

# Hezbollah in the Syrian War: Pragmatism in the Party of God

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### The Party of God

For over 30 years, Lebanon's 'Party of God', Hezbollah, has been a beacon of hope or a terrifying threat in its region. Founded in 1982 with Iranian support as an anti-Israeli resistance movement in southern Lebanon, it has transitioned from small local guerilla cells to a formidable military resistance (Shay 2014, 373-378). Since the year 2000, Hezbollah has continued to change and adapt, joining the political realm and parliament of Lebanon. Hezbollah is sometimes referred to as a state within a state, because it prompted an Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, operates hospitals, schools, and even a TV station (Early 2006; Schippers 2006; Abdul-Hussain 2009; Kindt 2009).

After its inception, Hezbollah was quickly branded a terrorist organization by the United States and Israel. Many scholars agreed with this distinction and have identified in Hezbollah nothing more than a proxy agent for Iran (Goldberg 2002; Byman 2003; Kramer 2006; Norton 2007; Deeb 2013; Hoenig 2014; Leroy 2014; Levitt 2015; Akbarzadeh 2016; Friedman 2018). More recently, others have pointed to Hezbollah's sociopolitical role in Lebanon and concluded that it in fact was, or was at the very least increasingly becoming, a grassroots, nationalist Lebanese organization, with an important developmental role for Lebanon's marginalized Shia population (Hamzeh 1993; Harik 2004; Alagha 2006; Aslan 2006; Norton 2007; Wiegand 2009; El Hussein 2010). Others have opted to combine these elements of Hezbollah in various forms and dynamics, emphasizing either their dualistic nature and dissonance, or their interplay and cooperation (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002; Harb and Leenders 2005; El-Hokayem 2007; Saouli 2011; Azani 2013; Knio 2013).

The Arab Spring and the subsequent Syrian Civil War form a key new chapter in Hezbollah's history. The Syrian conflict, as will become clear below, has firmly established Hezbollah as a truly regional player. As the Arab Spring swept the Middle-East, Hezbollah eagerly supported the uprisings. This stopped, however, when the Spring spread to Syria. Syria's Shia regime is an important ally to Iran, Hezbollah's backer, not to mention an important historical ally and supplier for Hezbollah itself (Levitt 2015, 383-386). While Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, initially denied involvement, encouraging those who felt the need to fight to do so on either side, but not to involve Lebanon (Shay 2014, 398), he later openly admitted to it. This move has brought the Shia movement much criticism: why would an Islamic movement aimed at the destruction of Israel expend the lives of its soldiers fighting other Muslims, including other Lebanese (BBC Monitoring 2013)?

Understanding this pivotal actor remains a key endeavor in Middle-Eastern affairs. Hezbollah is situated geographically on the border of Israel and the by now slowly stabilizing nation of Syria, not to

mention the sectarian state of Lebanon, fraught with tensions. Strategically, it is situated in the middle of the complicated web of antagonisms and conflicts that centers on the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As one of the few members of Iran's 'Axis of Resistance', Hezbollah (and Syria) are at the forefront of developments in the region.

Hezbollah's relation to Iran also helps us further understand the complex relationship between sub-state 'proxy' groups and their backers. Its longevity, resilience and adaptability make it an interesting and in some ways exceptional case on this front.

### The ever-changing face of Hezbollah

As with previous historical moments of unexpected change in Hezbollah's behavior, its contradictory actions and statements during the Arab Spring and subsequent Syrian Civil War once again bring the question of this group's true nature and motivations to the fore. While some works analyzing Hezbollah's behavior or rhetoric have emerged (Deeb 2013; Knio 2013; Levitt 2015; Worrall, Mabon & Clubb 2016), their number and extent remains limited. No authors as of yet have engaged in a broad study which analyzes the explanations for Hezbollah's behavior in the Syrian Arab Spring by comparing the party's own statements as well as other potential explanations to the facts on the ground. Furthermore, no analyses specifically aiming to assess the implications of these events for the existing literature have emerged, engaging with the strengths and weaknesses of each school of thought on Hezbollah. It is exactly these two purposes that this thesis will fulfill. First it will analyze Hezbollah's behavior in the Syrian Civil War, weighing the different motivations and explanations that could be behind it. Secondly, it will analyze the state of the literature throughout Hezbollah's existence to establish where it is strongest and which elements require extra attention or recognition in the face of the developments of the Syrian War.

It does this by first giving an overview of Hezbollah's history, emphasizing those elements that are critical for its development as an organization and subsequently also for the academic literature on the Party of God. The same chapter will also recount the events of the Arab Spring in general and the Syrian Civil War in particular, focusing on the roles of the international actors most important to Hezbollah, as well as Hezbollah itself. The third chapter will focus on the state of the literature. It will elaborate on the different schools of thought and individual authors' contributions and weigh them against each other and later developments. The fourth chapter will give an in-depth analysis of Hezbollah's actions during the Syrian Civil War, exploring possible explanations for them as they were given by academics, Hezbollah itself and previously unexplored possibilities, establishing a new interpretation of Hezbollah's priorities in this particular conflict. The fifth chapter ties these findings back in with the established literature in order to establish the strengths and weaknesses of the different schools vis-à-vis Hezbollah's new position in

the Middle-Eastern theater.

A key contribution of this thesis is that it devises a framework by which to categorize and analyze Hezbollah's actions in the Syrian war and in general. This 'macro-meso-micro' framework sees Hezbollah's behavior in relation to the different levels in which it is situated as an actor: a broader and largely ideological macro-level which focuses on Israel, the West and Islam; a meso-level corresponding to the country of Lebanon within which Hezbollah was founded and has always remained situated; and lastly the narrow constituency and organizational micro-level which forms the core of Hezbollah itself and is therefore vital to its survival. Because of Hezbollah's pragmatic tendency to focus on strategic targets related to its own supply lines, rather than targets vital to Lebanon's security or its ideological commitments to fighting Israel and supporting Iran, this thesis finds the micro-level to be the key to Hezbollah's motivations, a position which is reflected best by the 'duality school' of Hezbollah literature, although even this school underappreciates Hezbollah's agency in pursuing its goals, not to mention it often lacks an analytical focus on what exactly these goals are.

As this paper focuses on the state of the literature in relation to developing events, a large part of the source material is academic secondary literature. These sources were primarily read in English and French (a language in which a large body of literature concerning Lebanon exists [Daher 2015, 142]). For current events and developments, English-language news articles were the primary source material. As the author does not read Arabic, statements and transcripts of Hezbollah members and leadership, as well as the party's two manifestoes, were primarily found in English compilations of these (Alagha 2010; Avon, Khatchadourian & Todd 2012; Kızılkaya 2017). The absence of Arabic source material does not constitute a major issue, as Hezbollah is quite concerned with its international image and therefore most speeches delivered by its leadership (particularly Hassan Nasrallah) are translated on English publications of Arabic news outlets (such as Hezbollah's TV station al-Manar and the English website of al-Ahed News). For more general Lebanese political news, the BBC's Monitoring Service provides ample translations.

## Chapter 2: A Story of Change

Hezbollah has elicited multiple and often contradictory interpretations of its actions and developments from academics. This should not come as a surprise, as Hezbollah has gone through many transitions in modus operandi and rhetoric. The Party of God's turbulent surroundings have shifted between peace and violence many times in its relatively short existence and it has – without sacrificing its core ideological principles – adapted to it with a flexibility that is rare in Islamic organizations (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002, 116). Furthermore, the dualistic nature of Hezbollah as an organization lies at the heart of the difficulty scholars have had in categorizing it. As Williams explained in reviewing two vastly opposing books concerning Hezbollah, there are “two faces of Hezbollah, the older, darker face is that of “an organization that has not stopped using violence against innocent civilians ruthlessly throughout the world”, with close ties to the Iranian regime, while the second face is the later development of “a domestic political party that commands the loyalty of most Lebanese Shia, with organizational and media skills that would be the envy of western political parties” (Williams 2015, 168).

This chapter will first describe the key events in Hezbollah's history, focusing on the domestic issues and transformations that shaped it until the Syrian War. The second part is dedicated to the Arab Spring and the changes it brought to the Arab world and eventually Syria. It will give a brief overview of the key events, focusing mainly on those aspects that most closely relate to the eventual war in Syria and of course Hezbollah's part in it.

### Origins: the First Face

Hezbollah finds its origins in the bloody Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990 and the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon from 1982 onwards. The delicate sectarian balance of Lebanon was disturbed by the large influx of Sunni Palestinian refugees that followed the creation of Israel. When the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) established its headquarters in Lebanon in the 1970s, the country furthermore became a hotbed for terrorism and international political conflict. When tensions came to a head with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1975, widespread violence along sectarian lines, as well as multiple Israeli incursions into and occupations of the south of Lebanon disproportionately affected the Shia population concentrated there (Norton 2007, 16-18).

