Abstract

This paper explores the cultivation, institutionalisation and mediation of the image of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Lebanese political party Hizbullah. It explores how this image changes according to socio-political contexts and how it works to construct a constant interchange of communally-relevant knowledge intended to appeal to and mobilise different groups in certain junctures. As such, the paper pays attention to the methods, tools and practices used to construct Nasrallah's mediated persona and Nasrallah's role in self-mediation processes. The paper concludes with the challenges to Nasrallah's mediated image and charismatic authority posed by Lebanon's contentious internal politics and his support for the Syrian regime in its efforts to suppress the uprising that began in March 2011.

Keywords: Nasrallah, Hizbullah, political communication, image of presence, moblization, culture

Hassan Nasrallah: The Cultivation of image and language in the making of a charismatic leader

Populist movements, as well as formal and informal political groups, have often used charismatic leaders, symbols, imagery and language to mobilise supporters and enhance their appeal. Hizbullah, the Lebanese 'Party of God', is no exception–indeed, the group has been remarkable for its efforts in cultivating and disseminating a symbolic and inspirational image of its Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah as a charismatic leader whose own personal ethos, integrity and credibility have created a following even outside Hizbullah's main constituency, the Shi'as of Lebanon. Since his appointment as secretary-general in 1992, but particularly following the liberation of southern Lebanon in 2000 and the 2006 war with Israel, Nasrallah has been a highly visible celebrity-like leader with a substantial following. Rarely absent from the public space, Nasrallah's appearances are publicised ahead of time by Hizbullah's multi-media platforms, including newspapers, the television channel al-Manar (the beacon) and different websites, as dramatic political performances that demand urgent attention and action. Political performances, or spectacles, are key constituents of political life as they can play an important role in securing the consent of the public, reinforce obedience, and, as Lisa Wedeen has argued, "anchor visually and audibly politically significant ideas' as well as frame the ways people see themselves as citizens " (1999, pp. 19-20). The processes of mediation, Dick Pels (2003) suggests, can create a sense of false intimacy between the leader and the led and disrupt the traditional divide between the elites and the masses and between the formal and informal (Pels, 2003). Such aspects of the mediation processes are true of Nasrallah's political performances, which, along with his own ethos, conversational mode of address and skilful use of potent religious-political language have produced an effective, if not powerful, mediated 'image of presence' that appeared to bring his target populations

together as an imagined community, particularly in moments of socio-political crises. This articulation of the Althusserian concept of interpellation (summoning) does not mean the act of summoning fully succeeds in the sense that they are accepted by the target audiences. Indeed, analysis of political rhetoric must also explore those moments when these interpellations are subverted or resisted. However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

The argument this paper makes, and elaborates, is that Nasrallah's 'image of presence' has been worked on, maintained, institutionalised and validated through a sophisticated and adaptive political communication strategy that ran hand in hand with Hizbullah's evolution since its inception in 1982. The strategy combines elements of political marketing strategies with a culturally-sensitive model of mobilisation that actively selects, appropriates and disseminates meaningful symbols, images and language to construct and sustain a constant interchange of communally-relevant knowledge intended to appeal to and mobilize target groups in certain historical junctures. With this in mind, this article pays attention to the methods, tools and practices Hizbullah used to validate Nasrallah's religious–political persona and to Nasrallah's own involvement in mediation processes. As Roger Silverstone (2002) argues, mediation is dialectical, balancing potential opportunities with structures, but it is also uneven with some actors more powerful than others.

Before doing so, the paper briefly traces Nasrallah's rise within Hizbullah's hierarchical structures. It then focuses on the transformation of Nasrallah's image from a devout religious leader to Hizbullah's first charismatic leader in the media age while relating the change to specific historical contexts. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the challenges to Nasrallah's mediated image of presence and charismatic authority posed by Lebanon's contentious internal politics and his (and Hizbullah's) support for the Syrian regime in its efforts to suppress the uprising that began in March 2011.

