Lebanon after the Doha Agreement of 2008: The Birth of the Undeclared Shiite Republic in Lebanon

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This article argues that the Doha Agreement of 2008, in which Hezbollah received a veto on all Lebanese central government decisions, signaled the birth of an "undeclared Shiite republic" in Lebanon. Since then, political control of the Lebanese establishment has remained in Hezbollah's iron fist. The agreement, which was signed after three formative events—the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the Syrian army's withdrawal from Lebanon, and the Second Lebanon War with Israel—handed control of Lebanese politics to Hezbollah and the coalition under its leadership. Instead of trying to establish an Islamist regime, make constitutional changes, or antagonize internal Lebanese divisions, Hezbollah adopted a pragmatic policy of accepting the existing political system, while at the same time attempting to control the centers of political power and to ensure that official state policy was consistent with the dictates of "the Islamic resistance in Lebanon." All the significant developments in Lebanon between 2008 and the signing of the natural gas treaty with Israel at the end of 2022, support the claim that Hezbollah dictated decision making in the Lebanese state. The Doha Agreement was not the product of the circumstances in the shadow of which it was signed, but rather the outcome of two deep-seated processes that began decades earlier: the militarization of the Shiite community in Lebanon, and external patronage. These processes positioned the Shiite community as the center of gravity in Lebanese politics and the Doha Agreement solidified their position. Although most senior positions in the country (except for the Speaker of the Parliament) are not held by Shiites, none of them can be appointed or elected without Hezbollah's consent. This is the essence of the model of the undeclared Shiite republic: controlling the governing systems without needing to seize control of them by force. Hezbollah's control of the political system does not stem from a recognition of the legitimacy of its existence. Rather, it is a measure intended to ensure that the political system does not pose a threat to the autonomy of the "Islamic resistance" in Lebanon.

Introduction: The Shiite Community in Lebanon

It is widely believed that the roots of the Shiite community in Lebanon reach back to the seventh century, when Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, the well-known companion of Muhammad the Prophet, was exiled to Jabal Amil in southern Lebanon due to his great fondness for Ali (Al-Zayn, 1973, pp. 76-80; Al-Safa, 1958, p. 33; Sherara, 1996, pp. 32-33). Shiite historians and writers maintain that Shiite settlement in Lebanon intensified in the eleventh century following the establishment of the Shiite Fatimid Empire. Three regions were populated by Shiites: Jabal Amil in southern Lebanon, the Lebanon Valley in the east, and Kisrawan at the foot of Mt. Lebanon. Later, the Shiite peasants were expelled from Kisrawan by the Sunni Mamluks, who launched a series of military raids against their villages (Halawi, 1992, pp. 29-30; Hamzeh, 2004, p. 9). During subsequent periods, the Shiite community was a target of suspicion and discrimination by Sunni rulers—that is to say, the Mamluks and the Ottomans, who associated them with the movement of heretics within Islam and viewed them as a potential extension of the Safavid Empire in Iran (Al-Safa, 1958, pp. 71-80).

In addition to the lowly standing of the community, was the failure of its traditional leadership, which never tried to improve the community's social and political situation or to challenge the Lebanese state and accuse it of discrimination and neglect.

Like the Sunnis and the Druze, the Shiites were also not consulted on the establishment of Greater Lebanon by the French colonialists in 1920. When their lands were annexed to Lebanon, the Shiites became citizens of the new state, which they associated with Maronite hegemony and Western imperialism (Zamir, 1985, pp. 82-82). The mandate of the French authorities typically did not deviate from the traditions of their predecessors, which disregarded and excluded Shiites. However, in 1926, the French were the first to grant Lebanese Shiites the status of a recognized religious community with its own autonomous legal system. With this decision, the French sought to win the hearts of the Shiite masses and to prevent the spread of the great Syrian Revolt that erupted in the Druze areas of Syria at the end of 1925 (Firro, 2006, p. 742). This recognition created a sense of identification between the Lebanese state entity and Shiite particularism and motivated Shiite leaders to demonstrate political allegiance to the new state, which, for the first time, recognized their community as a religious group in its own right.

The independence of Lebanon and the foundation of the National Pact between the Maronite and Sunni elites in 1943 curbed neither the discrimination against the Shiites nor the exclusion of their community, which, according to the division of power that was based on an ethnic index, received the position of Speaker of the Parliament. Nonetheless, within independent Lebanon, the Shiites were left with a sense of alienation and poverty, and their underrepresentation was also reflected in the government administration. Empirical studies on the Lebanese bureaucracy during the period preceding the Second Civil War (1975-1989) show that the Shiites were the group with the least representation in the Lebanese government (Crow, 1962, pp. 510, 519; Halawi, 1992, pp. 98-99).

This underrepresentation in the state system was not the Shiites' only complaint. Additional grievances stemmed from the fact that the lion's share of the Shiite population lives in the regions bordering Israel. For many years, the Shiites complained that the state was leaving them to their fate, first in the face of the Palestinian organizations' seizure of control of the region and the Israeli reprisal operations against the Palestinian guerilla forces, and later during the Israeli military occupation in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Also relevant, in addition to the lowly standing of the community, was the failure of

its traditional leadership, which never tried to improve the community's social and political situation or to challenge the Lebanese state and accuse it of discrimination and neglect (Norton, 1987, p. 33).

The Taif Agreement of 1989 increased the Shiite's parliamentary representation (from 19 to 27 seats, out of a total of 128 seats), thereby equalizing their representation to that of the Sunnis. Still, the Shiite leadership received the increase with many reservations, not only because it was achieved through Saudi mediation, but also because it did not meet their political demands—annulment of the ethnic index system, or at least increasing Shiite representation so that it more accurately reflected the demographic growth of the ethnic group (Alagha, 2006, pp. 40-41, 247-269). These reservations had clear justification, as since the 1980s the Shiite community had become the largest community in Lebanon.

By all measures, the Shiite community was the most oppressed community in the country for a long period of time and it is ironic that the root cause of their eventual rise actually lies in the community's inferior status. The first step towards Shiite empowerment was the demographic change experienced by the community in recent decades and the migration to the big city, which yielded the basis for the radical politicization of Shiite collective consciousness and placed the community at the center of the political game in Lebanon. The Shiites' treatment as a marginal group ended after the Second Lebanon War in 2006 and the signing of the Doha Agreement in 2008. After that, the new reality in which the Shiites enjoyed political dominance did not assume an institutional form, and Hezbollah ruled without having seized control of the Lebanese political system as a whole. This development was a product of the political, social, and demographic processes that characterized the Shiite community after the 1960s. Hezbollah's political hegemony in Lebanon maintains a mechanism of self-restraint in three areas:

refraining from seizing direct control over the state institutions, diluting its discourse against the model of consociational democracy, and, most important, maintaining the status of the Lebanese army as the focus of the national and political consensus in Lebanon.

Discussion regarding the demographic changes in the Shiite community since the late 1950s lies beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we focus here on two elements that are relevant to the consolidation of the Shiite community in Lebanon, though it is clear that both changes are closely related to the demographic shifts.

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Although a census was not carried out in Lebanon in 1932, the popular view is that the Shiites emerged as the largest religious community in the country, constituting approximately 40 percent of the population (1.4 million out of a total population of four million) (Haddad, 2006, p. 23; Hamzeh, 2004, p. 13). The following table demonstrates that the birthrate in the Shiite community is the highest of any community in Lebanon (Norton, 2007, p. 13). Moreover, the Shiite community doubled its demographic presence in six decades, from 19.6 percent in 1932 to approximately 40 percent since the beginning of the 1990s. Despite these figures, according to the Central Intelligence Agency, the Shiite community is the second largest community in the country and constitutes 31.2 percent of the Lebanese population (see Table 1) (The World Factbook, n.d.).

On the eve of Lebanon's Second Civil War, the Shiites made up over half the population of Beirut and its suburbs. A sizeable majority

of them were migrants and displaced persons from lower socioeconomic classes who had come from the south, making it easier to recruit them for anti-establishment protest activity (Schemeil, 1976, p. 63). In terms of the matter at hand, the trends that began to develop in the 1970s and that intensified after the Second Civil War, led to the consolidation of the Shiite community in Lebanon. This process culminated in the signing of the Doha Agreement in 2008. The consolidation of the Shiite community stemmed from a combination of two major processes: rising militarization beginning in the 1970s, and the evolution of an ideological and strategic alliance with two regional patrons. The Doha Agreement, with all its implications, is an integral part of these two formative historical processes.

Table 1. Shiite Demographics in Lebanon

Year	The Shiite Population	Total Lebanese Population	Percentage
1932	154,208	785,543	19.6%
1956	250,605	1,407,868	17.8%
1975	668,500	2,550,000	26.2%
1984	1,100,000	3,757,000	29.3%
1988	1,325,000	4,044,784	32.8%
2005	1,400,000	4,011,000	35%

Sources: Halawi, 1992, p. 50; Hamzah, 2004, p. 13; Johnson, 2001, p. 3; https://tinyurl.com/fxcz636z.