The Islamic conservatives that would form Hezbollah in 1982 were angered by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in that year, which continued even after the removal of the PLO, and encouraged by the revolutionary success of the Shia Islamic regime in Iran in 1979 (Saouli 2011, 932). The war had created many sectarian groupings and militias, which often fought one another and broke apart or (re)united. Although the encouragement and later financial and military aid to Hezbollah from Iran is undisputed,

different roles have been ascribed to the Iranians as to the founding of Hezbollah itself. Some have claimed that Iranian army officials personally merged the several militias that would form Hezbollah in 1982 and provided it with training (Shay 2014, 375). Certainly, Hezbollah's 1985 first official manifesto explicitly mentions admiration for Iran, as well as pledging Hezbollah to follow Iran's political philosophy: the 'leadership of the jurispudent' (*vilayat-e faqih* in Farsi or *wilayat al-faqih* in Arabic). The jurispudent here referring to Ayatollah Khomeini (Alagha 2010, 39).

Bombings, terrorist attacks and kidnappings were Hezbollah's bread and butter in this period, among more 'conventional' tactics such as guerilla warfare; it is this period's extreme violence that created the violent 'face' of Hezbollah. Hezbollah fought a wide array of enemies such as Israel and the USA, but also other Lebanese factions such as the Maronite Kataeb Party and Shia AMAL. The most striking of its terrorist activities is perhaps the 1983 bombing of a US/French military barracks in Beirut which killed 240 marines. This was the deadliest individual attack on the United States between World War Two and 9/11, prompting the American withdrawal from Lebanon (El Hussein 2010, 803).

### Changes: the Second Face

Hezbollah's move towards domestic politics was approved by Iran. This key junction came with the end of the Lebanese Civil War at the close of the 1980s. In 1992, three years after the signing of the Taif Peace, the first elections since 1975 were organized. After much internal debate and disagreement, Hezbollah referred the question of whether it should participate or continue to commit itself to Islamic jihad and the delegitimization of the Lebanese state to the new 'leader jurispudent', by now Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran, who decided the former (Norton 2007, 100).

As the more pacified sociopolitical 'face' of Hezbollah started to emerge, it participated in the Lebanese elections, stopped violence against domestic groupings and de-radicalized its rhetoric to an extent. For example, 'revolution' was exchanged for 'resistance' in its political slogans (Saouli 2011, 934). Importantly, it started providing a plethora of social services which the Lebanese state was unable to provide cheaply or even at all. These include organizations that aid families of victims and the wounded of its conflicts, which run hospitals, schools and financial services. Other services include micro-credit, construction, women's organizations, media outlets (including a TV station since 1991 [Harb 2016, 11]), youth organizations, sports associations, research facilities and mosques (Harb and Leenders 2005, 187-188).

As Hezbollah fulfills all of these state functions, some scholars see it as controlling significant parts of the country, mainly overlapping with Shia majority areas, Shiites remaining Hezbollah's key

constituency (Haddad 2006, 28-29)<sup>1</sup>. However, in line with its increased participation in the Lebanese political system and society, Hezbollah has stated that it does not intend to be an alternative to the state, wanting to work within its confines and taking care not to undermine it (Alagha 2006, 169).

### Foreign wars: a Two-Faced Party

When Israel finally withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah had to adapt its rhetoric in order to be able to continue the resistance against Israel while defining it in terms of Lebanese national defense, rather than greater Islamic resistance against Western imperialism. Many international and domestic opponents of the Party of God demanded that it lay down its arms as it was no longer defending Lebanon. The 2004 United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1559 called for the disbanding of all Lebanese armed militias, of which Hezbollah was the only one remaining (Alagha 2006, 292). Hezbollah argued that the war with Israel was far from finished as Israel still controlled the Shebaa Farms, located in the border area between the two nations and claimed by Lebanon. Other peripheral reasons were that the locations of many Israeli landmines in southern Lebanon were never disclosed, nor were Lebanese prisoners of war released after the conflict (El Hussein 2010, 808). These arguments clearly focus on Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity, rather than on the Islamic virtue of resisting Israel, allowing Hezbollah to retain its domestic legitimacy *and* continue its fight against Lebanon's southern neighbor.

It would be over the Shebaa Farms that another brief war with Israel would erupt in 2006. In that year, two Israeli servicemen were kidnapped by Hezbollah from the Shebaa area. This was not an uncommon occurrence in the continued border clashes between the two forces, but in this instance, Israel responded with an invasion of Lebanon, coming as far as the outskirts of Beirut before being bogged down in guerrilla warfare with Hezbollah and eventually being forced to retreat without any major strategic victory. On the contrary, Hezbollah, despite suffering heavy casualties and many millions of dollars in damage to infrastructure, had never been more popular among the Lebanese public. "While the war raged 87 per cent of Lebanese supported Hezbollah's military response to the Israeli attacks—notably including 89 per cent of Sunnis and 80 per cent of Christians" (El Hussein 2010, 808).

In its new arena of domestic politics, these years were similarly turbulent, but not altogether unsuccessful, for Hezbollah, highlighting the tensions between its two faces. Syria, ally of Iran and Hezbollah and military presence in Lebanon since the civil war, had been coming under increasing criticism in Lebanon in 2005. When Rafiq al-Hariri, the Sunni leader of the anti-Syrian (and therefore anti-Hezbollah) bloc in Lebanon, was killed by a car bomb in February 2005, mass protests against the Syrian

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<sup>1</sup> Despite this fact, the services Hezbollah provides are available to all those that want them regardless of sect.



presence erupted, known as the Cedar Revolution. Syria's military left the country in April that same year. Despite this defeat, Hezbollah and its pro-Syrian 'March 8 Alliance' (opposed by the 'March 14 Alliance') managed to stay politically relevant (Harris 2007, 43). In fact, right after the May 2005 elections, the Christian 'Free Patriotic Movement' (FPM) agreed to a political alliance with Hezbollah, despite initially being part of the anti-Syrian bloc. Christian support for the Shia parties might partially be explained by shared fears for the large Sunni population (Williams 2015, 169-170).

In 2009, just in time for the new elections, a second manifesto was published, this time noticeably less Islamic and more Lebanon-focused in its rhetoric and aims (Alagha 2010, 115-138). Despite this apparently reconciliatory attitude, however, political crises and conflicts have continued to pester the Lebanese political arena to this day.

### Arab Spring and Syrian War

The Arab Spring and the subsequent Syrian War would prove a new chapter in Hezbollah's complex history, at the same time positioning it as a truly regional actor and revealing much about its true motivations both to the academic and the Arab world. The Spring was a wave of protests which started with the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor and quickly spread to nearly every Arab country in late 2010 and early 2011. After only a few weeks, in January, 2011, the 24-year-old Tunisian regime came to an end as its dictator fled the country (Alianak 2014, 23-27).

By that time, unrest was already beginning to spread to the rest of the Arab world, starting the same way: as a youth protest movement, but producing wildly different results. In Syria, protests started off much the same. In January 2011, some minor protests erupted, but they were quickly put down (Gelvin 2012, 102). By March, however, an example of the regime's brutality (in this case the imprisonment and torture of ten children under the age of fifteen, as well as firing at their protesting families) led to another wave of protests in provincial cities. This time, they did not go away so easily (*Ibid.*, 103-104).

This situation quickly devolved into civil war and it looked as though Assad was on the fringe of defeat by fall 2012. He had lost control in nearly all areas except for several major cities. However, from 2013 until 2015, the government's troops slowly recaptured town after town, taking advantage of continuous infighting between different opposition groups (Balanche 2016, 133-134). By 2018, Assad has reclaimed nearly all of the country (Loveluck & Al Alwani 2018).

Of the many foreign nations involved in the conflict, those in the pro-opposition camp have generally taken a more cautious and indirect course than those supporting Assad's regime. Both the level and nature of Western support for the opposition is key to Hezbollah's claims of fighting on the side of the oppressed, rather than the oppressors, as will become clear below. The US and its allies considered

Assad to be an oppressive dictator, and were also eager to see this key ally of Iran overthrown for geopolitical reasons. The US has supported the fight against ISIS, particularly through the Kurdish forces that have come to control the north of Syria. As for opposing Assad, however, the US' support has remained mainly rhetorical. Despite crossing a 'red line' drawn by president Obama, for example, Assad's repeated use of chemical weapons did not elicit any military repercussions (Gelvin 2012, 115). Since taking office, president Trump, in cooperation with Great Britain and France in one occasion, did engage in missile strikes twice in response to another instance of chemical weapons use. Yet, these were mainly symbolic and of little strategic importance (BBC 2018).

Saudi Arabia and Israel have also been relatively docile, as these countries appear to prefer an inimical dictator that they know to the chaos that might succeed him (Gelvin 2012, 116). Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia has reportedly supplied weapons and funds to several rebel groups in the conflict (Bassam and Perry 2015). Israel, for its part, has remained an official stance of neutrality towards the conflict, but has expressed a refusal to allow an Iranian or Hezbollah presence in the Israeli-Syrian border area. To this effect, it has reportedly launched multiple missile strikes and even some airstrikes on Iranian and/or Syrian weapons shipments to Hezbollah, as well as certain bases, in which dozens of Iranian soldiers were reportedly killed (Ben-Ozer and Okbi/Maariv 2018).

The pro-Assad camp, on the other hand, has been far more openly and directly involved, defending what they see as the legitimate government against the 'terrorist' opposition. Fearing that their favorable relationship with Syria would change if Assad fell, Iranian and Russian involvement has included weapons sales, military advisors and ground forces, and air support (Souleimanov and Dzutsati 2018, 42-44; Mohns and Bank 2012, 29).