Nasrallah: The dynamics of structure and agency

Hassan Nasrallah was born on 31 August 1960 in a neighbourhood in East Beirut. His family was not particularly religious or political. His father Abdelkarim Nasrallah was a vegetable and fruit salesman, who moved to the capital Beirut from Bazouriyeh, a small predominantly Shi'a village three miles east of the coastal town of Tyre in south Lebanon. From an early age, Nasrallah was attracted to learning and theological studies because, as he put it in an interview with the Lebanese newspaper Nida' al-Watan, "of the milieu I lived in," (Nasrallah, 1993) in reference to his early association with the fledgling community of politically engaged Shi'ite Islamists that began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s. Nasrallah's family relocated to Bazouriyeh in largely Shiite southern Lebanon at the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. During that period, he began to be attracted to political organisations, joining *harakat al-mahrumin* (the Movement of the Deprived) established by the Lebanese Shii Imam Musa al-Sadr who disappeared in mysterious conditions in Libya in 1978. Nasrallah's aim was to travel to the city of Najaf in Iraq to pursue his religious studies, and he travelled there in 1976. During this period, little was known of Hassan Nasrallah or of his oratorical skills and charismatic qualities.

In 1978, Nasrallah was forced to escape to Lebanon after the Iraqi Baathist regime launched a major crackdown against Shiite Islamists. When he returned to Lebanon, he re-joined the Shiite political formational Amal, but left again when the schism widened between its secular and Islamist members. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and occupied south Lebanon until finally withdrawing in 2000. The invasion, which seriously damaged Lebanon's infrastructure, killed thousands of people, forced the break-up of old alliances and the making of new ones and once again brought in Western troops to Beirut has been often cited as the most important factor behind the emergence of Hizbullah as a resistance and social force. By 1985, the year when Hizbullah published its Open Letter, its quasi-political

manifesto that outlined the party's aims and ideology. The manifesto detailed Hizbullah's objectives and aims, including ending Israel's occupation of parts of Lebanon, the group's commitment to Iran and its leaders and the preference for Islamic rule in Lebanon. Nasrallah was put in charge of Hizbullah's activities in Beirut. Within two years, he was appointed chief executive officer in Hizbullah's consultative council, gaining more clout and attracting the admiration of peers. A veteran Hizbullah official recalls that even when Sheikh Abbas al-Mussawi was elected secretary-general in 1989, "it was his protégé who drew the eyes of the party's files and ranks" (Blandford, 2007, p.7).

Hassan Nasrallah was elected Hizbullah's secretary-general on 18 February 1992, two days after the assassination of al-Mussawi- he was the council's unanimous choice. His appointment coincided with a transformation in Hizbullah's image from an Islamist resistance movement working outside the Lebanese system to a national Lebanese party playing by the political rules. Nasrallah supported the moves towards integration and Hizbullah's participation in the 1992 elections, the first after the 1975-1990 civil war, was to demonstrate that its transitional from an Islamist movement into a mainstream party was genuinely nationalist in orientation. At the helm, Nasrallah initiated a campaign aimed at widening Hizbullah's reach, and supervised the development of social, educational and communication services as well as heavy investments in diverse media platforms. Hizbullah had a clear and organised media plan since the 1990s and continued to develop its media platforms along with its evolution and changing role in Lebanon. By 2013, the group's multi-media platforms included its own newspaper, *al-Intiqad* (literally meaning criticism) and which was formerly called *al-'Ahd (*the pledge) its own satellite television station *al-Manar (*the beacon) several websites, including one for al-Manar offered in multiple languages (Arabic, English, French), and its own radio station *al-Nour* (the light). Hizbullah also

produces children's games, merchandise, books, computer games, as well as posters and billboards, to reach out to multiple audiences.

The roots of the transformation of Nasrallah's image were laid in the second half of the 1990s when Hizbullah increased the number of its resistance operations against Israeli forces. The turning point came on 11 April 1996 when Israel launched 'the Grapes of Wrath' military operation culminating in the Qana massacre in which more than 100 Lebanese civilians were killed by Israeli shelling as they sought shelter in a UN complex. The offensive and the massacre served to draw attention to Hizbullah's role as a viable national resistance party, particularly as Hizbullah's media intensified its campaigns to underline the role of the party in the resistance and the defence of the country. Indeed, Hizbullah's popular appeal and new political status, as the party defending Lebanon, produced a new media strategy aimed at improving performance and countering Israeli propaganda messages (see Harb, 2011).

On the political front, the signing of the April Understanding aimed at ending hostilities with Israel gave Nasrallah increasing negotiating powers in Lebanon, particularly as he constructed the agreement as a victory for Hizbullah. In an interview with the Lebanese newspaper As-Safir on 30 April 1996, he argued that"... [the] understanding is a new attempt at ensuring the protection of Lebanese civilians....that we are bound by it, and agree to its terms. As for the movement of resistance, it remains intact.....We believe that what happened was a great victory and that it was above all a victory for the Lebanese people-..."(Nasrallah, 1996). Nasrallah would later use the trope of victory to describe other significant moments in Hizbullah's history, such as the 2000 Israeli troop withdrawal from south Lebanon and the 2006 July war between Lebanon and Israel.