What's Unique about the External Patronage of the Shiite Community?

The Shiites in Lebanon were not the first community to request the protection of regional or international powers. For centuries, the Maronite Christians maintained an historic alliance with France, whereas the Sunnis consistently viewed the Arab world as the country's natural cultural and political environ. Their friendly relations with Egypt during the postcolonial period were later replaced by ties with Syria and Saudi Arabia. The Shiites' quest for external protection was a direct result of

their sense of oppression and alienation from the Lebanese state. Imam Musa al-Sadr, born in Iran, was a pioneer in the establishment of Shiite political alliances with regional powers, particularly with the Ba'ath Party in Syria. This alliance was the product of mutual political interests: al-Sadr sought external protection that could strengthen the Shiites domestically, whereas Hafez Assad sought Islamic legitimacy for his regime, which was subject to systematic attacks by the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria.

For this reason, in 1973 al-Sadr issued a fatwa (an Islamic religious ruling) that recognized the Alawite community in Lebanon as an integral part of Shiite Islam (Maoz, 1988, p. 151). The alliance with the Syrians grew much stronger following Syria's military intervention in Lebanon in 1976, developing into a strategic partnership of mutual support in the days of al-Sadr's successor Nabih Berri (Norton, 1987, p. 48). Assad's rise to power in 1970 was viewed as a victory of the heterodox rural periphery over the Sunni urban center, which found itself unable to make peace with this change. For the urban center, the promulgation of a new constitution in 1973, with its elimination of the customary mention of Islam as the religion of the president of the state, was an opportunity to challenge the Ba'ath regime. Against the background of the popular protests that occurred in the cities of Syria, and the challenge posed to the regime by the Muslim Brotherhood, an alliance between Assad's Ba'ath regime and Musa al-Sadr was formed. The latter headed the Supreme Islamic Shia Council and was willing to throw a lifeline to Assad by issuing a fatwa declaring that the Alawites were a legitimate branch of Islam (Ajami, 2006, p. 201). Although this legal ruling was never published, it laid the foundations for a political alliance between Syria and the Shiites in Lebanon. Moreover, al-Sadr himself was not considered to be a legal authority, and his fatwa was not truly accepted by the Islamist circles in Syria. The ruling also ran completely counter to the legal position of Shiite Islam, as reflected in letters from the great Shiite scholars

of the Middle Ages (Zine El Abidine, 2012, p. 147). Nonetheless, this fatwa served the regime in its war against the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and became an important milestone in the establishment of a political alliance between those in Syria seeking legitimacy and those in Lebanon seeking a supportive patron.

A recent study reveals that al-Sadr also skillfully exploited his ties to Iran to improve the lot of the Lebanese members of his sect (Chehabi, 2006, pp. 137-161). The Islamic Revolution (1979) marked a turning point in the external relations of the community. In contrast to Fouad Ajami's claim that the Islamic Revolution exempted the Shiite community from what he referred to as "the Iranian connection," ties between the Lebanese Shiites and Iran in fact increased after 1979, with their common anti-Western Islamic revolutionary ideology (Ajami, 2006, p. 191). Islamist Iran's patronage of the Shiite community culminated in the establishment of Hezbollah, following Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. This patronage was not only based on the ideological-religious connection, but was accompanied by unlimited political, military, and financial support.

As a result, some have argued that Hezbollah was nothing but an extension of the regime of the Islamic Republic in Iran (Wege, 2011, p. 9).[1] However, a meticulous examination reveals that such statements are clouded with ideological agendas, which tend toward oversimplicity and ignore the objective conditions and the internal forces underlying the establishment of Hezbollah (Shay, 2005). The intransigent Shiite quest for foreign patronage did not begin suddenly and did not stem from ethnic ties alone; rather, it was deeply rooted in the Shiite community's dissatisfaction with their political status in the Lebanese confessional system. It arose in the face of a policy of marginalization and neglect that was entrenched in the state. Many Shiites maintain that after decades of exclusion and neglect on the part of the central government, they lost their faith in the Lebanese state's ability and willingness to provide them

with basic functions: security, infrastructure, and social services. The development and crystallization of relationships with regional powers were a way to correct the absence of political representation and material resources. The Shiites in Lebanon did not develop irridentist leanings vis-à-vis Syria and Iran; they also did not attempt to eradicate the Lebanese political entity. They regard the two states as legitimate sources of support, and as authentic political surroundings, providing an environment of belonging in terms of political culture.

The transnational allegiance of the Shiites in Lebanon stems from the structural crisis of the Lebanese confessional system and longstanding policies, which exclude and discriminate against the Shiite community. The desire for an external patron must be seen in this context and should be understood as part of Shiite efforts to improve their status in domestic and regional politics. Clearly, the Shiite's political role in Lebanon would be impaired by a dramatic change in the regimes in Syria and Iran. Given the internal implications of this dependence, the Shiites' political behavior is shaped by a Domino Theory model (Bullock & Trombley, 1999, p. 236).[2] They identify Lebanon with the orientation of their external patrons instead of adapting the patronage network to Lebanese particularism.

After the Second Lebanon War, the most significant challenge facing Hezbollah pertained to the Syrian army's withdrawal from Lebanon. The Taif Agreement anchored Hezbollah's military organization within the legitimate national struggle against occupation. Although the IDF's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 did not influence Syria's support for Hezbollah's right to continue bearing arms, the Syrian army's withdrawal from the country left Hezbollah with no direct military backing. In a sense, Hezbollah's participation in the government was a preventative measure meant to ensure that no decision made by the central government could undermine Hezbollah's status or violate the status quo created by the Taif Agreement.

The Islamist organization known as Hezbollah was modelled on the Islamic Revolution in Iran both ideologically and organizationally. It's superfluous to state here that Iran was and continues to serve as Hezbollah's main source of the funding on which it relies. It should be noted, however, that Iran founded Hezbollah in the Lebanon Valley—a region that was under the patronage and hermetic control of Syria. It is doubtful whether Iran would have been able to establish the organization without Syria's consent. Syria at the time understandably regarded Hezbollah's establishment as part of the proxy strategy in the struggle against the IDF (Azi, 1998, pp. 69-70). Some researchers hold that Syria played the role of the dominant partner in the Hezbollah-Iran-Syria axes only during the 1980s, but that it continues to function as Hezbollah's primary patron, with the ability to block the connection to Iran in terms of the provision of weapons (Samii, 2008, pp. 37-38).

From the 1970s onward, Syria became the primary political patron of the Shiite community in Lebanon. It also initiated the Taif Agreement of 1989, which served as a legitimate political umbrella for Hezbollah's continued existence as a military organization by giving it freedom of action independent of any political authority and allowing it to continue operating under the title of a resistance movement. Since 1982, Syria has been Hezbollah's source of oxygen and its primary weapons supply route. Syria was also the only Arab state to side with Hezbollah, and only thanks to its supports did "the resistance" achieve its goals by liberating occupied land (the IDF's withdrawal from southern Lebanon). In this context, Naim Qassem, former deputy to Nasrallah and current secretary- general of Hezbollah, states that the alliance with Syria is not a fleeting episode; it was never based solely on hatred of Israel, but rather on ideological harmony, political-strategic partnership, and an unshakeable geopolitical calculation (Qassem, 2009, pp. 417-419). These three factors offer perhaps the best explanation for Hezbollah's

military involvement in the war in Syria and its willingness to sacrifice thousands of fighters to prevent the fall of the Syrian Ba'ath regime.[3]

At the beginning of 2011, Hezbollah welcomed the eruption of waves of protest that spread throughout the Arab World. Nasrallah called demonstrators "poor, freedom seekers, lovers of liberty, rejectors of humiliation and disgrace" (Berti & Schweitzer, 2013, p. 42). Hezbollah continued to maintain this position as long as the uprisings were limited to places such as Egypt and Tunisia; but when they spread to Syria later in 2011, the organization resolutely backed the regime, calling the protests a "Western plot." Hezbollah's backing of the Ba'ath Party regime found initial expression in a declaration of support and the provision of advice to the Syrian army. Beginning at the outset of 2013, Hezbollah played an active role in the hostilities, fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Syrian army (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2014). In a speech delivered on May 24, 2013, marking the anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Nasrallah stated:

> If Syria falls, the resistance [Hezbollah] will be besieged. Israel will invade Lebanon to impose its conditions and restore its control. If Syria is lost, the resistance [*muqawama*] will also fall—and Palestine too. (Zisser, 2014, p. 177).

The first testament to Hezbollah's change in policy was evident in 2013. Hezbollah sent thousands of fighters to al-Qusayr and went into battle beside the Syrian army. At the beginning of the operation, Hezbollah's leadership, headed by Nasrallah, presented the campaign for the city as defense of the large Shiite population in the region (which numbered approximately 30,000). It quickly became apparent, however, that Hezbollah's military involvement was strategic and was meant to tip the scale in the Ba'ath regime's favor (Zisser, 2014, pp. 176-177).