Also in this group is Hezbollah, which has defended its ally in the 'axis of resistance' openly since 2013. Hezbollah initially supported the Arab Spring uprisings with Nasrallah appeared on television stating "Your spring has just started. Nothing will stop it ... You shall triumph and we shall triumph God willing" (Al Manar 2011). Once the protests and war in Syria broke out, however, Nasrallah adopted the narrative of the Syrian regime, calling for an end to protest and later denouncing the rebels as terrorists (Knio 2013, 856).

Hezbollah officially announced its participation in the Syrian war on May 25, 2013. Nasrallah claimed to be responding to requests from Lebanese citizens that lived on the Syrian side of the border which were under attack from opposition militias. The largest Hezbollah operation in the war was that of the town of Qusayr in June 2013. This town's recapture from anti-Assad rebels was allegedly coordinated and led by Hezbollah in cooperation with the IRGC (Kızılkaya 2017, 213). Since then, the Party has claimed

to be fighting the radical Islamists (which they refer to as *takfiri*), defending the Lebanese border to prevent the conflict from spilling over into Lebanon, as well as defending religious sites for Shia, such as the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque near Damascus. In 2014, the US claimed to have evidence of Hezbollah fighters in Daraa, Aleppo, Idlib and Damascus (International Crisis Group 2014, 2). However, Hezbollah's participation does not appear to have involved the large number of troops employed at Qusayr, nor has the Party of God coordinated and led a campaign as it did then.

Some authors have pointed out that Hezbollah appeared to be fighting mainly in areas that are vital to its communication and supply lines from Syria – such as border areas like Qusayr, or the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque, which is close to Damascus airport – rather than in areas where *takfiri* activity is greatest (Tokmajyan 2014, 110). Hezbollah's participation in Syria also led to bombings in Shiite neighborhoods, as well as some Iranian targets, in Lebanon. In Bekaa Valley, a Hezbollah stronghold near the Syrian border, there have even been rocket strikes. This was seen, however, as evidence that the intervention was necessary. Hezbollah's narrative is that its fight against *takfiri* groups in Syria actually prevented worse bloodshed. The attacks that did happen only pointed to this fact. Additionally, these attacks largely subsided after 2014 due to more efficient cooperation between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces (International Crisis Group 2014, 8; 10).

## Chapter 3: Theories

Having established the historical backgrounds against and through which Hezbollah emerged and transformed, the paper will continue by exploring the theories surrounding Hezbollah in the academic world. As shall become clear, the events described in the previous chapter often had and continue to have a distinct effect on the literature. The major shifts in Hezbollah's behavior and position as an actor have caused equally significant ruptures in the literature, that are here identified as 'schools', although these do not necessarily self-identify as such.

The (chronologically) first major undeclared 'school' of Hezbollah scholarship sees Hezbollah as a relatively uncomplicated terrorist organization which operates as a functional extension of the Iranian ayatollah. The later process of de-radicalization and integration into the Lebanese sociopolitical arena ('Lebanonization') spawned the second 'school', which views Hezbollah as a genuinely Lebanese expression of nationalism and Shia Islamic ideology. The last grouping considers both of these interpretations flawed in their denial of each other. This group of scholars emphasizes Hezbollah's dualistic nature and sees the previous schools as two sides within the same seemingly contradictory organization. These unofficial 'schools' are referred to in this thesis as the 'proxy/terrorism school', the 'Lebanonization school' and the 'duality school', respectively.

### The 'proxy/terrorism school'

The first political and academic categorization of Hezbollah was that of a terrorist group, very often assumed to be a foreign policy tool of Iran. Israel and the United States were the first nations to renounce Hezbollah as a terrorist group, with some US officials calling it the 'A-team of terrorism', while other organizations such as Al Qaeda belonged to the 'B-team' (El Hussein 2010, 803). Many of the US' allies followed suit after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 (Harb and Leenders 2005, 175). More recently, due to Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict as well as alleged involvement in a bombing of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria, the Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League (Wedeman 2017), as well as the European Union have all officially listed Hezbollah as a terrorist organization (Marcus 2013).

Many scholars have joined in this conviction. Examples are Goldberg (2002) and Levitt (2015), both of whom consider Hezbollah to be an Iranian proxy. Kramer (2006, 24) explains that "One reason Hezbollah remains armed is to deter Israel and the United States, not from attacking Lebanon, but from striking Iran over its nuclear ambitions." Leroy gives a typical assessment when he says "Hezbollah has probably become the most powerful non-state military organization in the world thanks to Iranian support, but that status has cost it a near-total obedience in return" (Leroy 2014, 109; my translation). Smyth goes so far as to say that the "Iranian proxy organizations [including Hezbollah] should be

recognized as subnetworks of a broader [Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps] IRGC-Qods Force and part and parcel of a larger regional strategy” and his recommendation is that any Iran proxy’s designation as a terrorist organization should have similar consequences for the others (Smyth 2015, 56). A more moderate viewpoint is expressed by Akbarzadeh when he considers Hezbollah to be outside of Iran’s direct control, especially in recent years. Nonetheless, Iran uses Hezbollah, or at least the threat of it, as a foreign policy tool in order to put pressure on Israel: if Israel were to attack Iran, Hezbollah would lay waste to Tel Aviv (Akbarzadeh 2016, 133). He assesses the current relationship to be borne of strategic (as opposed to ideological) considerations: “Iran’s ideological worldview may have been the instigating factor for the alliance with Hizbullah, however, in the course of three decades Iran’s threat assessment has made that alliance a key strategic asset.” (*Ibid.*, 140)

This school has lost some of its accuracy with the end of the Lebanese civil war and Hezbollah’s changes with it. It was certainly more relevant when it first emerged in the era of the ‘first face’ of Hezbollah and it is reflected in policy by the many designations of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. The school’s weaknesses have been shown by the passage of time and the emergence of Hezbollah’s new face with it. By the year 2006, Hezbollah was so much more than a ‘simple’ terrorist organization. In fact, it is a disputed fact if it still engaged in terrorist activities at all. Whether or not it is an Iran proxy is a more complicated question, which is treated further in the other schools.

### The ‘Lebanonization school’

The politicization and (domestic) pacification of Hezbollah after the Civil War amount to what some scholars call the ‘Lebanonization’ of the movement. Due to Hezbollah’s apparent ‘new face’, many scholars have deemed the designation as an Iran proxy or terrorist organization no longer applicable. According to them, it has become a genuine expression of Lebanese nationalism. The 2009 manifesto’s absence of a broader Islamist vision is seen as a symptom of this phenomenon. These authors also point to the absence of terrorist attacks committed by Hezbollah since the 1990s, although this does not go undisputed (Harb and Leenders 2005, 178).

This ‘school’ agrees with the first that Lebanonization has not meant a renunciation of military means, although its solutions to this fact differ vastly with those of the ‘proxy/terrorism school’. As El Hussein explains, Hezbollah is peaceful towards domestic enemies, but violent towards Israel and “this duality in Hezbollah’s concept of resistance can be explained if we understand the organization as a *nationalist* entity that defines itself primarily *within the Lebanese polity*” (El Hussein 2010, 804; emphasis added). El Hussein argues that Western threats and demands for demilitarization, as well as the general de-legitimization of Hezbollah as a representative of Lebanese Shiites, only serve to drive the party further

into the Iranian/Syrian camp. If the region is stable and its constituency no longer feels vulnerable, however, the legitimacy behind Hezbollah's militancy would disappear (*Ibid.* 2010, 812).

Writing in 2006, Aslan claims that "over the past years, Hezbollah has achieved enormous political success by transforming itself from an agent of foreign regimes to an agent of domestic reform" (Aslan 2006, 31). Aslan explains that "one need look no further than the internal dynamics of Lebanon to understand why Hezbollah would so recklessly cross the border and attack Israeli troops [in 2006]. ... The sustained [Israeli] bombing ... wiped away the collected memory of the Lebanese people about who started this mess in the first place and once again focused the rage of the region on an aggressive Israel" (Aslan 2006, 32). The idea that Hezbollah's aggression against Israel primarily comes from a need for legitimacy and similar views are found in the works of, for example, Alagha (2006), Harik (2004) and Norton (2007).

This school is more timely and nuanced than the previous school, but was itself somewhat weakened as developments continued. The Hezbollah's more peaceful face that emerged post-civil war merited a more nuanced view of the party than was generally offered in the first school (which was more or less the only view in Western academia until the turn of the millennium or so) and the 'Lebanonization school' provides a much needed different perspective. However, this school's faults are similar to those of the first: focusing too much on one aspect or face of Hezbollah's identity. Additionally, expectations that the disarmament of Hezbollah was nigh were proven to be incorrect. Hezbollah found new reasons to continue its militancy and has proven violent both domestically and externally. Of course, a scholar such as El Hussein might counter that this is only due to the continued militancy Hezbollah was exposed to from the United States and, particularly, Israel – creating a situation which appears similar to the typical security dilemma.

### The 'duality school'

The last group of scholarly interpretations of Hezbollah believes its duality to be an inherent part of its identity, rather than an intermediate stage in its transition. Rather than focusing on either of the two faces of Hezbollah and arguing that it is the only, or at the very least most important one, as the other schools do, this school considers both to be central and in fact highly related to one another. It does not see the process of 'Lebanonization' as a (potentially) permanent turn away from the party's terrorist and Iranian roots, as the previous 'school' does, nor does it consider Hezbollah to have been and continue to be the terrorist extension of Iran in Lebanon, as the first does. Despite these scholars' agreement on this fact, their interpretations of this duality vary significantly.