On 12 September 1997, Nasrallah's populist image changed almost overnight when his 18-year-old son Hadi was killed in a military operation against Israel, but it was Nasrallah's dignified reaction to his son's death and his *tadhiya* (sacrifice) of his son (according to

Hizbullah and popular discourse) that saw a cross-sectarian, impassioned outpouring of emotions and support for a man who had lost his eldest son. *Al-Manar* broadcast live Nasrallah's speech reacting to the news, blending it with footage showing him visiting the families of other martyrs (Manarnet, 2009). The station repeated the broadcast numerous times, turning Nasrallah's reaction and the outpouring of support into a continuous media event that served to bring Lebanese nationals together as a collective. From that date onwards, Hizbullah's multi-media platforms, and a variety of Arab commentators, began to project Nasrallah as an extraordinary selfless leader and an organic leader with deep roots in popular culture. In Egypt, Magdi Hussein wrote in *Ash-Sha'b* (the people) newspaper on 23 September 1997: 'This aggressive action has turned into a new victory for the *mujahidin*. No one knew that Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah would send his son of 18 years old to the front lines… At a time when many (Arab) politicians in government and in opposition provide their children with different aspects of a life of luxury, we see here an ascending Islamist model [of selflessness]. This wonderful model shows us how Nasrallah refused negotiations with Israel to retrieve the body of his martyred son. …it is a model that will remain a source of inspiration for all in the Arab and Muslim worlds" (Magdi, 1997). When a deal was reached to exchange the remains of dead Israeli soldiers for Lebanese prisoners and bodies, Nasrallah did not put his son's name ahead of other resistance fighters' bodies, leading one commentator to write in al-Kifah al-'Arabi (the Arab Struggle): "He (Nasrallah) is more than a symbol; he is charismatic, articulate, straightforward and a mastermind in politics...With Hassan Nasrallah, the political scenery seems to be different" (cited in Harb, 2011, p. 195).

The liberation of the south of Lebanon on 25 May 2000 was another turning point in the evolution of Nasrallah's popular image. The liberation was a watershed and major achievement in Hizbullah's history as it was the first time Israeli troops were forced to retreat from Arab lands at the hands of an Arab paramilitary group since 1948, when Israel was

created. Widely credited to Hizbullah's resistance operations against Israeli forces, the liberation cemented the group's image as the party of resistance in Lebanon and confirmed Nasrallah as one of the most respected populist leaders in the Arab world. Marking the occasion, Nasrallah addressed a 100,000-strong crowd in an open-air venue in the southern town of Bint Jbeil, his language merging Hizbullah's Islamic identity with Lebanon's national one while also framing the withdrawal as a victory for all Lebanese people, irrespective of their political or religious affiliations. His speech was broadcast repeatedly by *al-Manar* television and continues to be broadcast and referred to on the annual anniversary of the liberation of the South. Within five years, however, the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri on 14 February 2005 dented Hizbullah's credibility as it helped bring domestic political tensions and disquiet about Hizbullah's insistence on keeping its arms into the open. Nasrallah condemned the assassination as an anti-nationalist act and called for parliamentary consultations to appoint a new prime minister.

The 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel was, however, the most ultimate historical event that helped the transformation of Nasrallah from a humble religious leader into Hizbullah's first charismatic leader in the media age. The broad consensus following the war in which more than 1,000 people were killed and almost a million displaced was that Hizbullah not only worn the war against Israel, but also managed to enhance its appeal within and outside Lebanon. Crucially, the war was the first regional armed conflict to be televised round the clock with Hizbullah's media providing details of all developments - Nasrallah's interviews, statements and speeches were all televised in full and re-broadcast to thousands of audiences in Lebanon, the Arab world and beyond, who followed each word attentively. However, it was Nasrallah's speech marking the end of the war that captured the Lebanese and pan-Arab imagination, cementing the elevation of his popular status from a leader of a small Islamist group to the symbol of pan-Arab national heroism par excellence.