The period between the initial years and the regime's victory over the opposition in 2018 was characterized by broad military intervention in Syria on the part of Hezbollah; thousands of elite fighters were sent to Syria with only one goal: to prevent the fall of the regime. The scope of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria leaves no room for doubt that Syria was and remains the Shiite community's primary ally in Lebanon.

"Arms are an adornment of men"[4]: The Rise of Shiite Militantism

The militarization of the Shiite community is closely related to Lebanon's involvement in the Israeli-Arab conflict and Israel's policy toward Lebanon since the 1960s. Since then, the Shiite population in Lebanon has been the group most exposed to the escalation of the conflict. For almost a decade and a half, the Shiite community found itself between a rock and a hard place in the war that was being fought between Palestinian organizations and the IDF. The Palestinian groups seized control of the Shiite villages, instilling fear into them and turning the villages into bases for carrying out hostile actions against Israeli targets, civilian and military alike. At the same time, the IDF responded with reprisal operations targeting the same villages.

Between 1969 and 1983, the Shiites paid the price of this struggle in blood, without any intervention by the Lebanese state, which had turned its back on its Shiite citizens (Hamzeh, 2004, pp. 15-17). The obsession with defending the community emerges clearly from the names of Shiite military organizations. The name "Amal" is the Arabic acronym for "Afwāj al-Muqāwama al-Lubnāniyya" (the Lebanese Resistance Regiments), and the military wing of Hezbollah is called "Al-Muqāwamah Al-Islāmīyah fī Lubnān" (the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon). However, though we cannot separate this militarization from the sociopolitical crisis that prevailed in Lebanon during the period preceding the Second Civil War, we must examine the harbingers of this process.

The Palestinian guerilla organizations and other left-wing parties attracted many young Shiites, who found an answer to the hardship they faced in anti-establishment revolutionism. The roots of the connection between the Shiites, who come from underprivileged and marginalized classes, and the leftist and Palestinian forces, reach back to the 1960s and the mass Shiite migration from areas far from Beirut. Rural Shiite migrants and members of the lower-working class in Beirut were detached from their social surroundings, constituting what Michael Johnson has referred to as a "belt of misery." They were excluded from the city's institutionalized systems of patronage after they were ejected from the existing systems in their original places of residence in the periphery. They therefore sought not only to overcome their socioeconomic misery but also to cause the collapse of the political status quo. Motivated by the revolutionary program of the anti-establishment left, young Shiites joined various Palestinian organizations and anti-establishment leftist militias (Hamzeh, 2004, p. 14; Johnson, 2001, p. 158; Norton, 1987, p. 38).

The PLO's continuing military activity in southern Lebanon on the one hand, and Israel's intensifying reprisal operations on the other hand, exposed the Shiite civilians of southern Lebanon to an increasing threat to life and property. Against this background, in consideration of the chronic weakness and inferiority of the Lebanese army, Imam Musa al-Sadr founded the Amal militia three months after the outbreak of the Second Civil War.[5] Despite the new militia's claim that it was established to defend the Shiites of southern Lebanon from Israeli attacks, the Amal movement was actually formed to provide the Shiite community with an armed force of its own as a weight against Palestinian hegemony and Palestinian leftist opponents in the south (Norton, 1987, pp. 47-48; Ajami, 2006, pp. 168-169).

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cleansing that the Christian militias began to conduct in the poor Shiite neighborhoods of East Beirut. Moreover, Amal's establishment was an attempt to curb the growing influence of the leftist forces among the Shiites, particularly that of the Communists. The fact that the Shiites sustained extremely heavy losses in the years 1975 and 1976, provided al-Sadr with a reasonable basis to believe that the anti-establishment front led by Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt had taken advantage of the Shiite public in its fight against the Christians (Norton, 1987, p. 42; Ajami, 2006, p. 178). Although Amal's establishment was an important step in the militarization of the Shiite community, Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon was undoubtedly the most important factor in this process. Many Shiites welcomed the Israeli army in 1982, viewing its arrival as a sign of the end of PLO control of the region. However, Israel's unconditional support for the Falangist government (whose militias eradicated the Shiite suburbs of East Beirut) and the ongoing military occupation transformed Shiites into opponents of "the new liberators."

Here, it is important to also mention the revolutionary regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a key force in the Shiites' mobilization against Israel, whose invasion of Lebanon ironically created fertile ground for the establishment of Hezbollah. It's obvious that Hezbollah's emergence was inspired by the Islamic Revolution. But what new studies do show without a shadow of a doubt, is that the revolutionary regime was decisively involved in the development that led to the creation of Hezbollah's organizational structure and the shaping of its ideology (Chehabi, 2006, pp. 209-220; Hamzeh, 2004, pp. 19, 24-26).

Since its establishment, Hezbollah has engaged in guerilla warfare against the Israeli army, and from the outset, it was established as a Jihadist-Islamist organization aimed solely at waging bitter war against the West and its proxies in the region, meaning Israel. In the eyes of Hezbollah and many others in the Arab world, Hezbollah's obstinate guerilla war is what caused the IDF to withdraw from southern Lebanon in May 2000, unconditionally and without any political or security settlement. Hezbollah touted the Israeli withdrawal endlessly, proclaiming it an unprecedented military victory. For the first time in the Israeli-Arab conflict, it had succeeded in forcing Israel to withdraw from occupied Arab territory unconditionally, without a peace agreement, and without security arrangements (Nicholas, 2007, pp. 232-243; Norton, 2000, pp. 22-35). In addition to the Israeli withdrawal of May 2000, Hezbollah's impressive military accomplishments in the Second Lebanon War (that broke out in July, 2006) resulted in a major increase in its political prestige both within and outside Lebanon. It also contributed to the crystallization of the Shiite political outlook while locating it at the center of the decision-making process (Hamzeh, 2004, p. 95; Shaqur, 2009, pp. 124-125).[6] Some strategic analysis experts hold that Hezbollah's military strength has become a strategic component that needs to be taken into account in any future regional conflict.

Shiite military force has not yet been used to seize power or to impose an Islamist regime (in the case of Hezbollah), although both dominant parties have used their armed militias from time to time to achieve limited, short-term political goals. In 1984, Amal seized control of West Beirut, bringing about the collapse of the government of Amine Gemayel. A year later, Amal openly declared war against the Palestinian camps (1985-1987) in an effort to uproot the PLO from Lebanon. Some have

depicted Amal's seizure of Beirut in 1984 as an event that fundamentally changed the way the Sunni leadership saw the Shiite community, transforming it from a marginal political actor in their eyes into a major actor that cannot be ignored in any settlement (Norton, 1987, p. 117; Shaery-Eisenlhor, 2008, p. 22). In May 2008, the militias of both parties seized West Beirut, the stronghold of the Sunnis led by Saad Hariri, to break the stalemate that had paralyzed Lebanon since the Second Lebanon War. This was the first time since the end of the Second Civil War (1989) that Lebanon experienced such levels of intercommunal violence. However, their scope was geographically limited, and the short duration of the altercations ensured that the Shiite leadership was aware of the limitations of converting a military force into a political force in the existing domestic and regional conditions.

Although it has been two decades since Simone Haddad carried out his quantitative study, it nonetheless showed us that a large majority of the Shiite community in Lebanon supported Hezbollah's military wing and the party's right to continue bearing arms with no time limitation. Still, only 54 percent of the respondents supported the party's right to use armed force against the state (Haddad, 2006, p. 29).

There is no denying that Hezbollah's inception provided the greatest momentum for the militarization of the Shiite community in Lebanon. In a sense, despite the Shiite discourse of resistance and the defense of Lebanon, the Shiite public has viewed Hezbollah as the community's private army (Abdulghani, 2013, p. 77). Still, it is important to emphasize that the increasing strength of the Shiite military force in Lebanon stems not only from the military capabilities of Iran, but also from the prominent Shiite presence in the Lebanese army on both the command level and in the soldiers' ranks. During the Second Civil War, the Lebanese army consisted of 2,833 Lebanese officers, 20.9 percent of whom were Shiite (compared to

15.3 percent between 1958 and 1978). After the Taif Agreement of 1989, the number of officers stood at 2,292, with a breakdown of 26.8 percent Shiite, 30.3 percent Maronite, 16.1 percent Sunni, and nine percent Druze (Barak, 2006, pp. 87-88). The percentage of Shiite officers in the Lebanese army has almost doubled, from 15.3 percent before the Second Civil War to 26.8 percent during the first decade following the Taif Agreement, so that the army's ethnic constitution reflects the social and political changes that Lebanon has experienced since 1943 (Barak, 2006, p. 91). Similarly, the Shiites are the largest ethnic group of army conscripts, accounting for between 35 and 40 percent of the regular force (Berkovich, 2006,p. 29). Other sources indicate that close to 60 percent of all soldiers in the Lebanese army are Shiites (Gaub, 2007, p. 17).