Saouli argues that Hezbollah's Janus-face is simply a necessary adaptation to be able to continue

its struggle against Israel – it's first and foremost purpose. When the civil war ended in 1989, Hezbollah needed to consolidate itself within the domestic political arena as well as its own Shia constituency in order to be able to continue to face Israel externally. This explains the 'state-within-a-state' services Hezbollah provides, as well as its political normalization and incremental rapprochement with past opponents. Considering Hezbollah's alliance with the FPM, followed by its immense popularity due to the 2006 Israeli invasion, it can be argued that this tactic is very successful (Saouli 2011, 932-933). Saouli does warn that the 2008 occupation of Beirut shows that, when faced with an existential domestic threat, Hezbollah will prioritize its militancy towards Israel over its domestic pacifism, indicating which aim is superior (2011, 939).

Harb and Leenders agree with this last assessment and consider Hezbollah's domestic pacifism to be a sort of a recruitment tool in the fight against the Israelis through the creation of a 'society of resistance'. They believe that Hezbollah is not simply aiding poor and deprived citizens in Lebanon in order to trick or cajole them into recruitment. Rather, the ideology and rhetoric of Hezbollah of oppressed Shia which have a religious duty to resist their oppression permeates and saturates the schools, mosques, news broadcasts, billboards and even employees – often women – operated by their organizations. Thus entering the domestic life of its constituency, Hezbollah creates a 'society of resistance', which provides willing supporters and recruits (Harb and Leenders 2005, 188-190). As Saad-Ghorayeb (2002, 116) points out "A close inspection of the party's internal dynamics reveals that it is virtually impossible to extricate the military from the political or vice versa." According to this group of scholars, the 'Lebanonization' tactic of normalizing relations is unlikely to end Hezbollah's military activities. On the other hand, a simple 'War on Terror' approach to Hezbollah "will be a much more difficult endeavor than the simple liquidation of a group of individual militants largely dissociated from their social environment" (Harb and Leenders 2005, 193). The only solution envisioned is a transformation of the Shia constituency that makes up the 'society of resistance', which can only occur if a viable alternative is offered.

Another perspective is offered by Knio, who believes Hezbollah is stuck in its current political ambiguity due to the interactions of structure and agency that it has itself created. He acknowledges the al-merits of the other 'third school' approaches, but considers them unable to explain Hezbollah's continued dependency on Syria and Iran, which, according to him, is evident from its actions in the Arab Spring. He proposes to analyze Hezbollah with a 'morphogenetic' approach, first devised by Margaret Archer, which assesses the interplay of structure and agency over time, rather than at any one moment, such as Harb and Leenders have attempted (Knio 2013, 862-863). After engaging in a historical analysis, Knio concludes that through its initial alliance with Iran, necessary to continue its civil war efforts,

Hezbollah also became aligned with Syria for practical reasons. Specific domestic circumstances as well as ideological choices by Hezbollah leadership and their opponents after the end of the civil war drove Hezbollah's relationship with Syria to a necessary one, which would eventually come to define Hezbollah's position within the country's political landscape in the 2005 crisis. In other words, the alliance with Syria was initially of secondary importance, but has now unintentionally become a key feature of Hezbollah's identity. Hezbollah's leadership "only reproduces the status quo and can no longer escape from the once evolved Iranian and Syrian patronage umbrella in which it is currently embedded" (Knio 2013, 869), forcing it to support Syria and Iran's position in the Arab Spring despite it being counter to its declared ideals (*Ibid.*, 869-870).

This school is an interesting synthesis of the first two, appearing to lean towards a more nuanced and complete version of the first school's explanation, but it is somewhat mute on the issue of Iran's role. Because of this balance, this school is the most convincing approach to Hezbollah pre-Arab Spring, despite its faults. Scholars such as Saouli, Harb and Leenders, and Saad-Ghorayeb emphasize the primacy of Hezbollah's militancy and resistance, as opposed to its political and social roles which merely serve to enable and/or strengthen the former. This is in many ways similar to the first school (although the term 'terrorist' is exchanged for terms such as 'resistance' or 'militancy'). Unlike the first school, however, these scholars tend not to engage with the question who orchestrates or benefits from this resistance – Iran or the Lebanese people. Knio is a notable exception to this pattern, as this criticism is the base of his research. His theory offers a very plausible explanation as to why Hezbollah at times appears to act in service of Syria and, by extension, Iran, counter to its own declared and apparent interests.



## Chapter 4: The Party and the War

Referring to the previous discussion of the events of the Syrian War and Hezbollah's involvement in it, this chapter continues by assessing potential explanations for Hezbollah's behavior. Many interpretations have been put forward, both by Hezbollah itself and by scholars. This chapter makes use of Hezbollah's own statements, academic commentaries on Hezbollah's behavior during the war, which includes some of the works cited in the previous chapter, as well as older assessments of the Party's ideological and strategic motivations which can be applied to current events. These explanations are organized into three categories based on their internal logics. However, they are not mutually exclusive, but in fact highly interrelated. Often they build on one another, meaning that these categories should not be seen as closed lines of argument. The first category is based on ideological convictions which center on religious solidarity against threats that emanate from the conflict, particularly that of Israel. The second logic is centered on Hezbollah's defense of the nation of Lebanon in its entirety and the historical and current role of the Assad regime in that process. Lastly, the third category involves both pragmatic considerations such as the defense and supply of Hezbollah itself, as well as the threat the opposition to Assad poses to the strength and even continued existence of the Resistance Axis. The chapter concludes by proposing a framework of analysis of Hezbollah's motivations which focuses on the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels at which Hezbollah is situated as an actor, which correspond to the three categories, respectively.

These categories, devised for this essay, do not neatly correspond with the schools of the previous chapter, but are useful in understanding the different kinds of motivations that Hezbollah potentially has, or uses rhetorically. The categories and the schools of thought naturally cannot overlap completely, because the former deal exclusively with motivations, while the discussions in the latter also concern the *nature* of the Party of God. The question of whether Hezbollah is a terrorist organization or a legitimate sociopolitical actor, for example, concerns Hezbollah's nature, but not its motivations. Nor do the schools' interpretations of Hezbollah's motivations necessarily correspond to one these categories. The 'proxy/terrorism school' might appear to focus primarily on the third category, but the ideological explanations of the first category also often appear in explaining Hezbollah's devotion to Iran and/or Islam. On the other hand, the 'Lebanonization school' appears to almost exclusively focus on the second category, pertaining to Lebanon. However, Hezbollah's devotion to Lebanon is to an extent ideological, nor can the defense of Lebanon be secured without heeding the pragmatic considerations of the third category, as will become clear below. Lastly, the 'duality school' would determine the third category to be key, while the second category is 'employed' to provide stability and support for that cause.

This chapter will argue that the third category, i.e. the micro-level concerns, was most important

to Hezbollah's decision-making process, followed by the second, meso-level, and lastly the first, macro-level. While the ideological and religious arguments were most frequently used by Hezbollah itself to explain its entry into the war, the incongruences between this narrative and the facts on the grounds, as well as the inconsistency with which it was applied depending on changing circumstances, show that it was mainly a rhetorical tool. The importance of Lebanon does appear to feature in the Party of God's decision-making, but it remained secondary when compared to the continued existence of Hezbollah itself and the important role the strength of the Resistance Axis plays within that. The areas of Hezbollah's engagement and their strategic importance to its supply lines, as well as the timing of Hezbollah's wholehearted entry into the war reveal that these pragmatic considerations were key to its behavior.

### Ideology

The first category of explanations is named 'ideology' here for lack of a better name, as they are all to do with the core (declared) beliefs of Hezbollah. Therefore, many of the arguments mentioned here are based directly on statements and speeches by Hezbollah leaders such as Hassan Nasrallah, as well as lower-ranking officials and military personnel, primarily those which took part in the extensively propagated battle for Qusayr. The explanations in this category are often inconsistent with facts on the ground, giving the impression that its use was mainly rhetorical and that it was not a central feature in the minds of the Hezbollah leadership.

A potential motivation for Hezbollah is the pan-Arabic function it has historically aimed to fulfill in part through its alliance with Syria's Assad regime. Aside from seeking to champion the pan-Islamism of Khomeini's revolution – which has in modern times devolved into sectarianism due to conflict with Saudi Arabia (Turner 2012, 129)– Hezbollah has aimed to be a champion of pan-Arabism, an attraction that Iran, as a non-Arab nation, cannot have. Tying itself to Syria's regime has in the past served as Hezbollah's declaration of Arab solidarity (Alagha 2006, 219). However, whether this alliance still fulfills this function is questionable, as the Party of God is now fighting Arabs in the name of Assad. This contradiction has been pointed out by critics as they questioned the sudden switch from advocating the Arab Spring revolutions to supporting the Assad regime. One might even question the initial commitment Hezbollah showed to the Arab Spring uprisings. It could be seen as genuine support for the cause of the Arab public. However, it should also be noted that any overturn of the generally pro-Saudi/Western status quo in the Middle-East had the potential to be beneficial to Hezbollah and the Resistance Axis.