It is not possible to detail all elements of this speech which reflected Nasralllah's skills in fusing religious and political language to summon his audiences as an "imagined" national collective and describing the end of the war as a 'Divine Victory' and a 'political victory' for all Lebanese:

> Our victory is not the victory of the party.... it is not the victory of a party or a community; rather it is a victory for Lebanon, for the real Lebanese people, and every free person in the world. ….Your resistance, which offered in the 2000 victory a model for liberation, offered in the year 2006 a model for steadfastness; legendary steadfastness and miraculous steadfastness. It is strong proof for all Arabs and Muslims, and all rulers, armies and peoples…The *Lebanese resistance* provided strong proof to all Arab and Islamic armies. ...This is the equation. Today, *your* resistance broke the image of Israel. (Mwali Alkhamenei, 2011)

The construction of Nasrallah's image and charisma in popular culture

The available literature on Hassan Nasrallah – mostly a collection of quasi-biographies, books, articles, images and archival material of his speeches, his achievements and his religious engagements – recounts his life story as a classical linear narrative of a 'genuine' or 'pure' charismatic leader endowed with pre-authored, extraordinary skills. While there is as yet no full-length English-language biography of Nasrallah, a handful of books, pamphlets and other material detailing aspects of Nasrallah's life and his charismatic appeal have been produced by Hizbullah's various publishing houses following the 2006 war.

Most of these publications tell the same story – that of a humble, religious, visionary, authentic and credible leader who has charisma and who was destined to follow a revolutionary path. An example is a book titled *Zaman Nas☐rallah (The Time of Nasrallah: The Heavenly and Strategic Visions in the Leadership of Hassan Nasrallah)* published in 2008 by Dar al-Amir, a Hizbullah-affiliated publishing house. Another is an illustrated

children's book titled *al-Faris al-'Arabī: sirat h☐ayat assayed Hassan Nas☐rallah min al-wilada h☐atta al-qiyada* (*The Arab Knight: the Life Story of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah from Birth to Leadership*) which uses cartoons, images of Nasrallah, posters and newspaper clippings and taps into a reservoir of symbolic and sacred figures to appeal to children already familiar with this reservoir and its meanings.

In his systemic, functional and broadly Eurocentric analysis of authority structures, Max Weber (1978, pp. 122-3) argued that 'genuine' or pure charisma was a feature of ancient societies. He wrote: "Where charisma is genuine … its basis lies … in the conception that it is the duty of those subject to charismatic authority to recognize its authenticity … Psychologically, this recognition is a matter of complete personal devotion to the possessor of the quality." Weber also suggested that charismatic authority was different from other forms of authority as it was distinctly personal and rested on the "devotion to the specific sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of the extraordinary charismatic order, but that genuine charisma becomes unstable as enthusiasm and fervour disappear through discipline and habituation" (1978, ibid).

Ruth Willner (1985, pp. 5-8), drawing on Weber's articulation, proposes four criteria that distinguish charismatic leadership from other types of leadership. These are: the leader's image, which suggests that followers believe the leader possesses superhuman and extraordinary characteristics; receptivity, which means followers believe the leader's statements because it is he or she who makes them; compliance, meaning followers obey the leader; and emotions, which mean a leader provokes intense emotional responses from his or her followers. Willner also argues that a common misconception about charisma is the linking of the qualities of the charismatic leader to the personality of the individual who is credited with it: "There is a popular notion that charisma is located in a quality or combination of qualities of a person and that some leaders naturally possess a charismatic

personality while most do not" (ibid, p. 14). Thus, attempts to locate a set of qualities that would qualify calling political leaders charismatic are unlikely to yield results because charisma is, she suggests, defined in terms of people's perceptions of and responses to a leader. It is not what the leader is, but what people see the leader is that counts in generating the charismatic relationship. As such, the distinction between charismatic political leadership and charismatic authority rests on the extent of the radius of charismatic support. She writes: "If and when a charismatic political leader converts the majority members of a system into his charismatic constituency, his charisma also becomes the basis for authority in that system …" (ibd, pp. 16-17).

While determining the popular reception of Nasrallah's charismatic authority and image of presence is difficult to achieve accurately, popular responses to his public performances and image do suggest his charisma is defined in terms of what people say about him. For example, in certain parts of Lebanon, and particularly in the Beirut Shiite-dominated suburb *Dah☐iyeh*, Nasrallah is revered as a leader and as a popular icon, as reflected in comments by a variety of people this author spoke to between 2007 and 2010. Some comments refer to him as "Nasrallah is the leader we look up to and follow," and "he is the only one defending us," or "Nasrallah does not exaggerate when talking and does not make things up." Other statements and press commentaries, too, describe him as an unusual, charismatic and extraordinary man, but with a humane and informal demeanor.