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Hezbollah's Defensive Discourse: Resistance Not Against the Army but "Hand-in-Hand with it"—Is This Truly the Case?

Hezbollah's political and ideological discourse has undergone three stage of development since the 1980s. In its early days, the organization employed a discourse that drew inspiration from the Islamic Revolution in Iran. This discourse was accurately reflected in the document that Hezbollah presented in 1985, which related to three primary aspects. The first was full and unreserved allegiance to the ideology of the "guardianship of the Islamic Jurist." The second was uncompromising commitment to the war of Jihad against the enemies of Islam, most prominently the West and its proxy in the region, Israel. The third was rejection of the ethnic

regime in Lebanon and the commitment to replace it with the rule of Islam. Hezbollah's military activity, which included suicide attacks, was loyal to this ideological agenda (Hamzeh, 2004, pp. 36-39; As-Sayid, undated, pp. 35-51).

Toward the second half of the 1980s, a change began to take place in Hezbollah's discourse and modes of action, with a focus on limiting resistance to within the sovereign territory of Lebanon. Until Israel's withdrawal from the Security Zone in 2000, Hezbollah portrayed its struggle as Jihadist-nationalist resistance aimed at liberating the territory of an occupied homeland (Hamada, 2001, pp. 99-100).[7] This discourse was consistent with the view of scholar Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, whose ideas helped Hezbollah make the theoretical and ideological transition from universal Jihad to the sphere of delineated territorial Jihad. In his work *Kitab al-Jihad* (The Book of Jihad), Fadlallah argues that Islam's treatment of the Other is based first and foremost on coexistence and neighborly relations, and that Jihad is defensive in essence (Fadlala, 1996, pp. 220-225). Similar thinking was presented by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi in his work *Fiqh al-Jihad* (The Jurisprudence of Jihad), in which he claims that, since the days of its birth, the Jihad of Islam has been defensive, including the battles fought by the Muslims during the period of Muhammad the Prophet (Al- Qaradawi, 2009, p. 239). According to this logic, Muslims are obligated to wage a war of Jihad in one of three cases: tyrannical rule, foreign aggression, or foreign occupation. This line of thought provided Hezbollah with the theoretical conceptualization it needed to reduce the scope of its Jihad.

For approximately a decade and a half, Hezbollah portrayed itself as an Islamic resistance waging Jihad against a foreign occupier. The new discourse lost its charm after the IDF withdrew from southern Lebanon in May 2000, which was a formative historical event in the history of the conflict in the region. Although this withdrawal was a distinct outcome

of internal dynamics within Israeli society in the neoliberal age, this does not negate the fact that this was the first Israeli withdrawal without conditions, without a settlement, and without a peace treaty. Hezbollah channeled this to portray Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon as a victory for the resistance. It obligated Hezbollah to reshape its discourse to justify the fact that it continued to bear arms, despite Israel's withdrawal. In this context, the organization began to emphasize its defensive doctrine and to argue that it continued to bear arms in order to defend the homeland against "Israeli aggression" (Kana'ana, 2019, pp. 227-231).

The discourse of defensive resistance became a guiding concept in Hezbollah's political and ideological discourse, recurring in almost all the speeches of Secretary General Nasrallah (Soubrier, 2013, p. 101). Naim Qassem also offered a political-constitutional justification for the dual reality existing in Lebanon and the essential need to exclude Hezbollah from the authority of the Lebanese state. Subordinating the resistance to the direct authority of the Lebanese state, he argued, would tie the hands of the resistance, robbing it of its capacity to struggle against Israel. An act of subordination or integration of the resistance in the country could expose Lebanon to external pressures and place responsibility for any act against Israel on the Lebanese state in terms of international law, when the international arena is biased in Israel's favor in any event. Continuing the dual reality of resistance-versus-state releases the former from the political obligations of the state and provides it with freedom of action (Qassem, 2009, pp. 166-167).

Due to Israel's unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon and the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah developed a national discourse consisting of three components: "The people, the army, and the resistance" (Al-Qays, 2022; Bazzi, 2006, p. 658). The new national discourse placed the resistance to Israel at the heart of the political consensus in Lebanon, while also

positioning it alongside popular legitimacy (al-Muqawamah) and institutional legitimacy (the army). Based on an awareness of the fears existing among the *fellahin* of Lebanese society regarding both Hezbollah's military consolidation and the Islamist doctrine, the organization crafted a new discourse that allayed these fears, strengthening the defensive component and the apparent shared fate of the Lebanese People and its army. These three components—the people, the army, and the resistance—complete one another. Mohammad Raad, a member of the Lebanese parliament for Hezbollah's parliamentary faction, justifies a dual defensive reality due to the pluralist structure of Lebanese society. In his view, this structure does not allow for external intervention or alliances with strong states; rather, the dualism of the defensive doctrine of the army, in conjunction with the readiness of the resistance, is a proven recipe for maintaining the independence of Lebanon and the ability to stand strong against "both the concrete and potential Zionist threats" (Raed, 2008,. P. 133). Therefore, Hezbollah developed three courses of action:

a. Suspension of the goal of establishing an Islamic state in Lebanon at this stage. This change in position found expression in a formative "political document" issued by Hezbollah in 2009, which does not address the establishment of an Islamic state—whether by force or through a gradual process.

b. Openness to the Christian community in Lebanon, particularly the Maronites, to alleviate its fear of an Islamic alternative. In this context, it is important to remember the historical encounter between the Maronite patriarch and Hezbollah, and the inclusion of Christian candidates in the party list—measures whose crowning achievement was the signing of an agreement of understandings with President Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and the alliance with the Marada movement led by Suleiman

Frangieh. In this context, Naim Qassem notes that the document of understanding that was signed in 2006 between the Free Patriotic movement under Aoun's leadership and Hezbollah, built bridges between the two large communities and provided the resistance with legitimacy in recognizing it as an integral part of the national strategy for defending the homeland (Qassem, 2009, pp. 250-251).

c. An emphasis on Hezbollah's national role as a form of resistance aimed primarily at ensuring peace in the Lebanese homeland—first and foremost by means of all-out war against the Israeli occupation, and then through its functioning as a defensive wall against "Israeli aggression." Since Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, the task of the resistance has been to defend the homeland and to serve as a deterrent for Israel. Even when popular uprisings erupted in Syria and the Jihadist organizations began to flourish, Hezbollah positioned itself as a shield of coexistence in Lebanon against the Jihadist threat (Kana'ana, 2019, pp. 237-241).

As a political movement and a military organization, Hezbollah represents an ideological-religious totalitarian Jihadist movement whose worldview is the core of its existence. The organization's Lebanonization since the 1980s does not contradict its devotion to its two overarching goals: a decisive battle against the state of Israel and the establishment of an Islamist regime within Lebanon's borders. Relinquishing the overarching goals of the organization would have meant erasing the essence of Hezbollah itself as a totalitarian Islamist movement. Therefore, the pragmatism that characterizes Hezbollah, both in giving up the goal of establishing an Islamist state and in defining the purpose of the organization's immense arsenal of weapons as defensive, required considerable sophistication. According to Faez Kazi, the 2009 political document created the reality that was agreed in the Doha Agreement of 2008. The document conditioned

the establishment of true democracy on the termination of the ethnic index system and held that, until the conditions for this are achieved, a consociational democracy should be established in which Hezbollah is given the privilege to halt any act of the central government that contains a threat to the organization's standing in the country. Hezbollah never disavowed the desire to establish an Islamist regime, and it certainly never disavowed its ideological and political commitment to the doctrine of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. Rather, the organization conditioned the establishment of an Islamic regime upon the existence of a majority that was in favor of it, or, as stated in 1985: If the members of our Nation are given the opportunity to freely choose the form of government in Lebanon, it will want no alternative to Islam (Kazi, 2013, pp. 65-67).

> Documents that Hezbollah issued between the years 1985 and 2009 stated explicitly that there was only one goal in the struggle against Israel—its destruction. The 1985 document portrays Israel as "the spearhead of the United States in our Muslim world, an enemy that must be fought… The confrontation with the entity must end in its eradication from existence."

This effort was aimed first and foremost at neutralizing Hezbollah's domestic rivals, who fear theocracy, and at justifying the continued bearing of arms outside of state authority. The strategy of balances that has been espoused by Hezbollah since the end of the Second Lebanon War may reflect a process of pragmatism; however, it does not signify actual moderation. In the same breath, the continued bearing of arms is a powerful statement indicative of Hezbollah's devotion to its goals. The balance between maintaining the existence of the Lebanese state and continuing to bear arms is a pragmatic equation resulting in chronic fragility, although it would be difficult

to view this as an abandoning of the conflict against the State of Israel (Belkaziz, 2006, p. 46).

