, represent a commitment to preserving the structure as it is, or require defence of the systems deficiencies and blemishes’.⁴⁷

As the above infers, Hizbullah’s acceptance of sectarian arrangements solidified in the Taif accords, should not be equated with a defence of confessional arrangements. Hizbullah’s decision to accept a *modus vivendi* with the conditions of Taif was, at least in part, a hope to reform the sectarian system from within the democratic framework.

Hizbullah’s relations with Iran are not untroubled especially in regard to *Shia* leaders within Lebanon itself most pertinently exemplified by Ayatollah Fadlallah who, while deeply respected by Hizbullah and referred to in some literature as the “ideologue” of Hizbullah⁴⁸, came to heads with the Supreme Guide of Iran in 1995 by challenging Ayatollah Khameneai’s position as the *wilayat al-faqih*.

To argue that Iran are merely a proxy of Iran lacking internal agency is an over-reliance on nation-state frameworks and a premature dismissal of non-state actors. While Iran provides ideological and religious justification for Hizbullah and certainly external material and political support, it cannot be justifiably asserted that Hizbullah have no autonomous agency. As DeVare and Stahlly robustly argue

‘Although Iran’s provision (with Syria) of weaponry, financial aid, and sanctuary enabled Hizbullah to equip large insurgent forces, the organisational successes were a product of tactics devised and implemented by its Lebanese cadres, who drew more heavily on their prior experience in Lebanon’s civil War than on the inexpert advice offered by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps. Consequently, Iranian support strengthened Hizbullah only in so far as the organisation creatively adapted its inputs to Lebanon’s unique environment’.⁴⁹

Writing in 2008, Samil forcefully adds that “Hizbullah is pursuing its own agenda in Lebanon, and this is increasingly at odds with the objectives of Tehran and Damascus”.⁵⁰ The outbreak of the Syrian civil war and continued conflict in Iraq has simply laid the conditions for further pragmatic cooperation between Iran, Syria and Hizbullah.

In certain respects, Hizbullah’s relations with the state of Iran cannot be separated from their view of the Lebanese state itself. Prior to the signing of Taif, there was clear indication that Hizbullah’s views on the Lebanese state were predominantly negative (not surprising given at the time the state itself was in collapse). Hizbullah early publications via *al-‘Ahd*, lays blame on the Lebanese state evident in article titles such as “The Litani project, A Signal of State Neglect of the Region of the South”.⁵¹ “It is because the state was deemed illegitimate and bankrupt that one needed alternative sources of authority”⁵² hence, Hizbullah’s relationship with Iran which coincides with its *Shia* orientation and resistance against Israel.

It can therefore be argued that Hizbullah’s continued relations with both Syria and Iran are highly pragmatic and provide material support. While a strong religious connection exists between Hizbullah and Iran, in the former’s adherence to the concept of the *wilayat al-faqih*, no such religious connections are inherent with the Syrian regime of Assad. Essentially the relations with Syria and Iran are pragmatic and have been enabled by Taif accords themselves and the conditions set by them. Hizbullah have utilized, especially Syrian support, for material benefits and a claim to international legitimacy. “Diplomatic recognition and support in International forums provide non-state groups with an aura of legitimacy and complicates their opponent’s efforts to repress them”.⁵³ Taif therefore set the conditions for both Syrian and Iranian relations with Hizbullah to cement and for all sides to gain elements of legitimacy. In the case of Syria, Hizbullah gained recognition and material support as an important regional actor while Syria itself was able to bolster its anti-Israeli stance. Iran on the other hand, grants

Hizbullah religious legitimacy and can appeal to wider collective *Shia* memories and histories while Iran utilises its strong relations with Hizbullah as a deterrence against Israel and to retain a foothold in the Arab world.