The ideological connections which Hezbollah has to Iran, in particular the adherence to the principle of the leader-jurisprudent, can also be argued to have played a part in its decision to defend staunch Iran-ally Syria. The practical aspects to this connection will be touched upon in the third

subsection of this chapter. From an ideological perspective, as mentioned above, both Hezbollah's manifestos explicitly point to Iran's special role in "thwart[ing] the Zionist-American scheme" (Alagha 2010, 131), as well as declaring adherence to the "rules and religious edicts made by the jurist, the authority of emulation" (*Ibid.*, 40), by which Khomeini and his successor Khamenei are intended. Sullivan points out that, aside from practical and strategic considerations, "[m]aintaining the Axis of Resistance is also a matter of great ideological importance for Iran and its commitment to exporting its Islamic revolutionary principles" (Sullivan 2014, 9). Hezbollah's commitment to the leadership of Iran and specifically the Supreme Leader (Khamenei) therefore instill the defense of Assad's regime with an ideological value, as it is a key aspect of the Axis of Resistance. Significantly, although an official 'fatwa' (ruling on religious law) declaring a so called 'defensive jihad' against the insurgents in Syria has not been issued by Khamenei (Kızılkaya 2017, 220), Nasrallah publicly announced and significantly increased Hezbollah's involvement in the war days after a meeting where Khamenei reportedly asked him to do so explicitly (Sullivan 2014, 14). If this was truly one of the major reasons to engage in the conflict, the image of Hezbollah as an Iran proxy, be it ideologically motivated or otherwise, might not be so outdated yet.

Hezbollah's role as a protector of Shia in Syria can also be used as an argument. Hezbollah enjoys the support of many Muslims and Christians in the Arab world due to its successes against Israel and its pan-Islamic message. However, it should be borne in mind that it finds its origin as a Shia militia and most of its direct support base, the 'Society of Resistance', consists of Lebanese Shia Muslims. Not unlike Iran, Hezbollah is sometimes tempted to ignore its essentially pan-Islamic message in favor of pro-Shia rhetoric when faced with Sunni opponents. Its initial rhetoric in the war reflects this tendency. The protection of the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine near Damascus, of great religious importance to Lebanese Shia, as well as other, minor shrines in Syria were a frequently used justification for Hezbollah's presence in the war (Kızılkaya 2017, 216). Furthermore, the apocalyptic image of an extremist and Sunni 'takfiri' regime in Syria post-Assad was used to garner support for Hezbollah's involvement. The initial successes and brutal violence of al-Nusra and ISIS in Syria served as the 'preview' of this apocalyptic image (Rida 2013).

The facts on the ground, however, appear to undermine this argument, not to mention that it contributes to exactly the sectarian divisions and tensions that Hezbollah attempts to counter. As the war dragged on, it became clearer and clearer that Hezbollah was often operating far from important Shia shrines. Additionally, its presence in the regions with the most *takfiri* activity (namely the Northwest and Northeast of Syria) was minor compared to areas nearer to Lebanon's borders which contained comparatively moderate resistance groups (*Ibid.*, 5-6). Another weakness of this argument is that Hezbollah's message is supposedly pan-Islamic. Fighting Sunni Muslims in Syria and defending it along

sectarian lines has damaged Hezbollah's standing with Sunnis. Additionally, it contributes to the increasing sectarian tensions amongst Muslims, which Hezbollah has always condemned as part of the Israeli-American conspiracy in the Middle-East (Smyth 2015, 7; Sullivan 2014, 16). Considering the significant issues that arise as a result of this argumentation, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that Nasrallah openly admitted to defending the continued existence of Assad's regime, as opposed to exclusively Shia interests, after the battle of Qusayr in 2013 (Sullivan 2014, 16).

It might seem unrelated to someone unfamiliar with Hezbollah's ideology and rhetoric, but the defense of Palestine is used as an argument for entering into the Syrian conflict, although the relevance of this might be questioned. Both the more radical 1985 Open Letter and the 'moderate' 2009 manifesto identify Israel (referred to as the 'Zionist entity' or 'cancerous gland') as nothing but a tool in the US' plan to dominate and exploit the Middle-East through creating divisions and conflict (Alagha 2010, 120). Fighting Israel is always central to Hezbollah's actions, rhetoric and its legitimacy in the eyes of the Arab world. Unsurprisingly then, Palestine featured heavily in statements made by Party officials. Aside from the direct, minor involvements of the Israeli Defense Forces in Syria, often directly aimed at Hezbollah, any assault on Syria, or any member of the Resistance Axis for that matter, is explained as an indirect assault on the Palestinian cause. "If Syria falls in the hands of the Takfiris and the US, the resistance will be trapped and "Israel" will enter Lebanon. If Syria falls, the Palestinian cause will be lost", Nasrallah stated (Rida 2013). The chaos that would emerge from a *takfiri* victory in Syria, would make Muslims both less occupied with and less able to participate in the struggle for Palestine, leading to the defeat of its cause. This is why Hezbollah recognizes the signs of an American ploy in the resistance to Assad. To subtly imply their relation, announcements relating to the war in Syria would often be precluded by statements on Palestine to. Similarly, key speeches on Syria were often held on days that are symbolically significant to the struggle against Israel or the plight of the Palestinians (Kızılkaya 2017, 215). Less subtly, Nasrallah has stated that "Syria's friends in the region and the world will not let it fall in the hands of America, Israel, and Takfiri groups" (Moughnieh 2013). However, Hezbollah has not been in major engagements with Israel since 2006 and the Resistance Axis' relationship with Hamas was significantly damaged by its refusal to support Assad's war effort (Sullivan 2014, 25). Furthermore, the engagement of Hezbollah fighters in Syria weakens its line of defense against Israel in the short term, while the significant casualties suffered by Hezbollah in Syria are sapping resources and veterans experienced with urban warfare in the 2006 war, weakening the Party of God in the longer term (*Ibid.*, 26).

## Nationalism

This category of explanations appears to be of greater importance to Hezbollah than the previous one, although there are again considerable inconsistencies casting doubt on its cogency. It should be mentioned that the defense of Lebanon is not a wholly non-ideological affair for Hezbollah and the arguments used in this category are in many ways similar to the previous ones, also suffering from similar inconsistencies.

A key early element to this line of argument was the defense of Lebanese (Shia) which live directly across the border in Syria. These 30,000 or so Shia that live in the border region of Syria and Lebanon consider themselves Lebanese. According to Hezbollah, they requested protection from the rebel groups in their region, to which Hezbollah supplied, trained and reinforced them in the early stages of the war. At this time, it denied being involved at all in official statements, only admitting to individual fighters volunteering to aiding causes such as these villagers in Syria. This involvement could therefore be seen as a form of extraterritorial national defense on Hezbollah's part, and therefore a legitimate patriotic act (Kizilkaya 2017, 217). However, as the war dragged on and Nasrallah eventually publicly admitted to involvement beyond these border regions, this argument became less and less credible and was eventually abandoned and replaced by some of the arguments mentioned above and below.

A stronger and frequently employed argument is that a failure to counter *takfiri* and generally militant forces in Syria would lead to their entry into Lebanon after the war, although it could also be argued that Hezbollah's actions have brought violence to Lebanon. Already in 2013, Hezbollah presented the logic that "if we didn't fight in Syria, we would now be fighting in Lebanon" (International Crisis Group 2014, 5). The fear that a radical, jihadist group would come to power in Syria if Assad fell was already expressed in the arguments presented above and returns here. The spread of Sunni extremism if Assad falls is taken for granted. One might counter this logic of defending Lebanon from Syrian extremism by pointing out that Lebanon suffered a wave of bombings and even missile attacks on Shia as well as Iranian targets, not to mention a rise in sectarian violence in Lebanese Sunni strongholds due to Hezbollah's involvement in Syria. On the contrary, as this essay mentioned previously, this was used as evidence that Hezbollah's actions were necessary and that the threat to Lebanon was as existential as they claimed. In 2013, Nasrallah stated "if we withdraw from Syria, then [the Syrian towns of] Qusayr, Qalamoun and the Lebanese border would fall in the hands of the armed groups. Car bombs will target all of Lebanon, not

only Dahiyeh<sup>2</sup> (International Crisis Group 2014, 5). Furthermore, the coordination between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces show – if nothing else – its incorporation into the national political field of Lebanon.

### Pragmatism

Although Hezbollah itself is unlikely to give them the central stage, many arguments for its foray into the Syrian conflict can be made which relate to pragmatic issues and the general strength and position of the Resistance Axis. These explanations generally do not suffer the same inconsistencies and gaps as those in the previous two categories do, adding to their strength. In fact, as will be explained, this group of arguments should be considered the key to understanding Hezbollah's behavior in the Syrian War theater.