Omission of the demand to establish an Islamist regime in Lebanon also does not reflect an abandonment of Islamist ideology on the part of Hezbollah, as such an act would go against its very essence (Kana'ana, 2019, pp. 236-237). Pan-Arabist scholar Abdullah Belkaziz, whose writings do not hide his regard for Hezbollah, confirms that the pragmatism demonstrated by the organization in both its patterns of political behavior and its military activity does not indicate an abandonment of the ideological foundations on which the organization was established. Hezbollah remains committed to two ideas: the establishment of an Islamist regime, and the doctrine of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, also regarding the conflict with Israel (Belkaziz, 2000, pp. 58-60). The struggle against Israel is a civilizational, religious, and national struggle aimed not only at liberating southern Lebanon, but also at rejecting all political settlements and destroying the Zionist enterprise. Belkaziz determines that these are conventions anchored in Hezbollah's very existence and that the pragmatism reflects no moderation or fundamental revisions, but rather pragmatic consideration of the existing reality (Belkaziz, 2000, pp. 60-61).

The totalitarian ideology, the obsession with weapons, and the arsenal that Hezbollah built leaves no room for doubt regarding the organization's ideological commitment to the struggle against Israel. This context reminds us of the importance of the document that Hezbollah issued in 2009, known as the "political document." The revision that was made to the document pertained to the question of the alternative to the ethnic consociational regime in Lebanon; however, it made no change regarding the struggle against Israel. In addition, documents that Hezbollah issued between the years 1985 and 2009 stated explicitly that there was only one goal in the struggle against Israel—its destruction. The 1985 document portrays Israel as "the spearhead of the United

States in our Muslim world, an enemy that must be fought… The confrontation with the entity must end in its eradication from existence" (As-Sayid, n.d, p. 44). The language of the 2009 document is no different: "The historic responsibility to not recognize this entity, no matter what the pressures and challenges, rests on the shoulders of the Nation and its peoples, as does continuing the struggle for the liberation of all the occupied land and the restoration of stolen rights, no matter how long it takes or how great the sacrifices (Qassem, 2009, pp. 496-497).[8] Qassem's quotation only provides further support. In this spirit, he says that the resistance came into existence in reaction to the Israeli occupation and will continue to struggle as long as the occupation continues. After all, the resistance was established on the foundation of the belief that the occupation can be defeated. Qassem clarifies that the resistance would continue to bear arms as long as Israel exists, for even after Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, it remains a current and future threat to the country (Qassem, 2009, p. 450).

In this spirit, Nasrallah has, on several occasions, articulated a similar view. In a speech delivered on the day of remembrance for Samir Kuntar in 2015, he advanced two logical arguments relating to Israel. The first was that Israel is an unavoidable fact whose existence must be accepted, and that there is no choice but coexistence and all that this implies in terms of surrendering to it and accepting its dictates. On the other hand, there is the logic of resistance, which he refers to as "deterministic logic," according to which the destruction of Israel is a deterministic outcome of history, as every occupation, no matter how long it's duration, reaches its end.[9]

Although deterrence of Israel is a doctrinal element in the struggle against it, it is not the only consideration. The continuation of resistance is inherently linked to a principled commitment to the Palestinian people, as this guiding doctrine defines Israel as a current and future threat to Palestine and the entire region; thereby obligating resistance against it until it is defeated (Qassem, 2009, p. 448). This unshakeable commitment to the struggle against Israel is faithfully reflected in the training of Hezbollah fighters, which is based on religious, ideological, and military foundations. Hezbollah's fighting force receives more than just military training, which occurs after a methodical process of coherent religious-ideological indoctrination and a nurturing of the inspirational, practical model of Husayn's martyrdom. Such training and modeling rests on an identification with the Palestinian's plight and the struggle for the holy sites. The conflict with Israel, the restoration of rights to the Palestinian people, and the liberation of the holy places, most importantly Jerusalem, are the contemporary equivalents of the struggle of Husayn, son of Ali, against tyranny, despotism, and exploitation (Belhaziz, 2006, pp. 44-45; Fiad, 2000, pp. 69-74).

Another extremely important aspect of the shaping of the political and ideological world of Hezbollah that cannot be ignored, is the messianic aspect of its struggle against Israel. As an Islamist movement devoted to the revolutionary ideology of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, Hezbollah is committed to what its former General Secretary Abbas al-Musawi called "paying the tax burden of preparations for the coming of the Mahdi," and Jihad against Israel is what will prepare the ground for the coming of the Mahdi. "Islamic resistance" in Lebanon is an enterprise that prepares the ground for the return of the Mahdi, whose return will provide him with a powerful point of departure—embodied in the Islamic resistance—for realizing the messianic vision in its entirety. Therefore, all harm to or weakening of the resistance is like weakening the messianic enterprise of the Mahdi (Majalat Baqiat Allah, 2023, pp. 64, 82).

Three trends prepare the ground and portend the coming of the Mahdi: the appearance of the Islamic resistance in Lebanon, the awakening

of hostility to Jews, and the abandonment of neutrality and passivity. Al-Musawi wrote that he who desires to swear allegiance to the Mahdi must, from a religious and moral perspective, abandon passivity and neutrality and take their places beside the oppressed; he also wrote that he who does not adapt himself to Jihad in this world will not have the privilege of being among the supporters of the Mahdi in this world (Majalat Baqiat Allah, 2023, p. 83). This approach was a formative component of the shaping of the deterministic view of Israel. In one of his speeches in 2024, Nasrallah related dismissively to the messianic aspect of the struggle against Israel.[10] In the same breath, he emphasized the obligation to continue the struggle against Israel until it is destroyed, with no connection to an eschatological or prophetic conception. Nasrallah described Israel as a cancerous tumor that by nature creates pain and wars. The source of all the *fitan* (pl. of *fitna*: temptation or trial) that this region has known is actually Israel, making it necessary to work day-and-night to uproot this tumor.[11] In light of these insights, the struggle against Israel is indeed a tool for political mobility; however, it remains a foundation stone in the existence of Hezbollah and its ideological and religious vision of the Shiite organization.

For Hezbollah, the discourse of "spider webs" (to describe Israel as weak and fragile) is not a form of psychological warfare but rather an expression of the organization's internal certainty of its ability to strike Israel with an overwhelming blow (Harel & Issacharoff, 2008, p. 443).[12] This trend is reflected more intensively in Naim Qassem's approach to the intermediate period of the struggle against Israel. In addition to portraying the Israeli withdrawal as achieving the goal of liberating the occupied homeland, Qassem enumerated five additional accomplishments of the resistance against Israel, in the following order: 1) Highlighting the nation's potential ability to resist the occupation; 2) Raising morale in the face of the frustration and the loss of faith in its abilities,

which characterized this region for decades; 3) Reviving the spirit of resistance among the Palestinian people; 4) Causing the failure of the "new Middle East"; and 5) Transforming Lebanon from a weak state into a strong state (Qassem, 2008, p. 11).

Hezbollah's refraining from starting a total war against Israel during the present confrontation also echoes an ideological and strategic worldview based on the premise that continuation of the struggle against Israel will ultimately lead to the internal collapse of Israel's state, army, and social fabric. Like other Islamist movements, Hezbollah believes that the demise of Israel is a matter of divine determinism and a natural historical development. The ongoing struggle against Israel, with the help of its structural internal weaknesses, will ultimately lead to its collapse. The idea of the internal weaknesses and the spontaneous collapse of Israel is not new; it has been raised in the past in Pan-Arabist circles, as it is currently being raised by Islamist circles (Al-Tamimi, n.d., pp. 28-29). What was new was Nasrallah's conviction that perseverance in the struggle against Israel and continuous strikes would accelerate the country's spontaneous collapse. According to this analysis, Israel's internal weaknesses are not the product of its existential dependence on a foreign power or the fact that it is a state devoid of state foundations due to the militaristic nature of society; rather, they stem from a series of changes that accelerate internal dissolution. These changes are related to Israel's inner essence and to its struggle with the Palestinian people. In this internal Israeli context, Nasrallah identified four changes: the crisis of leadership that has plagued Israel since the death of Ariel Sharon, the internal fragmentation of Israeli society, loss of the Zionist patriotic spirit, and loss of the deterrence of the IDF.[13] As for the struggle with the Palestinians, both trends—changing the demographic balance in favor of the Palestinians, alongside the steadfast perseverance of the Palestinian people (Al-Khudari, 2007, p. 164)[14]—create momentum,

maintains Nasrallah, in the unavoidable internal collapse of the state of Israel. This view certainly contributes to the continuation of Hezbollah's bearing arms and fighting Israel, as the ultimate result of this struggle is to be the defeat of Israel.