RETENTION OF ARMS

The Taif Accord famously demanded the disarming of all militia groups. In an act of creativity and ingenuity, Hizbullah refused to be coined as a “militia” and re-emphasised their declaration as a “resistance” force. In accepting Hizbullah’s self-titled “resistance” the Taif government essentially endorsed Hizbullah’s continued bearing of arms, actions against the Israeli state and recognising the group as an integral part of the “national resistance”.⁵⁴

The Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000 was marked as a triumphant victory by Hizbullah yet left the movement in a precarious position as the end of occupation left the party bereft of justification for its continued arms⁵⁵ and under increased, international pressure to disarm. In 2004, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1559 demanding the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon in addition to the withdrawal of Syrian troops. In response, Nasrallah stated that Hizbullah would disarm if, and only if, this was put to a popular referendum⁵⁶ shaking the confessional system by demanding a “one man one vote” whilst counting that the *Shia* demographic majority would challenge the Lebanese state’s desire to risk losing the referendum.

Astutely manoeuvring the system, Hezbollah had accepted confessionalism, and thereby the continued discrimination of the *Shi’a* community, on condition that its right to keep the resistance under arms would not be infringed. A popular referendum outside the discriminatory confines of sectarian quotas would illuminate the numerical strength of the *Shi’a* and hence the deceptiveness of the strength of other communities.⁵⁷

The point being that thirty years (and more) of consociationalism has resulted in Hizbullah finding accommodation to a system it swore to reform if not annihilate. The conditions set by Taif have become entrenched over the years since its signing resulting in a provisional normalization of the consociational structure. This normalization is evidenced when Hizbullah have been forced to choose between its stance on reforming sectarian arrangements and its continued bearing of arms. As Strindberg and Warn suggest, “Hizbullah agreed to abide by a system it considered unfair and discriminatory and in exchange it would maintain its logic of resistance”.⁵⁸ ‘Resistance’ here can be understood not only in Hizbullah’s armed opposition to Israel but also in its resistance to contested imaginations of Lebanese nationalism against its own. Nonetheless, this “resistance” is both framed and contained within the post-Taif order. In one sense, Hizbullah resist the sectarian structures of Taif and yet, as indicated above can also assist in sustaining and maintaining that very same system by utilising its *Shi’i* identity above that of Lebanese

One year following the Syrian withdrawal of Lebanon, Lebanon was thrust once again into violence in the 34-day long Hizbullah-Israel war of 2006. For Hizbullah and supporters, Israeli military intervention vindicated both the need to retain arms and the necessity of remaining politically linked to Syria. It is generally accepted that Israeli initial aims were the complete annihilation of Hizbullah which failed. Further international attempts to disarm Hizbullah were adopted in UNSC resolution 1701, yet Nasrallah responded with the “Divine Victory” speech in September asserting Hizbullah’s resolve and experience was stronger than ever.

Hizbullah’s argument that as a resistance force, the retention of arms is necessary to act as a deterrent to future Israeli interventions in Lebanon, has to some extent crossed the sectarian divide. Michael Aoun, the Christian President articulated in 2017 that “Hezbollah has a right to keep its weapons to protect Lebanon from Israel”.⁵⁹ With mounting conflict along the

Lebanon/Syrian border, violence once again becomes the norm and Hizbullah's retention of arms makes sense within this context. As Rifaat Nasrallah, a Christian militia leader, has articulated, Hizbullah are not merely a proxy of Iran and an agent of Syria they are Lebanese and fully integrated into Lebanese daily life. "The resistance is not some external force that comes to terrorise us. They are part of our society. They attend our weddings and funerals. They take care of me and I take care of them".⁶⁰

Hizbullah as a resistance force, while shrouded in *Shia* symbolism and ideology is also narrated as defence of Lebanon for all Lebanese. Hizbullah position the *Shia* as defenders of the nation thus attempting to secure a central place for the *Shia* in Lebanese national frames. The Israel – Hizbullah war of July 2006 vindicated Hizbullah's insistence in retaining their arms. Nasrallah declared Hizbullah's continued resistance, and armed struggle, against Israel was more than just the protection of Lebanon, but a battle fought on behalf of the entire *umma*.⁶¹ Though such statements may rarely correspond to any practical support to other Islamist movement, such rhetoric can be a powerful speech act in creating senses of cross-border solidarities.