The first of these concerns the historical ties between Hezbollah and its Iranian and Syrian allies. The Resistance Axis is not a formal alliance, nor is it exclusively ideological or religious, as witnessed by the membership of a Sunni element, namely Hamas, until recently. As Mohns and Bank put it, the Resistance Axis "is best understood as a political alliance based on common enemies" (Mohns and Banks 2012, 26). Hezbollah has in the past described its relations with Syria and Iran in similar terms. While it of course acknowledges its ideological ties to the Supreme Leader of Iran and admits it "benefits from the positive convergence of its interests and strategy with Syria and Iran to recover occupied land from Israel, be it Lebanese or Palestinian ... [Hezbollah] takes its decisions independently of Iran and Syria" (Alagha 2006, 172). While this thesis discusses the exact nature of that relationship in several places, its purpose here is to demonstrate the close affiliation Hezbollah has enjoyed with these two nations. Hezbollah has historically been backed by Syria in Lebanon, until its presence in the country came to a head in 2005 with the creation of the March 8 and 14 Alliances and the withdrawal of Assad's forces. Aside from the extensively discussed historical and ideological ties to Iran, its practical support for Hezbollah has also been massive, even vital. This historical loyalty could have played a part in Hezbollah's decision to come to Assad's aid when his position became dire and Iran decided to back him.

A more extreme explanation is proposed by those in the 'proxy/terrorism school', who consider Hezbollah to be little more than an extension of Iran in Lebanon, namely that Hezbollah's participation in the conflict was to be expected the second Iran's started, however, this is contradicted by Hezbollah's apparent hesitance. When scholars such as Smyth argue that Hezbollah and other 'Iran proxies' cannot be seen as fundamentally separate entities from Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, they often point to

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<sup>2</sup> Dahiyeh literally means "suburb", but is used here to refer to the southern neighborhoods of Beirut which are predominantly Shia. This Hezbollah stronghold, which houses its headquarters, was the most frequent target for the bombings.

the cooperation and coordination between these groups in Iraq and of course Syria (Smyth 2015). Nonetheless, Hezbollah's strategic alignment with the IRGC is not necessarily indicative of quite so extreme a situation. After all, when requested to enter the war in Syria in greater capacity by IRGC officers, Nasrallah reportedly refused, only budging when the request came directly from Khamenei, indicating that its relationship with the Islamic Republic is more complex than Smyth might suspect (Levitt 2015, 383).

It would appear that Hezbollah's decision to intervene does emanate from a pragmatic viewpoint, rather than a zealously ideological one, as evidenced from its initial restraint and the timing of its eventual intervention. After all, the Party of God entered the war fully only by June 2013 with the battle for Qusayr, more than two years after the protests turned into outright revolt. As discussed above, Assad was teetering by late 2012, looking as though he would not survive the winter in office (International Crisis Group 2014, 6). The fact that Hezbollah decided to so significantly increase its support only at that time indicates that this decision was based on a pragmatic cost/benefit-analysis rather than on purely passionate religious or ideological zeal.

Perhaps the most convincing argument in this category is that in many ways the Resistance Axis is key to Hezbollah's own survival. From the Party's very inception, Syria has served as a channel for weapons from Iran. Additionally, Syria has provided Hezbollah with weaponry from its own arsenal. Hezbollah soldiers have also trained in Syrian camps and occasionally under Syrian officers (Sullivan 2014, 10). Nasrallah himself has frequently stated that "Syria is the backbone of the resistance, and the support of the resistance" (Levitt 2015, 382). These invaluable services Assad provides to Hezbollah are unlikely to be fulfilled by any of its potential successors. Disregarding the Sunni extremist groups, whose regard of Hezbollah could not be lower, the former chairman of the Syrian National Council, a council of opposition forces which purports to form the post-Assad order in Syria, has stated it would stop the shipments to Hezbollah and in fact reconsider Syria's alliance with Iran (Mohns and Bank 2012, 29).

This category is also significantly strengthened by facts on the ground. These appear to indicate that pragmatic aspects to Hezbollah's relationship with Assad were central in its decision to intervene. Hezbollah's operations, from its defense of the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque to the defense of border communities and Qusayr, have tended to be close to assets of strategic value to its own weapons supply routes, rather than areas of particular religious significance or *takfiri* presence. Sayyida Zaynab is close to Damascus airport and its direct access routes, the border communities are near the highway between Damascus and Lebanon, and Qusayr is the last major Syrian town on the supply route from Northwestern Syria, where the Turkish and nautical supply routes arrive (Tokmajyan 2014, 110). As Kizilkaya indicates:

“According to [realism], Hizbullah is commonly believed to be acting in Syria in order to maintain its dominance in Lebanon, which could be at risk in the event of a regime change in Syria” (Kızılkaya 2017, 225).

### Rhetoric, country and survival

Having considered and weighed all of these arguments, it is possible to judge their overall merit and to come to a theory of what drove Hezbollah to engage in the war in Syria. It would appear that Hezbollah’s motivations were far from purely ideological or religious in nature, although the apparent weight Khamenei’s request had to the Hezbollah leadership may be the exception there. Hezbollah initially showed hesitation to engage in the conflict. Once it did, there were many shifts in ideological and religious explanations for its conduct – initially denying any official involvement at all, shifting to the protection of Lebanese Shia in Syria, and later Shia shrines and fighting *takfiris* – arguments which are all plagued by inconsistencies and internal contradictions. It appears that Hezbollah used its ideological strength and zeal as rhetorical tools to maintain its moral high ground with its support base. The savage and murderous images that flooded the world of *takfiri* violence and hate, often specifically towards Shia Muslims, proved a powerful ‘anti-Christ’. In timeworn Hezbollah fashion, the origin of these horrors could be none other than the US-Israeli conspiracy against the peace in the Middle-East.

The continued existence of the Resistance Axis and Hezbollah’s loyalties towards Iran and Syria played a more considerable part in Hezbollah’s decision-making process, although it appears to have been secondary to Hezbollah’s own survival in Lebanon. The Assad regime is invaluable to Hezbollah’s supply of weapons, training and general security, as Syria is Lebanon’s only neighbor that is friendly to Hezbollah – the other of course being Israel. While Iran might be the benefactor of the Resistance Axis, Nasrallah is correct when he classifies Syria as its backbone. As was explained above, the details of Hezbollah’s behavior on the ground support the argument that this was the superior motive in the Party’s decision to intervene. However, the Resistance Axis is only ever a means to an end to Hezbollah. The reasons it is willing to invest so much to salvage it is that it values its own security and existence as both a political and military player in Lebanon. It appears to truly fear that the fall of Assad would have heralded a period of weakness and vulnerability for Hezbollah. Perhaps this would have led to a new Israeli invasion or the marginalization of Hezbollah’s Shia constituency.

What emerges from this is that Hezbollah’s activities in Syria appear to have been explained with religious and ideological rhetoric, for the sake of salvaging the Resistance Axis because of its importance to Hezbollah’s own security and continued position in Lebanon. In other words, it could be stated that Hezbollah has separate concerns on the separate levels in which it is situated as an actor. Hezbollah’s



broader ideological concerns, this chapter's first category, corresponds to its position on a 'macro-level', concerning its position vis-à-vis the Middle-East and the West. On this level, Hezbollah is concerned with its struggle against *takfiri* extremism, the liberation of Palestine and the Israeli threat to the Middle-East, which it considers to be part of a greater US-led ploy to exploit the Middle-East. The Party's positionality vis-à-vis Lebanon, corresponding to the second category of motivations in this chapter, can be considered its 'meso-level'. On this level, Hezbollah fears for the direct threat Israel and extremists might pose to Lebanon if the Party of God's own position in Lebanon is jeopardized.

Lastly, Hezbollah's narrowest concerns within its own constituency and party can be considered a 'micro-level'. It corresponds to the third category in this chapter, as it is security on this micro-level which elicits a pragmatic and uncompromising determination from Hezbollah. Here, Hezbollah looks after the continued existence of itself and the 'resistance', and its primarily Shia constituency, the 'society of resistance' (Harb and Leenders 2005, 188-190). The ideological vision it shares with Iran's Islamic regime is an important motivator and in a way the creator of the 'resistance'. The argument this thesis proposes is that, within the Syrian conflict, these concerns increase in importance and prominence as the level becomes smaller. This conclusion is not without precedent and the next chapter will discuss where exactly the events of the Syrian War and this theoretical argument find themselves in the literature on Hezbollah.

## Chapter 5: The War and the Literature

This thesis set out to analyze how Hezbollah's seemingly self-contradictory behavior in the Syrian War fits into and affects existing theories on the Party of God and its motivations. With the events explored and analyzed, this chapter will weigh the findings against the previous findings and expectations of the three 'schools' identified in chapter two, as well as the individual authors' contributions. The outcome of this process is an assessment of the applicability of the schools to the Syrian War. However, through this assessment, this chapter makes broader points concerning the school's merits and faults. The findings call for a more nuanced view of the client-patron relationship that the 'proxy/terrorism' school assumes exists between Hezbollah and Iran, although the school's arguments are not without merit still, particularly because of its focus on Hezbollah's micro-level concerns. The 'Lebanonization' school, arguing for the importance of Hezbollah's meso-level, appears initially strengthened because of Hezbollah's rhetoric, but the party's sincerity and true motivations are called into question. The 'duality' school, while very diverse in its arguments, offers a lot of analytical strength in this particular instance, as it manages to combine key points of the meso- and micro-level. In general however, it is found that Hezbollah's individuality as a regional player, disconnected from Iran as well as its grassroots support in Lebanon, requires more attention. The chapter will follow the same basic structure as chapter two, first discussing the 'proxy/terrorism' school, then the 'Lebanonization' school and lastly the 'duality' school.