Along with emphasizing the guiding concept of the defensive weapon, bearing arms was portrayed as a necessity derived from the weakness of the state, but also as an alternative to the absence of the desired state—that which protects its citizens and maintains the rule of law.[15] This approach, more than anything else, reflects the organic link between the feelings of oppression and exclusion that surges through Shiite society and Hezbollah's obsession with arms. Linking the bearing of arms to the nonexistence of a proper and just state clearly reflects the feelings of frustration that has been the lot of the Shiites since the signing of the Taif Agreement. The Shiites ended the Civil War as the most powerful community—demographically, militarily, and in terms of political mobility—; however, none of these strengths translated into success in the institutional politics of Lebanon. This approach, which links the continuation of bearing arms to the establishment of a strong, just state, was presented by Sheikh Naim Qassem, who stressed that resistance does not contradict the army or the state, but rather completes the army and serves as support for the state. Qassem suggests that the condition for relinquishing the military power of the resistance would be Lebanese agreement to the establishment of a strong, just state (Qassem, 2008, p. 12).

One day after Hamas' murderous attack of October 7, 2023, Hezbollah launched a limited campaign of attrition against Israel, with no provocation and in total contradiction of the defensive doctrine on which it bases the legitimacy for the continued bearing of arms outside of state authority. The argument that Hezbollah's participation in the fighting is lip service to the Palestinian struggle, is more wishful thinking on the part of those making the claim than it is the essence of

Hezbollah involvement. Joining the fighting is an unequivocal and distinct statement regarding Hezbollah's commitment to the struggle against Israel and devotion to fulfilling the mission of handing Israel a systemic defeat.

The process of Lebanonization experienced by Hezbollah has not necessarily diluted the ideological commitment to all-out war against Israel. The internal considerations pertaining to the Lebanese state do indeed exist, but they do not undermine the religious commitment. The campaign that Hezbollah launched against Israel was meant to convey three messages both to its supporters, the supporters of the ideological struggle against Israel, and to Hezbollah's enemies alike. First, that Hezbollah is fundamentally committed to the struggle against Israel and that this commitment stems from the view that the struggle against Israel is one that must be won. Second, that Hezbollah at this stage is not interested in a total war with Israel due to the internal Lebanese constraints, and that it therefore launched a campaign of attrition, which aimed to offer a supportive front to the Palestinians while exhausting the Israeli army and economy. Third, that the option of total war on the part of Hezbollah would be a response to a total Israeli attack.[16] Hezbollah's role in the campaign is not symbolic, as indicated by the number of casualties it has sustained thus far and by the extent of the destruction of south Lebanon villages. The toll in blood and destruction on southern Lebanon leaves no room for doubt about Hezbollah's commitment to the continuing struggle against Israel until its collapse (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2024).[17]

Lebanon after 2008: Shiite Hegemony in Practice

Since the signing of the Doha Agreement in 2008, the military wing of Hezbollah has enjoyed undisputed military superiority, as reflected in the events in Beirut in May 2008. At the beginning of that month, the Lebanese government decided to do two things: to

dismantle Hezbollah's communications network and to dismiss the security officer of Beirut's airport, who was considered to have close relations with Hezbollah. In a resolute response, Hezbollah, in conjunction with Amal and the militias of the Syrian Social-National Party (PPS) seized control of Beirut and attacked Druze villages on Mt. Lebanon. It was Lebanon's most intense internal clash since the end of the Civil War in Lebanon in 1989. In addition, it was the first time that Hezbollah turned its military forces against other Lebanese communities (Abisaab & Abisaab, 2014, p. 144). Hassan Fadlala effectively described the effects of the Doha Agreement from Hezbollah's perspective. According to Hezbollah, the Doha Agreement served to correct the iniquities of the Taif Agreement of 1989 by laying the real foundations for consociational democracy. Moreover, this agreement anchored the dual reality of the "army of resistance" operating alongside the army of the state (and not in its place). It set the tripartite discourse of "army, nation, and resistance" as a hegemonic discourse in the Lebanese state, with all those who speak out against it as traitors to the state (Fadlala, 2015, pp. 202-203).

Hezbollah's seizure of Beirut in 2008 resulted in the Doha Agreement, which stated that the opposition led by Hezbollah would receive veto power over decisions of the central government. The agreement pertained to the selection of the new president and an amendment to the election law, but the important section dealt with the formation of the government, determining that Hezbollah and its allies would receive slightly more than one-third of the ministers. Hezbollah and its allies were given 11 ministerial posts, the president received three, and the coalition received 16. Accordingly, it was decided that all government decisions needed to receive a two-thirds majority, meaning that Hezbollah and its allies were given the ability to veto any government decision. Since then, precedent has developed giving Hezbollah and its allies what is known as a "blocking third,"

due to the two-thirds majority required to pass a government decision (Hajjar, 2009, pp. 270-271).

Two years earlier, during the Second Lebanon War, it had become evident that Hezbollah was a powerful military force that could withstand an onslaught by the Israeli army and fire missiles deep into northern Israel non-stop for more than five weeks of fighting. Hezbollah's military wing was the only militia that was not disarmed following the Second Civil War in 1989. Hezbollah exploited the struggle against Israel's occupation of part of southern Lebanon to justify this exceptional violation of state sovereignty. The new circumstances that arose following Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from southern Lebanon led Hezbollah to change its justification to include the liberation of the Shebaa Farms (Mt. Dov) and deterrence in the face of "Israeli aggression" (Kaufman, 2002, pp. 576-595). The IDF's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, along with the results of the Second Lebanon War of 2006 and the Doha Agreement of 2008, turned Hezbollah into the undisputed major power in the political arena in Lebanon. From then on, Hezbollah enjoyed power that enabled it to dictate political moves, or at least to torpedo the moves of all its rivals.

Every Lebanese government since 2008 has either been arranged around the principle of the "blocking third" or led by prime ministers backed by Hezbollah. Even during the government of Saad Hariri, Hezbollah controlled the decision-making process. Since 2005, Lebanon has had four parliamentary elections. Because two of these elections (2005 and 2009) resulted in the victory of the anti-Syrian March 14 camp, the Doha Agreement set a precedent by granting this "blocking third" to the pro-Syrian March 8 camp, led by Hezbollah. In the elections of 2005, the March 14 bloc won 67 seats, whereas the March 8 coalition won only 57.

These elections hold great importance due to three factors:

1. Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for the withdrawal of all foreign armies

from Lebanese territory and the dismantling of the militias.

2. The assassination of Rafik Hariri, which occurred later, leading to the Syrian army's withdrawal from Lebanon.

3. The withdrawal of the Syrian army and the return from exile of Christian leader Michel Aoun (Haddad, 2005, p. 306).

After the anti-Syrian March 14 camp led by Saad Hariri won 67 seats, Fouad Siniora formed a government that received the confidence of 92 parliament members, which was the first to include Hezbollah representatives since the signing of the Taif Agreement in 1989 (Haddad, 2005, pp. 327-328). This move did much more than simply create a political or constitutional change. It reflected a tangible concern regarding the effects of the Syrian army's withdrawal from Lebanon and was meant to serve as an internal brake on any decision that could challenge the "consensus" regarding Hezbollah's status as an armed organization. Siniora's government was paralyzed after two Shiite ministers resigned following the Second Lebanon War, and an ongoing strike brought the entire government to a halt until 2008 and the signing of the Doha Agreement. Every government that has been formed in Lebanon since then has been subject to the principle of the blocking third, which has ensured Hezbollah participation in the decision-making process (Berti, 2011, p. 956). The results of the election of 2009 were not significantly different, and the March 14 camp won 71 mandates, as opposed to the 57 mandates won by the March 8 coalition (Harnisch, 2009).

In the elections of 2018, Hezbollah and its allies achieved a sweeping victory, winning 71 mandates in contrast to the 48 won by the March 14 camp. In these elections, Hezbollah managed to bypass the Sunni political arena with the election of some of its Sunni allies. The elections of 2022, which were held after the civic protests that broke out in 2019, the explosion that rocked the Beirut port, and an economic crisis, reduced the strength of the Christian parties, Hezbollah's allies, while at the same time the Shiite parties maintained their representative status among the voters. Although the civic protest strengthened the Phalanges at the expense of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and led to the selection of several symbolic representatives of the civic struggle, it is doubtful whether the results will change the paradigm of the Doha Agreement and facilitate the establishment of a Lebanese government that Hezbollah does not support.

Hezbollah has also proclaimed its strength through an amendment to the Lebanese election law in 2017. This amendment, which reflects the mounting political power of the Shiite community, instituted two innovations: partial relative representation and preferential voting. Preferential voting gives every voter the right to vote for a list of candidates, as well as for a "preferred candidate" in their district (as defined in the new Lebanese election law of 2017).[18] It is well known that two of the Shiite parties were responsible for the amendment regarding relative representation; it was an open secret that they preferred this system, in an effort to turn Lebanon into a single electoral district that reflects their demographic advantage. Similarly, the preferential voting was supposed to enable them to influence the results in favor of the Sunni candidates in the districts in which the Shiites possessed marked electoral strength. Preferential voting also helped to relieve the fears of the Christian parties and to prevent Muslim voters from determining the outcomes of the elections in the districts with a Muslim majority. In this way, the two new components were useful to both the two Shiite parties and their Christian allies.