Hizbullah's continued resistance to Israel has profound implications for the Lebanese state's monopoly of violence. Hizbullah do not threaten the nation-state's existence but challenge some of its theoretical assumptions. Hizbullah's violence is not aimed at the Lebanese nation-state as a strategy to gain political power but is given permission by the nation-state to continue its Islamic resistance: a resistance born from the contemporary reality of Israeli incursions, ideologically justified by appeal and interpretation from Islamic history, and legitimated in state terms in the post-Taif agreements.

Post the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, Hizbullah have sought to legitimate themselves as more than a militia ingraining the movement in Lebanese consciousness by embarking upon a wide range of social and economic ventures. Arguably this is not a

transformation of the party's agenda but a changed emphasis in altered socio-political conditions. The transformation was not instantaneous with the signing of the Taif Accords. Between 1983 and 1987 (well before the signing of Taif), Hizbullah established two hospitals, seventeen infirmaries, two dental clinics, and three pharmacies.⁶² Hizbullah are now associated with the "largest and most efficient social welfare networks" in Lebanon.⁶³

In the early period of Hizbullah's creation the arbitrary borders of the nation-state were spurned. Shaykh Subhial al-Tufayli stated,

We do not work or think within the borders of Lebanon...this little geometric box, which is one of the legacies of imperialism. Rather we seek to defend Muslims throughout the world.⁶⁴

Given the absence of a functioning centralized state, the lack of cohesion between Lebanon's divided communities and the influence of several external countries (including Iran, Palestine and Syria) it is hardly surprising that in the mid-1980s Hizbullah did not think within the borders of Lebanon.

In the aftermath of the Taif Accords, Hizbullah focused their violence almost solely upon Israel. Hizbullah were granted state permission to wage targeted attacks upon Israel in the South. The Taif Accords ultimately granted state legitimacy to Hizbullah's violence which already benefited from clerical legitimacy.

The tacit acceptance of the Taif Accords granted Hizbullah a legitimate voice upon Lebanon's political scene. The shifting conditions post-Taif may have altered Hizbullah's strategies, but also altered aspects of the Lebanese state. The Lebanese state while accommodating Hizbullah within its structure had to relieve itself of its monopoly of legitimate violence; this is not represented by the Lebanonization of Hizbullah, but as a de-nationalizing of legitimate violence. Indeed, the de-nationalization of Lebanese state violence goes beyond Hizbullah's rhetoric against Israel. Following the kidnapping of Lebanese pilgrims by a Syrian

anti-government movement Nasrallah declared to the group “If you want war we can solve it with war, if you want peace then we can solve it with peace.”⁶⁵ While only rhetoric, Hizbullah were able to declare the possibility of war on a non-state actor without either Lebanon or the international community batting an eyelid. The success of Hizbullah’s armed strategy resulted in Wiegand commenting that “Hizbullah is stronger, more effective, and has more resolve than the Lebanese army, and the government know this.”⁶⁶ The post-Taif arrangement of allowing Hizbullah to retain arms in the name of ‘resistance’ therefore has created the conditions which has eroded the Lebanese state’s monopoly of violence both within, and without, Lebanese territory.

“Better to fight them there than here”

From 2014 onwards Hizbullah have been openly fighting beyond the borders of Lebanon alongside Syrian and Iraqi counter-parts. Not only have Hizbullah been instrumental in allowing the Syrian regime to regain control of rebel held areas, the cross-border experience is being argued to have improved Hizbullah’s effectiveness and strategies. Embroiling themselves physically in regional crisis has also ensured that Hizbullah remains an important regional player in its training capacities to other actors whether they be Lebanese, Syrian, Iraqi or otherwise. Hizbullah are considered to have been instrumental in the effectiveness of pro-Syrian regime forces.⁶⁷ As one Hizbullah fighter in Syria remarked on his Syrian counter parts “they had no skill, no discipline and no leadership. Now, the men they have learned a lot and are very serious fighters. They’ve become more like Hizbullah”.⁶⁸ Evidence has also suggested that Hizbullah have provided training in Iraq, utilising Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) since 2014.⁶⁹