Paradoxically, people often describe him as ordinary, a man of the street and a brother among equals, suggesting the blurring of the boundaries between the leader and the led. Some commentaries refer to his austere and simple lifestyle (he is reported to continue to sleep on a hard mattress on the floor rather than a sumptuous bed), his friendly and conversational mode of address as well as his truthfulness as personal attributes that reveal he is an 'organic'

leader rooted in Lebanon's everyday culture. For example, as Suha Dabbagh said in a personal communication with the author in Beirut on November 11, 2011:

> Nasrallah comes across as a normal man who does not irritate people with his airs and graces like other Arab leaders. I like his way of talking, no high politics or subterfuge. During the 2006 war, I was looking for a hero, and I found him in Nasrallah. And this was not a movie. Nasrallah does not exaggerate or make things up. … He has the spirit of youth in him, unlike those other [Arab] leaders who look like fossils. He uses the language of the street, but it is not street language (S. Dabbagh, personal communication, November 11, 2011)

Simon Coleman (2009, pp. 417-439) has argued that the potential for a charismatic response depends on a leader's ability to form a charismatic presence and landscape that constitutes the charisma of the exemplar. Roy Wallis (1984, pp. 25-39) also suggests that the potential for a response further depends on the efforts of those elites surrounding the leader intended to enhance the recognition of the leader...endowing him with still further significance as author of the movement and their own fortunate condition, leading him to take evermore seriously the conception of himself as someone out-of-the-ordinary. With this in mind, this paper next examines the methods, tools and practices Hizbullah uses to cultivate, legitimise and popularise Nasrallah's 'image of presence' as well as Nasrallah's own agency in creating a charismatic presence particularly in moments of socio-political crisis.

Appropriating Nasrallah's image in culture

Drawing on an analysis of archival material and fieldwork in Lebanon, this paper argues that Hizbullah's diverse media platforms began cultivating Nasrallah's image as soon as he was appointed the group's secretary-general in 1992. While few details of the decision-making process were made public, Hizbullah's official mouthpiece *al-'Ahd* newspaper published two front-page black-and-white images of the new leader under the headline and inscription: 'The

best of successors to the best of predecessors.' The phrase, rich in historical symbolism and meanings, is an example of the powerful, symbolic and meaningful language the group use to legitimize Nasrallah as a credible and authentic religious-political ideologue who has the necessary credentials to lead. On 7 June 1992, a few days after his appointment, the paper printed in full Nasrallah's first interview as secretary-general conducted with the popular Lebanese daily *as-Safir* conducted a few days earlier and in which Nasrallah himself sought to construct an image of himself, and his party, as more inclusive than other actors in Lebanese society:

> When we were just a small group fighting the Israeli enemy, we were able to hide underground whenever we read in the papers that there was a reason for us to disappear….but soon we became a large movement and started viewing our project as non-partisan and non-factional, and one that operates at the level of the Lebanese people and the nation as a whole and not a sectarian or party project….. The fact that we are engaged in an existential battle with Israel is an honour….we view the Israeli enemy with a different eye – namely, that its very existence in the region poses a constant threat to Lebanon as a whole. (Nasrallah, 1992)

John Corner (2003, p. 69) has argued that the mediation of political personas and their image can project leaders in three broad modes; iconically – in the sense of displaying the demeanour, posture and associative contexts of the political self; vocally, reflected in the increasing blurring of the "what" is said with "how" it is said as well as between the personal and political; and finally, kinetically which is associated with choreographing of political performances and actions (Corner, 2003, p. 67). These aspects of the mediation processes apply to Nasrallah. In fact, a close analysis of Nasrallah's public performances shows that he constantly fuses the how with the what, or, in other words, the style of delivery with rhetoric. In terms of style, Nasrallah's mode of address is more conversational than formal – he often