Michel Aoun's election as president in 2015 in itself was an important reversal achieved by Hezbollah. Sixteen months after the end of the term of President Michel Suleiman, Aoun was elected by a majority of 83 (with 127 present, 36 abstentions, and eight disqualified votes), despite the fervent opposition of the members of the March 14 camp, and after 45 sessions in which the parliament was unable to select

a new president. The stubborn persistence of Hezbollah and its allies ultimately led to Aoun's election, as the Lebanese political system faced two possibilities: Aoun as president or political paralysis (Cambanis, 2016). Hezbollah's parliamentary power lies, therefore, in its ability to paralyze the Lebanese political arena, through both military means and a national discourse that portrays any opposition to Hezbollah as an attempt to undermine the Lebanese national consensus.

The natural gas agreement of 2022, which divides the gas fields located along the border between Israel and Lebanon, was an historical watershed. Although Israel's interest in the agreement reflects its strategic and economic interests, and the agreement gives Israel clear advantages on the strategic level, this does not negate the fact that it largely reflects standards and conditions that were determined by Hezbollah. First, the agreement is based on a total disconnection between the maritime border and the land border, due to Hezbollah's reservations regarding the Blue Line that was drawn by the UN. Second, it was signed without a ceremony and will in no way constitute an initial phase of a political process leading to normalization between the two countries, like the Abraham Accords. Third, the Israelis believe that they have made greater concessions.

An analysis by researchers of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) holds that the agreement constitutes recognition of the fact that Line 23, which Hezbollah will once again control, serves as the border. That being the case, Israel conceded control to a large majority of the 860 square kilometer area that was under dispute (unlike in the past, when it was only willing to concede 55 percent). Still, most of the area that Israel conceded is located in Israel's economic waters, and not in its territorial waters (which stretch to a distance of 12 miles from the coast). Despite Lebanon's commitment to refrain from making any changes from the border to a depth of five kilometers, and its agreement that Israel receive compensation for the production

of gas at the Qana gas field, which crosses Line 23 into Israeli territory, these two reservations were not enough to thwart the agreement. Israel accepted Line 23, as presented by Lebanon (Mizrahi & Sharvit Baruch, 2022, pp. 2-3).

The agreement, therefore, is a clear manifestation of the hegemony of the Shiite community, which has grown considerably since the signing of the Doha Agreement in 2008. To conclude this matter, we can say that all the governments that have come into office in Lebanon since the Doha Agreement up to the present day, were formed with the support of Hezbollah, or at least did not arouse its opposition. In this context, we note the government of Dr. Hassan Diab that was established at the beginning of 2020 following the outbreak of civic protest in Lebanon, in response to the government's intention to impose a tax on the WhatsApp mobile phone app. The major new aspect of his government was the unprecedented representation of women in the Arab World, with six women holding ministerial positions, all without head coverings. It was also the first time a woman was appointed to the position of minister of defense (Zeina Akar). The formation of this government of technocrats, with its distinctly female character, only reflects the pragmatism of Hezbollah, which at this stage is satisfied with control of the governing system, without any coercion of the theoretical or ideological criteria derived from the Islamist doctrine.[19] The political vacuum that has existed in Lebanon since the tenure of President Michel Aoun in 2022 serves only to strengthen the hypothesis regarding Hezbollah's political hegemony in Lebanon; after all, the political system in Lebanon has only two possibilities: either election of Hezbollah's candidate or paralysis of the system itself. The same is true of the Lebanese government. The critical issue from Hezbollah's perspective is to ensure that the institutional political system does not undermine the resistance. Hezbollah does not offer an integrated view regarding the problems of the state, but rather seeks to

maintain the state's existence out of concern for the organization's status in Lebanon.

Hezbollah's political hegemony has never encountered any challenge on the part of the military or security establishment in Lebanon. The Lebanese army is located at the heart of the national consensus and is considered to be the institution that, more than anything, symbolizes Lebanon's sovereignty and statism. For this reason, the Lebanese army has never tried to challenge Hezbollah's political hegemony in Lebanon. The military strategy of the Lebanese army itself, to a certain extent, has facilitated Hezbollah's hegemony in Lebanon. Since its establishment, the Lebanese army has maintained three principles that ensured its existence and provided it with the resilience of a shock absorber vis-à-vis the vicissitudes of the area. First, the Lebanese army condemned itself to a norm that requires espousing a neutral position vis-à-vis internal conflicts and to refrain from any involvement in Lebanese domestic political disagreements, out of conviction that such intervention could result in the dismantling of the army (Freiha, 1980, pp. 118, 124-125). This has been the credo of the Lebanese army since 1952, when the commander of the army, General Fouad Shehab, refused to intervene in a political protest against the president at the time, Bishara al-Khoury, and with greater intensity during the First Civil War of 1958 (Soubrier, 2013, p. 28). This logic later proved itself, as Lebanon's Second Civil War ultimately resulted in the army's disintegration along ethnic and political lines. Second, the Lebanese army condemned itself to a neutral position on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and since then, from the 1948 war up to the present, it has not taken part in the fighting against Israel. Third, the Lebanese army has always acted to maintain ethnic balances on the command level, in addition to presenting a state national military doctrine based on two main principles: defending the homeland against all external aggression and defining Israel as an enemy who is occupying part of the homeland and must be fought (Soubrier, 2013, p. 103).

Since the IDF's withdrawal from the Security Zone, Lebanon has faced four internally destabilizing crises stemming from incidents in which Hezbollah used its military strength both domestically and against external threats. All the crises that emerged against a background of Hezbollah's military activity between 2006 and 2023, did not dissuade the army from maintaining its neutral and passive position. The Second Lebanon War of 2006 was the first test after the IDF's withdrawal, but the aggressive seizure of the city of Beirut in May 2008 was the most important test of relations between the Lebanese army and Hezbollah, although the army did not intervene in the matter at all. The seizure of Beirut marked the first time that the military force of the resistance was directed internally, illustrating more than anything else the depth of the crisis caused by the existence of two military organizations in Lebanese territory. The move showed that the crisis was two dimensional and cannot be summed up in the existence of a military organization challenging the authority of the national army, but rather was presented by a military organization of a monolithic ethnic Shiite nature. The fact that Hezbollah is such an organization arouses antagonism because Lebanon's Sunni neighborhoods were the targets of attack, and because the move was perceived by many as the collective humiliation of the Sunnis of Lebanon (Soubrier, 2013, p. 106). The outbreak of the uprising in Syria presented Lebanon with an extremely significant crisis, and the entry of Hezbollah forces into Syria after 2013 placed civic peace under real threat. However, this measure on the part of Hezbollah also did not receive a response from the Lebanese army (Nerguizian, 2018, p. 2). The fact that Hezbollah joined the war against Israel in October 2023 and launched a limited campaign in the north has also not changed the passive approach of the Lebanese army.

> The Shiite community emerged from the chaos of the Second Civil War as the most powerful community in the Lebanese domestic arena. The militarization and allied relationships that were formed with Syria and Iran positioned the Shiite community at the center of political and military power in the Lebanese arena.

The Shiite community emerged from the chaos of the Second Civil War as the most powerful community in the Lebanese domestic arena. The militarization and allied relationships that were formed with Syria and Iran positioned the Shiite community at the center of political and military power in the Lebanese arena. The Taif Agreement of 1989 prevented the Shiite community from translating its power into institutional politics but excluded it from all the implications of the enterprise of rebuilding the country, leaving the ideological military arm, in particular, as a "legal" violation of state sovereignty. The militarization of the Shiite community, alongside the strategic alliance with strong regional actors, produced the powerful point of departure that allowed Hezbollah, two years after the end of the war, to acquire Lebanese and regional legitimacy for the Taif Agreement. If the Taif Agreement excluded Hezbollah from state authority, the Doha Agreement gave the Shiite community, led by Hezbollah, silencing control of the Lebanese state (Kazi, 2013, pp. 65-66). This agreement would not have been possible without the processes of consolidation of power that the community has experienced since the 1970s.

Conclusion

Since the end of the Civil War in 1989, many Shiites have felt that they were not fairly compensated for their sacrifices over 15 years of ongoing bloodshed. The Taif Agreement was far from satisfying their political demands (Kazi, 2009, pp. 58-59). For five decades, the Shiite public witnessed far-reaching social and political changes that moved it from the margins to the center of the political arena. Some have argued that the core of Lebanese politics is demography, whereas others ascribe the Shiite rise to regional politics or religious revival (Soffer, 1986, pp. 197-205; Nasr, 2011, pp. 133-145).