It is still fairly unclear which militias Hizbullah have been involved with specifically, but evidence suggests that Hizbullah have offered training and joint exercises with a number of forces allied to the Syrian regime and a number of *Shia* militias (Syrian, Iraqi and more). An

initial prominent *Shia* militia active in Damascus was the *Abu Fadl al-Abas* Brigade created in 2012. According to a report conducted by Sullivan, Hizbullah have also drawn from Iraqi *Shia* militia such as *Kataib Hizbullah* and *Asaib ahl al-haq*.⁷⁰

Intervention in Syria granted the opportunity to present Hizbullah's activities as

- 1) Protecting all Lebanese from violent external opposition;
- 2) Protecting important *Shia* shrines and communities from aggressive *Sunni* (“*takfiri*”) militias.

While both presentations of the conflict converge into a rationale for why Hizbullah should retain arms, the logic plays to both national and sectarian objectives. The interplay between the national, Arab, Islamic and external dynamics are further evidenced in the statement by Sheikh Nabil Quak, a senior Hizbullah official, who claimed in 2014 that, “Day after day, it is becoming clearer to Lebanon, Arab and Muslim, and international communities that there is a need for Hizbullah to remain in Syria”.⁷¹

The intertwining between the Lebanese/national and the region/Islamic has also frequently been raised in rhetoric by Sayyed Nasrallah who asked in 2016 “if the resistance in Lebanon was defeated, what would have happened to Lebanon and the region?”⁷² Once again, Hizbullah position themselves as defenders of the nation and the region and in so doing, create a narrative in which the *Shia* communities of Lebanon are central actors rather than marginalized peripheral communities. In one sense sectarian divisions are accentuated but also positively reaffirmed. For instance, Nasrallah spoke in 2013 arguing that “If we did not go to Syria, Lebanon would have turned into a second Iraq”.⁷³

Two rationales are being provided to legitimize Hizbullah's actions in Syria and Iraq. Domestically, to Lebanese and Arab identities, Hizbullah emphasise their resistance role on behalf of the entire of Lebanon. Simultaneously, to the pious *Shia* communities in Lebanon,

Syria and Iraq, Hizbullah emphasise their religious tenants and express themselves as defenders of *Shia* people and sites particularly those associated with Zaynab, daughter of Ali and sister to the martyr Husayn. On the one hand, sectarian divisions are passed over in favour of national and pan-Arab sentiment whilst simultaneously action is being legitimated in specifically *Shia* terms to different audiences. While Hizbullah may be careful to not over stoke tensions within Lebanon itself, the increased sectarian rationale of its actions abroad may have unintended consequences.

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF TAIF

The Taif Accords succeeded in re-establishing the Lebanese state and ensuring a period of relative, if fragile, peace. This success has ensured that Hizbullah have had to work and transform within the post-Taif arrangements. In many ways, the signing of Taif reformulated Hizbullah into a structured and overtly political party willing to work within a democratic system. The accommodation to the post-Taif environment is however a compromise on the part of Hizbullah and has allowed the movement to play on both its Lebanese and *Shia* credentials depending upon the audience and context.

Drawing attention back to the beginnings of the paper, Hamzeh argued that Hizbullah were born of “crisis” conditions. These crisis conditions included poor socio-economic development, political stagnation, uneven distributions of resources and conspicuous Westernisation. None of these crises were sufficiently tackled by the Accords which left the details of how to overcome them to later debates. Coupled with the deepening of confessional arrangements the aftermath of Taif has resulted in identity categories and sectarian divisions being ripe for instrumentalization by a variety of actors both domestically and regionally to mobilise communities against grievances (real and imagined).

Internally, the conditions post-Taif has coerced Hizbullah to act within a national framework and adhere to electoral politics. The democratic structures and heterogeneous makeup of Lebanese populations has ensured that within Lebanon sectarian identity is often down played by Hizbullah. When *Shia* identity is utilized by Hizbullah in domestic politics, it is often done so to place *Shi'ism* in the centre of national imaginaries and thus reveals Hizbullah's attempts to re-write what is conceived as 'Lebanese' and replace *Shia* communities from their marginalized position in Lebanese society.