goes off script, uses vernacular rather than classical Arabic and jokes (he often makes fun of himself, too), thus humanising his political persona. Nasrallah also uses a political discourse accessible to ordinary people while articulating their sense of self and already-felt grievances – he often makes references to the oppressed and Hizbullah's efforts to fight injustice and the oppressors. Furthermore, Nasrallah adapts different linguistic, cultural and religious registers while crafting a powerful religious-political, and yet simple historical narrative, that mixes frames of suffering and redemption with tropes of resistance and/or struggle for the land and that promises divine rewards for those who follow him and respond. Nasrallah's statements are rich in imagery, symbolic references and culturally-meaningful frames of reference that integrate Islamic frames of reference and heroic figures from the past with a potent discourse of resistance to Israel and its allies that remain relevant to contemporary historical and political contexts (Matar, 2008, pp. 122-37). Finally, Nasrallah is skilful in adapting his image and language to summon different audiences in diverse historical junctures. For example, he projects himself as a religious persona by reminding Hizbullah's supporters of the need to follow the right path [of resistance and struggle]; as an Arab leader by reiterating the significance of resistance against Israel and through leading (and addressing) the annual Jerusalem Day celebrations; and as a Lebanese national by calling for cooperation and national dialogue amongst the country's various factions to preserve Lebanon's sovereignty.

However, while he changes his political-religious rhetoric to suit diverse audiences and contexts, Nasrallah's discourse has three main constants: First, he peppers his talks with citations from the Quran, references to the Prophet Mohammad and his descendants. Second, Nasrallah addresses his audiences frequently by using the personal pronoun '*antum*' (you), provoking a sense of familiarity that is enhanced by his switching between intimate language (such as when he uses colloquial '*ammiyyah* Arabic) and formal Arabic (as when quoting from the *Qur'an*). Finally, Nasrallah employs different layers of speech designed to

appeal to a particular audience: For example, to a mainly Shiite audience, Nasrallah frames *jihad* (struggle) as a purely religious duty that transcends all other aims, and the conflict with Israel as the first part of a campaign aimed at liberating Jerusalem and other Muslim holy places. To a wider Lebanese audience, Nasrallah frames *jihad* in national terms invoking the term *muqawama* (resistance). To a larger Arab audience, Nasrallah presents armed struggle as part of a wider Arab nationalist cause against Israel, the United States and their allies. And to an international audience, Nasrallah frames Hizbullah's activities as part of a liberation struggle against an illegal occupation force (see Palmer, 2007, pp. 57-58).

The power of mediation

The transformation of Hassan Nasrallah into Hizbullah's foremost charismatic leader at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this paper suggests, is the outcome of Hizbullah's political communication strategy which ran hand in hand with the group's political evolution since 1982. This strategy, it argues, succeeded in constructing Nasrallah's person as an 'image of presence' that, as Roland Barthes (2000, p. 200) writes, "intervenes without warning on the place of denotation....in order to pass off as merely denoted, a message which is really heavily connoted." Nasrallah's speeches, interviews, rallies and engagements – indeed, his every utterance –are constructed by Hizbullah's various media platforms as dramatic political performances that demand attention.

The sense of drama is heightened and communicated in a variety of ways. For example, before Nasrallah is due to make an address, Hizbullah's television al-Manar would broadcast segments of videos showing him addressing audiences on other occasions, the clips often interspersed with images of Hizbullah fighters in battle and pictures of destroyed Israeli armoury. *Al-Manar*, for example, regularly broadcasts songs, some of them with phrases from Nasrallah's speeches, while showing images of Nasrallah in conversation with Hizbulah fighters or with ordinary people. Furthermore, Nasrallah's appearances, whether on television

or in public spaces, are announced ahead of time –some of these announcements are in the form of printed informal invites detailing the time and place of Nasrallah's engagements and published in *al-Intiqad* and on Hizbullah's main website *al-Muqawama al-Islamiya* (Islamic Resistance), while others are open invites to the general public, advertised by al-Manar at regular intervals.

The sense of anticipation before he is due to make an address is heightened by repeated broadcasts of his previous appearances, images of the audience waiting for him while waving the canary flags of Hizbullah and Nasrallah's pictures and banners with the word *labbaika* (we will act on your demands) or *fida' al-sayyed'* (meaning, a sacrifice to Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah), reflecting a deep emotional bond with, and loyalty to, him. Finally, Nasrallah's public appearances, particularly at public rallies, are important commemorative events in and by themselves. His addresses often mark important historical and highly symbolic occasions and commemorative practices – Martyrs' Day; Jerusalem Day: Liberation Day; the anniversary of (the late Iranian spiritual leader) Ayatollah Khomeini's death – and as such, they become associated in audiences' minds with commemorative practices that serve to underline the central rhetorical and political motifs in Hizbullah's worldview and provide a counter-historical narrative of struggle against oppression and occupation.