### The 'proxy/terrorism school'

Some of this school's core tenets, particularly Hezbollah's ties to Iran, are strengthened by the findings of this thesis, although the identification of Hezbollah as terrorist appears increasingly incorrect and the type of relationship that is thought to exist between Hezbollah and its Iranian backers requires a re-evaluation. This school's core tenets are, as explained previously, that a) Hezbollah is at heart a terrorist organization and b) it is a proxy of Iran, ranging from a client to little more than a foreign arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), depending on the author.

Hezbollah's close ties to Iran are still a clearly identifiable feature to its identity, although their extent is not as clear-cut as this school make it out to be. Broadly speaking, Hezbollah's actions were aligned with the interests of the Resistance Axis in general and Iran in particular in Syria. Of course, one might wonder to what extent this is a strategic alignment, rather than complete submission to Iran's wishes. In other words: whether Hezbollah's loyalty to Iran is motivated by macro-level ideology or by micro-level pragmatic concerns of Hezbollah's own survival. After all, as was explained in the previous chapter, Hezbollah almost exclusively operated in theaters of the war that directly influenced its own supply routes or security. This included the frequently propagated defense of the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque

in Damascus with its proximity to Damascus Airport, and the key battle of Qusayr, located on the Lebanese-Syrian border and close to the highway which connects the two countries. Nonetheless, Hezbollah's coordination with Iranian and Syrian government forces in the conflict was thorough. What is more, the meeting with Khamenei, where the Iranian leader allegedly directly asked Nasrallah for a greater, more open Hezbollah engagement in Syria appears to have been a key element in the decision to do just that. This connection implies a continued ideological dedication to Iran's Supreme Leader.

There are two authors which this thesis will take as emblematic for the whole school in their accuracy or inaccuracy, providing a more specific analysis. Smyth's recommendation of seeing Iran's proxy militias – including Hezbollah – as essentially an integral part to the IRGC's broader structure (Smyth 2015, 56) is exemplary of the extent to which some authors in this school see Hezbollah's submission to Iranian demands. However, despite their coordination (notably in the battle for Qusayr), this view is too simplistic. Hezbollah's tactical decision-making, responding to its own direct needs before those of Iran or the IRGC, sketch a more complex image. In this light, Akbarzadeh's analysis appears to be much closer to the truth. He recognizes in the supposed patron-client relationship between the Party of God and Iran a strategic alliance, rather than the zealous ideological connection it arguably started out as (Akbarzadeh 2016, 140). Hezbollah participated in the war where and when it made strategic sense for it to do so: in protecting its supply lines, which shows that micro-level concerns were key. The timing of the intervention, coming only when Assad's continued rule appeared to hang by a thread, further emphasizes this point.

The designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist group, however, is increasingly untenable. Its sophisticated strategic military operations in this war resemble those of a national army more so than those of a rogue terrorist group. This is further exemplified by the training it provided to Assad's national troops in urban warfare, often necessary as Assad struggled to regain control in the early years of the war. In fact, Hezbollah adopted the war-on-terror rhetoric employed by the Assad regime as it attempted to gain international legitimacy. As many of the opposition groups consisted of radically Islamic Sunni groups such as ISIS and Al-Nusra, Hezbollah could often be found on the same side of battles as the Western forces it so despises and that attack it in the context of the same War on Terror that now aligned them.

### The 'Lebanonization school'

This school's strength is shown by the prominence with which defense of Lebanon featured in Hezbollah's own narratives concerning its engagement in the conflict, although its motivations and larger internal logics are questionable in this case. As outlined in chapter 2, this school arose when Hezbollah increasingly became active in Lebanese politics. Subscribers to its logic believe that Hezbollah would increasingly become a legitimate political actor with ties to grassroots Lebanese concerns, abandoning its militancy

and connections to Iran if it was allowed to feel secure by its Western and Middle-Eastern opponents.

The strongest argument for this school's applicability in this conflict is the eagerness with which Hezbollah employed this argument in legitimizing the party's entry into the war. Appealing to the meso-level arguments related to the defense of Lebanon apparently has significant potency within Hezbollah's constituency. It might appear self-evident that Hezbollah's primarily Lebanese supporters would respond positively to a narrative of Lebanese defense. Nonetheless, it is still significant as this undermines the assumption that Hezbollah is simply an Iranian proxy whose ideology is interchangeable with that of Iran's ayatollahs – as the previous school believes – at the very least on the grassroots level. A similar point can be made concerning its initial support for the Arab Spring protests. Its appeals to democracy and justice for the Arab peoples that challenged their dictatorial leaders in the 2010-2011 uprisings show the extent of its (narrative) integration to the Lebanese political sphere.

Secondly, on a non-rhetorical level, arguments can be made that its activities in Syria were both directly and indirectly beneficial to the defense of Lebanon. After all, the potential for spillover of the violence of various militias that were active in Syria is not at all unthinkable. The devastation of the 15-year Lebanese Civil War can partially be attributed to the Palestinian spillover into Lebanon's fragile sectarian balance. Additionally, it should not be forgotten that sectarian violence and bombings did take place in Lebanon on a moderate scale during the Syrian conflict. Hezbollah's activity in Syria, as discussed in the previous chapter, could be interpreted either as worsening or even causing this violence as well as preventing more serious violence taking place. Its domestic cooperation with the Lebanese Armed Forces in combatting this sectarian violence, however, unambiguously shows Hezbollah's coordination with and even incorporation into the Lebanese state and its politics.

Thirdly, even if Hezbollah's motivations in Syria were purely based on micro-level self-interest, an argument could be made that this self-interest is a simple prerequisite for the party's further Lebanonization in particular and Lebanon's defense in general. Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah would undoubtedly argue his organization is central to Lebanon's deterrence as well as physical defense against its greatest threat: Israel. If Hezbollah had not defended its supply lines in Syria and Assad had indeed fallen, it would have been significantly and most likely permanently weakened for it. After all, Syria was (and continues to be) the "backbone of the resistance" (Levitt 2015, 382). With Hezbollah weakened or even gone, Lebanon's southern border – in Hezbollah's own narrative – would be too poorly defended to resist another Israeli invasion, which would not be far off without Hezbollah to deter it. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that Hezbollah is very much a Lebanese organization, regardless of its broader aims. It has never attempted to expand its 'society of resistance' beyond Lebanon and create an international

network, as other Islamic organizations have often attempted. This is indicative of the significant importance that Hezbollah awards its position on the meso-level in Lebanon, even if it is secondary to its micro-level concerns.

This primacy to the micro-level over the meso-level emerges due to, as the previous chapter touched upon, the facts on the ground seriously calling these facts into question. Potent as they might be amongst Hezbollah's constituency, its leadership appear to have used this potency more as a tool than a motivation. Hezbollah's supply lines were the primary object to be defended in Syria, not all of Lebanon's borders. Nor were *takfiri* groups the central target to the campaigns. Hezbollah's support for the Arab Spring appears to have been equally cynical and subordinated to the Axis of Resistance, as evidenced from events in Syria.

Two authors' arguments again stand out as representative of this school's strengths and particularly its weaknesses. El Hussein predicted in 2010 that the legitimacy behind Hezbollah's militancy in the eyes of its constituency would decrease and even disappear if it were no longer threatened by Western and Western-backed forces in the region. Conversely, threats to its continued existence would be met by increases of militancy and aggressiveness (El Hussein 2010, 812). Assad's demise would certainly have constituted a threat to Hezbollah's continued existence, further emphasized by the backing Hezbollah's traditional Western allies gave to varying extents to Assad's opponents. However, it is hardly groundbreaking that a political actor acts more aggressively when threatened than when left to its own devices. A true testimony to this theory's value would be evidence of Hezbollah's militancy reducing or at least evoking protests from its constituency in periods of diminished threat, but this is far less clearly established as of now.

Lastly, Aslan's explanation of Hezbollah's aggressiveness as a tool of gaining domestic support and legitimacy (in the case of the 2006 war) (Aslan 2006) certainly cannot apply in this case. While its own supporters generally at the very least accepted involvement in Syria, the Lebanese public at large, as well as the broader Arab public were frequently disillusioned by the Party of God's apparent hypocrisy in denying the Syrian people the freedom it supported in the other Arab Spring nations, not to mention the hypocrisy in fighting Muslims in Syria rather than Islam's enemies.

### The 'duality school'

The duality school's strength both generally and in this case is going against the hard dichotomy of Hezbollah being either peaceful or militant, instead using its domestic stability to fuel its foreign aggressions. In other words, using meso-level strengths to increase micro-level security and enforce macro-level militancy. However, its general weakness also returns in this particular case: it fails to clearly

identify what and whose interests Hezbollah actually serves. This final 'school' is also the most diverse and arguably less coherent than the other two groupings. The individual theories receive extra attention below because of this. Nonetheless, it is possible to make a couple of generalizations of its applicability to this conflict.

In its acceptance of Hezbollah's inherently two-sided nature, this school is strongest at the intersection of the previous two schools' weaknesses. Hezbollah did not serve as a purely Iranian vassal, blindly joining the fray to the fullest when Iran did, nor did Hezbollah peacefully keep to the sidelines, only serving Lebanese national interests militarily when absolutely necessary. Instead, it maintained its militancy for both causes.