The rise of the Shiites should be understood as the result of the three processes that have influenced the community since the 1960s that are analyzed above. Demographic growth, militarization, and the establishment of external patronage all reinforced one another in producing the phenomenon of Shiite political activism. This development was accompanied by rising political radicalization. Neither religious tradition nor regional politics in themselves offer a convincing explanation for this combination of empowerment and radicalization. The erosion of the Shiite commitment to the Lebanese state, reflected in militarization, political radicalization, and its allegiance to an external force, cannot be separated from the internal dynamic of exclusion, marginalization, and the state's discriminatory treatment of the Shiites for many years. This process of erosion was worsened by the Shiites increasing awareness that they are the main and the largest ethnic group in the country in terms of demography, military strength, and political mobilization. Therefore, they do not seek to seize power or to dismantle the Lebanese territorial framework, but rather to control access to political power. In addition, they understood that advancing far-reaching demands two decades after the end of the Second Civil War could cause the formation of a coalition that could unify against their community.[20]

Of the political developments that Lebanon has experienced since 2008, the two that stand out most clearly are the Shiite community's status as the Lebanese political center of gravity on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Hezbollah's political hegemony. The existence of these two factors were formally recognized in the precedent established by

the Doha Agreement of 2008. The natural gas agreement of 2022 joins a long list of cases demonstrating Hezbollah's political hegemony: from the Doha Agreement, to the election of President Aoun, to the amendment of the election laws. Every Lebanese government since 2008 has been subject to the dictates of Hezbollah, whose power is fueled by the controlling Shiite influence in the country since the 1980s, which was first expressed in the Doha Agreement.

Hezbollah is in no hurry to seize control of the Lebanese state, but this does not mean that as an Islamist organization it does not wish to rise to power. The fact that Hezbollah has refrained from seizing control of the state until now, stems from three pragmatic and utilitarian considerations. First, seizing control by force is liable to disrupt the fabric of community life and the foundations of orderly and regulated consociational democracy, on which the Lebanese system of government is based, and perhaps even to cause Lebanon to decline into a third civil war, which is a development that Hezbollah does not want. Second, seizing control of the state would require Hezbollah to contend with the challenges of administering a state that is failing both economically and functionally, and this is not consistent with its priorities. Third, seizing control of the state of Lebanon would expose Lebanon to international sanctions, deepening the crisis prevailing in the country.

Hezbollah continues to challenge Lebanese state sovereignty, but at the same time it is making efforts at maintaining the state's existence. That is the contradiction that Hezbollah created in Lebanon: challenging the state on the one hand, while maintaining its existence on the other hand. Hezbollah does not intend to relinquish its military power, and it is not integrating itself into the Lebanese army. In addition, Hezbollah continually develops its political and ideological discourse to justify its continued bearing of arms outside state authority. In this context, integration within

the political system, and defensive discourse, were meant first and foremost to maintain Hezbollah's military existence.

The obsession with weapons to some extent reflects the authentic feelings of oppression and frustration among Shiites; however, it also stems from Hezbollah's ideological doctrine regarding the uncompromising struggle against Israel. The Doha Agreement was meant to create a model for balance between this obsession and self-restraint against seizing control of the state. The constitution of 1926 gave the signal for the birth of the First Lebanese Republic under Christian leadership, referred to by many as the "Republic of Merchants." The National Pact of 1943 did something similar under cover of Maronite-Sunni partnership. The Taif Agreement of 1989 gave expression to the birth of the Third Republic—the Taif Republic—in the shadow of the hegemony of Sunni capital. The Doha Agreement of 2008 gave the signal for the birth of the Fourth Lebanese Republic: the undeclared Shiite republic operating under the hegemony of resistance, which extends a crooked hand to the Lebanese army. The republic that was established following the Doha Agreement differed from its predecessors in that the agreement did not create fundamental change in the structure of the governing system, but rather granted a political movement with a mighty military arm the ability to paralyze the governing systems of the state and expropriate political decisions from the hands of the Lebanese state. The Doha Agreement in practice provides legitimate framing for Hezbollah's political hegemony, without assigning to it the responsibility derived from it. This political reality allows Hezbollah to operate without bearing responsibility toward Lebanese society or facing the state with its international responsibility. Naim Qassem's thesis that Hezbollah's exclusion from the realm of authority of the Lebanese state exempts the latter from international pressures and responsibility before international law, paradoxically reflects the political reality in

Lebanon in the post-Doha Agreement age. The political system based on the Taif Agreement remains in place, with a fundamental and weighty change. This change finds expression not only in the total neutralization of the state's authority over Hezbollah, but also in the appropriation of political decision from the hands of the state.

Epilogue

The dramatic developments that preceded the IDF's ground offensive in Lebanon, particularly the intelligence penetration and the elimination of Hezbollah's military command and political leadership headed by Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, struck Hezbollah a paralyzing blow. In his last speech before his assassination, Nasrallah himself acknowledged that intelligence penetration had struck the "resistance" with the most serious blow since its establishment. There is no doubt that the military setbacks that Hezbollah sustained have undermined the organization's status in Lebanon. In addition, Nasrallah's disappearance from the arena has left a real leadership vacuum with the potential to challenge Hezbollah's hegemony in the medium term. Hezbollah's political rivals can be expected to try to channel these developments to weaken its status within Lebanon, and the resumption of operation of the television station *Al Mustaqbal*, which is associated with Saad Hariri's camp, is evidence of this fact. Despite the above, the Shiite community in Lebanon is still the center of gravity of Lebanese politics, and it remains a fact that all efforts to reach a ceasefire must go through parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri.

The recent developments do not turn back the hands of time, and it is doubtful whether the Shiite community will accept any attempt to strip it of the precedents it has built since the Doha Agreement of 2008. The political constellation derived from the Doha Agreement is not being challenged in a way that could undermine its foundations. First, there is great doubt whether Israel will try to leverage its military power to advance a political process and whether such a move would find willing Lebanese partners. Second, Hezbollah still enjoys the undisputed support of its regional patron (Iran), which acted to preserve its status and to rebuild its capabilities. Third, and perhaps most importantly, there is no apparent rebellion within the Shiite community, and Hezbollah's status within its supportive surroundings has not been undermined. This is because the community's empowerment is inherently linked to the strength of Hezbollah, making it doubtful that this approach will soon change due to the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah.

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Notes

1   Carl Wege holds that "Hezbollah has evolved into a component of the Lebanese state, facilitating both Syrian and Iranian objectives while at the same time maintaining its autonomy."

2   Domino theory is a term coined by US President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1954 in reference to the belief of all US governments since 1947 that the fall of one country to Communism would quickly lead to the fall of its neighbors.

3   In a May 2013 speech, Nasrallah described Syria as the backbone of the resistance. For an excerpt from Nasrallah's speech, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nx8KR02bVpw

4   Norton, 1987, p. 47.

5   One year earlier, in March 1974, he proclaimed the establishment of the *Mahrumin* (Oppressed) movement.

6   In an article published in *Al Hayat* on December 12, 2006, well-known Egyptian intellectual Saad Eddin Ibrahim compares Nasrallah and Nasser.

7   In a speech following the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Nasrallah depicted the war as a divine victory (video on file with the author).

8   For the complete version of *Al Wathiqa Al Siyasiya*: https://www.alahednews.com.lb/ uploaded/wasika/hz-2009.pdf

9   For a full version of the speech of Secretary General Nasrallah on December 27, 2015, see: https://archive.almanar.com.lb/article.php?id=1383677

10   In contrast to Nasrallah's claim, since the outbreak of the 2023-2024 war, a version of the song "ala darab Fatima" was released by Hasin Khir al-Din, which states explicitly that Jihad will continue until worship occurs in Jerusalem following the Mahdi. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6SAJcKf4gE

11   See Hezbollah General Secretary's speech of May 31, 2024, which was delivered as an evening in memory of Shiite scholar Ali al-Kourani. https://mediarelations-lb.org/post.php?id=18137

12   Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff have defined the Second Lebanon War not as a defeat, but rather as a stinging, overwhelming failure.

13   See Nasrallah's speech on the annual day of commemoration for Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, February 1, 2024. https://www.almanar.com.lb/11481109

14   See also the following article that analyzes Nasrallah's views, titled "How Hassan Nasrallah Sees Israel's Unavoidable Fate" (Arabic): https://alkhanadeq.org.lb/post.php?id=805

15   This idea was specifically raised in Nasrallah's speech following the Second Lebanon War, which he portrayed as a divine victory.

16   See Nasrallah's first speech after Hamas' deadly attack, which he delivered on November 3, 2023. For the full transcription: https://www.almanar.com.lb/11185165

17   See: Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2024; Asharq Al-Awsat, 2024.

18   Website of the government of Lebanon regarding the elections: https://tinyurl.com/4dtnk7c5

19   For a report on the formation of the government of Dr. Hassan Diab, see: https://tinyurl.com/yc57dj5d

20   The statement of Nabih Berri was published in the newspaper *Al Hayat* on December 10, 2008.