The peace Accords however not only changed the dynamics inside Lebanon but reformulated the environment of the region by ensuring that the actors who brokered the peace remained influential powers, especially Syria. As the paper argues, the Syrian/Hizbullah alliance cannot be understood as simply a natural sectarian alliance. Religious and doctrinal differences are stark between Hizbullah and the Assad regime and historically Syria favoured the secular AMAL party to Hizbullah. However, the continued presence of Syria in the years following Taif ensured that a pragmatic alliance strengthened between the two players converging in the shared anti-colonial stance towards Israel.

The consociational arrangement of the Taif Accords has left in place the identity categories first introduced by the Ottoman *millet* system and re-introduced during French colonialism. Dividing national identity into sectarian divisions has ensured that cross-border affiliations continue as these identity categories are not contained, nor constrained, by national boundaries. The historical sectarian divisions, which were granted state legitimacy by the Taif accords, has ensured that solidarities can be activated and mobilized with other "sect" members which transcend state divides. Exemplified in the relationship between Iran and Hizbullah, continued reinforcement of sectarian identities has allowed both actors to religiously legitimate their cross-border activities particularly using Ayatollah Khomeini's conceptualization of the *wilayat al-faqih*. The concept of the *wilayat al-faqih* is rejected by large swathes of Iraqi and

Syrian *Shia* inferring that a homogenous “*Shia Crescent*” is highly unlikely to emerge in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, *Shia* identity can be mobilized (as Hizbullah have done) to legitimate transborder activities in the name of protection of *Shia* peoples and shrines.

In a region engulfed with war, civil strife, rising sectarian divisions and external actors pitted against one another the outlook for the region, Lebanon specifically, and Hizbullah are ambiguous and fragile. Hizbullah’s involvement in Syria and Iraq have not been without there costs physically, materially and symbolically. Out of roughly 15,000 fighters it is believed that approximately 2,000 have died on Syria’s battlegrounds.⁷⁴

A growing fear is in regard to what Hizbullah will do once it withdraws from Syria as the movement itself has both transformed and hardened. As Menachem articulates, Hizbullah are “flush with arms from Iran, it now more closely resembles a regular and quite effective – army”.⁷⁵ This has intensified Israeli fears with possibilities of renewed Israeli action against Hizbullah. As the Syrian efforts to control and eliminate opposition winds down, Israel fears the establishment of a “*Shia ‘corridor’*” linking Iran to Lebanon via Syrian territory.⁷⁶ This fear, as discussed earlier, is also shared by the Arab Gulf states who have flagged the dangers of an emerging “*Shia crescent*”.

Hizbullah’s armed activities beyond Lebanon’s borders, may have added to the group’s experiences and demonstrated that once again the movement is highly adaptable in operational terms and capable of fighting several different types of conflicts in diverse terrains, it has also seriously increased the number and character of its enemies. Deemed as terrorist entities by the United States and Europe, through the current Saudi/Qatar divisions, increased pressure is being placed on Hizbullah and its supporters through regional and international bodies. Perhaps however the most dangerous consequences of Hizbullah’s intervention in Syria and beyond is the creation of enemies amongst a variety of *Sunni* movements and militias. While in one sense

this can be mitigated by the evidence that *Shia* groups in Syria have adopted the term “Hizbullah fi Suriya” (Hizbullah in Syria)⁷⁷ bolstering the rank and file and providing targets external to Lebanon, on the other hand, militias divided by sectarian divisions is likely to add to sectarian tensions across the region.

The 1989 Taif Accords succeeded in ending the civil war but has yet to prove its durability in sustaining peace. Taif was meant to rid Lebanon of the competition between sects but with sectarian divisions entrenched and so many issues left undetermined, Taif has ensured that uncertainties and competition over resources and power remain intact. Competition in Lebanon for material and political gain is often tied to sectarian identity thus granting the opportunity for Hizbullah to conceive of alternative (or competing) narratives of Lebanese nationalism that places *Shia* actors (and of course Hizbullah itself) as protectors and martyrs for the Lebanese nation.

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