Following the 2006 war, Hizbullah's media outlets began publishing sentimental songs and poems in praise of Nasrallah. Some of these are authored by Arab nationals, such as Syrian Omar al-Farra, In one poem, al-Farra refers to Nasrallah as a 'noble knight' from '*ahl al-bayt* (a reference of those Muslims who inhabit the house of the Prophet Mohammed, in other words his followers who had come along to alleviate the suffering of the deprived, a language that resonates with popular Shiite aesthetics and collective memory. A popular song, too, highlights his religious credentials by ending with the phrase: "Oh Hussein, we had come back with Nasrallah," thus making links to the lineage of the most revered leader in

Shiite history. This is a reference to Imam Hussein who was killed along with his band of supporters in the battle of Karbala in 680 becoming a symbol of sacrifice in Shiite history. Other popular songs are intended to appeal to the wider Lebanese and Arab publics. One example is the song *Ah□ibbaī* (my beloveds) by Lebanese singer Julia Boutros, whose lyrics are adapted from Nasrallah's victory speech following the 2006 war. The climax of the song comes with the appearance of a group of able-bodied Hizbullah fighters running through Lebanese woods and the words: "You are the glory of our nation, you are our leaders, you are the crown on our head; you are the masters" (Tama ara, 2008).

Hizbullah also displayed images and religious iconography depicting Nasrallah with other revered Muslim Shi'ite leaders along roads, on the walls of buildings in the streets of Beirut and elsewhere. Some of these are portraits of the Hizbullah leader, but others have inscriptions referring to his religious and national credentials. For example, one poster has the picture of Nasrallah with the words 'Nasrallah, the sun of Palestine' inscribed under a photograph of the Dome of the Rock, the mosque that symbolises Jerusalem to many Muslims and Arabs. Others show Nasrallah holding children, laughing, addressing crowds or with Hizbullah fighters. Hizbullah also produced and sold a varied assortment of merchandise – key rings, posters and other memorabilia – to reflect support and admiration for Nasrallah. There are stickers that show Nasrallah in different guises and places and there are even some showing his well-known bodyguards who are a constant presence in all his public appearances. Nasrallah also appears in posters of Hizbullah martyrs. In these posters, he is often seen smiling, suggesting their death should be celebrated, not mourned. Combined, all these products maintain what Barthes (2000, p. 203) calls a "photographic syntax," or "a discursive reading of object-signs within a single photograph." Indeed, the signifiers in the photographic syntax – in this case, the persona of Nasrallah as well as the background behind

his image (such as flags, colours, graphics and inscriptions) - emerge as guiding tropes and signs for society in particular historical contexts.

As such, the 2006 war was the ultimate socio-historical juncture that helped turn Nasrallah into a pan-Arab political force and served to legitimise his charismatic authority. Support for Nasrallah, and Hizbullah, extended to the Arab world where citizens in different capitals carried Nasrallah's image as an identity marker and as a symbol of Arab nationalism, provoking comparisons with the late Egyptian president Gamal Abdel-Nasser whose nationalist stance and policies were supported by many Arab nationals in the late 60s and early 70s.

Rising challenges to Nasrallah's charismatic image

However, within weeks of the end of the war, Hizbullah's position and Nasrallah's image were dented following allegations that Hizbullah members were involved in the assassination of Hariri. With domestic political tension escalating, Hizbullah began a new phase in its political communication strategy aimed at validating Nasrallah's standing in the public sphere and maintain popular support for the group. In this context, the group launched a coordinated marketing campaign to reclaim legitimacy and appeal to supporters. The campaign was marked with the publication of several books about his life history that included lengthy testimonies from his family and party members and media programmes detailing his achievements. Among these was a production by al-Manar that used a movie-like trailer with English translations broadcasting key quotations from Nasrallah's speeches as Hizbullah and nationalist songs playing in the background (Personal videos from Moh, 20012). In addition, the station continuously re-broadcast some of Nasrallah's most significant speeches, using a combination of visual effects and a variety of sound tracks. Some of these programmes played religious chants while others used nationalist songs

reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s Arab nationalist productions, reminding their audiences of Nasrallah's religious and national attributes.

In March and April 2010, the Hizbullah-sympathetic newspaper *al-Diyar* began a series of articles as part of a comprehensive file about Nasrallah, his life and his achievements, published in two instalments. In the first instalment, writer Radwan al-Dheeb provided narrative after narrative of Nasrallah's life history, sacrifices and credibility. The second was a hand-written statement by Nasrallah telling his life story, and which was first published on 12 May 2006 in the Tehran-based magazine *Risalat al-Ḥusayn* (the Letter of Hussein). There were lengthy testimonies from members of his family (including his father, sister, mother and wife) and supporters as well as other Hizbullah leaders reiterating his extraordinary qualities, his dedication to resistance and his heroic deeds. Most of the reports tell the same story: that of a charismatic, eloquent religious-political ideologue and an inspirational leader whose charismatic deeds influenced the history of Lebanon as no other leader had done. For example, Al-Dheeb wrote on 20 March 2010: "He (Nasrallah) is a leader who looks to history with the future in perspective…He acts on the basis of the belief that stems from the people's hopes and potential. He does not surrender or wait in resignation until helped by others." Another commentary published in the same paper on the same date ponders Nasrallah's humane and sentimental side, while emphasising his rootedness in Arab and Islamic history: "He is) an inclusive and forgiving leader, the defender of Arab civilisation and culture… a feat he achieved through his and his party's actions…Nasrallah is the '*Khomeini*'of the Arabs" (Al-Dheeb, 2010).

The mediation of Hassan Nasrallah's image of presence and charismatic authority, this paper argues, produced powerful effects during an inter-related set of historically-specific constellations of social, cultural and political and institutional forces, helping Nasrallah transcend political-ideological legacies in Lebanon and establish himself as a national and

Arab hero. However, a complex set of unprecedented historically-specific constellations, such as the Arab uprisings that began in 2011, was bound to challenge Nasrallah's image as the ultimate pan-Arab hero and charismatic leader. Nasrallah and Hizbullah supported the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and particularly in Bahrain which has a large Shiite population that had been for long marginalised by the ruling Sunnis. However, Hizbullah's and Nasrallah's support for the Syrian regime in its repression of the popular uprising dented his credibility and image as an organic leader with support in mass culture. In order to appeal to his supporters, Nasrallah used the anti-nationalist and anti-resistance frame to refer to the Syrian uprising, a frame the Syrian regime also used to mobilise support.

At the beginning of 2013, and after a period of staying out of the limelight which sparked rumours he had been taken to Iran for treatment of cancer, Nasrallah began to divert attention from Hizbullah and the Syrian crisis to local Lebanese politics, while emphasising Hizbullah's rootedness in Lebanon, its determination to avert sectarian strife and its involvement in the domestic political processes. In a speech on 27 February 2013 (Nasrallah, 2013a), he proposed a new electoral law based on proportional representation as the alternative for the country ahead of parliamentary elections that were planned for June 2013 and repeated Hizbullah's support for this law in another speech on 6 March 2013. In a speech to justify Hizbullah's intervention in Syria on 13 June 2013, Nasrallah referred to the Syrian opposition as the *takfīriyinn* (the infidels) - a term used to describe Islamist forces opposed to the Syrian regime and Hizbullah's influence in Lebanon- and used the frame of resistance against Israel and its allies to defend the engagement of Hizbullah fighters in a battle outside Lebanese soil: "…We (Hizbullah) consider that the takeover of these groups of Syria, or a number of Syrian provinces especially those bordering Lebanon as posing a great danger to Lebanon and the Lebanese people and not only Hizbullah" (Nasrallah, 2013b).

Since his appointment in 1992 and up to the end of 2011, Hizbullah's mediation of Nasrallah's 'image of presence' had succeeded in creating a charismatic landscape and a response to his image in popular culture. However, Hizbullah's support for the Syrian regime against a popular uprising at a time when support for people power in the Arab world was at its height only served to dent his 'image of presence' and charismatic authority, thus showing the challenges to and limits of processes of mediation and self-mediation in particular historical junctures contexts. This paper has concerned itself with addressing the cultivation and mediation of Nasrallah's image over time. As such, it did not discuss the negative media campaigns waged against Hizbullah and Nasrallah in the regional Arab media. In fact, these campaigns, particularly in Gulf-financed media platforms, had also played a role in subverting his image. This paper has argued that a charismatic response cannot be discussed without paying attention to the cultivation, maintenance and validation of image in the media age or to the fine balance between potential opportunities and structural constraints. It has also shown the limits of mediation processes and the transitory nature of Nasrallah's charismatic authority, underlining the symbiotic relationship between image of presence in particular historical junctures.

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