However, one of the major findings of this thesis is that Hezbollah primarily served its own, micro-level, existential interests, an option that continues to be un(der)addressed by any schools, including the last one. The duality authors mainly focus on the role Hezbollah's militancy has in its processes and identity: is it a central feature above all others, or is it a transitory element which is slowly disappearing? Its assessment of what exactly is the *purpose* of this militancy barely goes beyond 'resistance (against Israel)'. The complex web of loyalties and interest that Hezbollah is situated in needs more attention from this school in particular. This could be achieved through an engagement with the 'macro-meso-micro' framework this thesis proposes, elements of which are already implicitly present in the school.

Saouli's writing on Hezbollah's motivations identify the 'resistance' as Hezbollah's primary concern (Saouli 2011, 932-933), something which is arguably confirmed by this conflict, although the centrality given to Israel as the target of this resistance is more problematic. His argument's weakness is caused by its focus on the macro-, rather than micro-level. Hezbollah endured domestic criticism and potentially long-lasting damage to its popularity and image of pan-Islamism in favor of its militancy in Syria. It is possible to defend this war's utility to the 'resistance', which would be weakened without the Assad 'backbone'. If taken more broadly, the *takfiri* and American/Israeli opposition to Assad appear to underline the need and actuality of the resistance. However, the central feature to the resistance in Saouli's theory is Israel; this is something that is hard to maintain in the Syrian War. Admittedly, Israel actively participated in the war, attacking both Assad's troops and Hezbollah, but it occupied no more than a secondary role in the conflict, which was principally about keeping Assad in place at all costs, no matter who was opposing him.

Harb and Leenders' central argument concerned the 'society of resistance' that Hezbollah has created amongst its constituency and the effectiveness with which its domestic social programs had reformed that constituency into a loyal and dedicated ideological support-base (Harb and Leenders 2005,

188-190). This basic principle appears strengthened by this paper's findings. Despite the fact that Hezbollah operated in Syria for causes that were counter to its declared intentions and principles, as also reflected by the criticism it received, its core following remained loyal and no major challenges to the Party's engagement emerged (at least publicly). These authors' main flaw remains that they fail to indicate what it is that Hezbollah is attempting to achieve in the long run. Harb and Leenders mainly attempt to give a typology of Hezbollah, rather than analyze its motivations and allegiances, making their theory less useful in the context of this thesis' aims.

Knio's analysis is much stronger as it locates Hezbollah in a structure with Iran and Syria that it is unable to escape even though it might want to due to changed circumstances, something which is emphasized through this paper's findings. Knio explicitly tried to improve the duality school's inability to explain Hezbollah's continued reliance on Syria and Iran. He identifies the interplay of structure and agency which has trapped Hezbollah under Iran and Syria's 'security umbrella' (Knio 2013, 869). The accuracy of this analysis is striking for the initial part of the Syrian War, which is perhaps unsurprising as it was published in the second half of 2013. Hezbollah did indeed feel obliged to come to Assad's aid despite its contradiction to its declared intentions. The structure of weapon supplies and general allegiance to Damascus as well as Tehran forced Hezbollah to engage in a war that it would most likely have preferred to stay out of if it didn't depend on its success. The fact that Hezbollah primarily focused on its micro-level concerns in Syria, such as the defense of its own supply lines, failing to provide major commitments in the offense against Assad's other enemies does question whether Hezbollah "only reproduces the status quo" (Knio 2013, 869), of subjugation to Iran and Syria's patronage. To remain true to Knio's terminology, Hezbollah appears to have more agency within the structure of the Resistance Axis than Knio identified in 2013, which could be seen as a consequence of Assad's relative weakness.

### The 'Resistance' must go on

This chapter has analyzed how well the different schools as well as selected individual theories hold up to the previous chapter's findings concerning Hezbollah's motivations in the Syrian Civil War. It has found that the 'proxy/terrorism school' appears to be more correct than it has been in a long time at first glance. Hezbollah's coming to Assad's aid undeniably served Iran's purposes and even appears to directly have been prompted by a request from Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. However, the details of Hezbollah's supposed patron-client relationship as identified in this group need to be re-evaluated and nuanced. It is very possible for Hezbollah to appear to 'betray' its own declared morals and intentions for purely strategic purposes which serve its micro-level self-interest, independent from Iran. This strengthens voices such as Akbarzadeh's over the more extreme generalizations as represented by Smyth

and others. Additionally, the ‘terrorist’ label appears less and less accurate for Hezbollah. The Party’s conduct in this war signify that it is at the very least only partially accurate, if not entirely obsolete.

The Lebanonization rhetoric, while clearly still potent amongst the public, appears to increasingly be just that: rhetoric. Some of Hezbollah’s actions could be (and were) ascribed to the defense of Lebanon, i.e. Hezbollah’s meso-level concerns. Nonetheless, the inconsistencies in this policy and the rhetoric around it indicate that the true purposes went beyond a defense of Lebanon and extended to the defense of Hezbollah’s vital supply lines and allies, even if this meant evoking sectarian tensions and bombings within the country it claimed to be defending. This dedication to its goals despite domestic protests clearly contradicts conclusions such as Aslan’s, that the Party of God’s militancy could be explained through the popularity it garnered it domestically. What’s more, the assumed pacification and demilitarization of Hezbollah as was initially predicted by this school after 2005 has quite clearly been disproved as time has passed. Thirteen years after Hezbollah’s entry into the government and despite the continued centrality of Lebanon to its identity and existence, the Party is still centrally dedicated to its military identity and capabilities, as witnessed by the effort it exerted in maintaining its military supply lines.

The arguments of the ‘duality school’ – before the Arab Spring’s developments arguably already more accurate and nuanced than the previous schools– continue to resonate with events, although some of its proponents leave out the key question of ‘for whom?’. A focus on motivations, which frameworks such as this thesis’ ‘macro-meso-micro’ analysis could provide, would increase the explanatory power this school’s theories have. The primacy this group of scholars gives to resistance and the use Hezbollah makes of its domestic constituency resonates with the latter’s continued support during the Syrian War, which could be construed as part of the ‘resistance’. This resistance has to be extended beyond simple macro-level issue such as opposition to Israel if it is to be entirely accurate, however. Knio’s morphogenetic attempt at locating the roles of Syria and Iran in Hezbollah’s struggle is especially applicable to this conflict, although Hezbollah’s self-centered behavior vis-à-vis its allies does imply that adaptations are required.

The key focus of this thesis’ findings – the micro-level – is that Hezbollah mainly acted within its own strategic interests in Syria, an option which is largely absent from the first two schools and features only in the work of some of the authors in the third. What is at the heart of Hezbollah’s concern is the continued existence of the ‘resistance’. What appears often to be overlooked is that this ‘resistance’ does not exclusively consist of Iran’s will, nor the interest of Lebanon or Hezbollah’s own eventual quite literal ‘domestication’ within the country. At the heart of the ‘resistance’ for Hezbollah is Hezbollah itself. Whether this is interpreted as fighting against Israel or its Western backers; as resisting the rise of Western values and influences in the Middle-East broadly; or protecting the marginalized Shia within Lebanon: the



movement's primary concern is with its own continued survival. If this aligns its interests with those of Iran and (later) Syria, as indeed it has and continues to do, then it will act pragmatically, and cooperate with them and aid them. When prudence mandated a focus on its legitimacy at the meso-level, the domestic political sphere in Lebanon, Hezbollah dedicated itself to the democratic processes and adopted the language of national defense that this required. When the Arab Spring protests promised to upset the political balance in the region which was decidedly against the Axis of Resistance, Hezbollah supported them. Nonetheless, when this same movement threatened to overthrow Hezbollah's own supply lines, endangering its continued existence in its current form, it did not hesitate in condemning them and joining the fray. Its recognition of this fact is where the third school can be strongest, especially in the cases of the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War.

## Chapter 6: Pragmatism in the Party of God

This thesis set out to do two things: firstly, to analyze Hezbollah's behavior in the Syrian Civil War to determine what its priorities and motivations in engagement were. Secondly, to compare these findings to the existing academic literature on Hezbollah and judge their strengths and weaknesses in the face of this major event. There are special circumstances surrounding this war that make such a reassessment necessary. Firstly, it was the conflict that arguably made Hezbollah into a truly regional player, rather than a domestic Lebanese actor. Secondly, the tension between Hezbollah's declared ideologies and pragmatic considerations were painfully revealed. While its intervention might have helped save the Axis of Resistance, its reputation as a determined and uncompromising opponent of Israel and the West has been tarnished with hypocrisy in this war of Arabs against Arabs. Its pan-Islamic rhetoric appears to have gone the way of Iran's and disappeared behind a wall of violence along sectarian lines within the increasing Sunni-Shia opposition. The actions Hezbollah took in this instance are therefore key to understanding its inner workings and motivations.

Concerning Hezbollah's priorities in the Syrian Civil War, Hezbollah appears to have mainly acted in the interests of the continued existence and security of itself (the key element to the 'resistance') within Lebanon and as a Middle-Eastern actor in general. These concerns reflect its position at its 'micro-level' as proposed by this thesis. The means to do this was the Resistance Axis, necessitating Hezbollah's intervention in Syria and its dedication to its ally Bashar al-Assad. However, the Party of God's ability to shape its intervention according to its own primary interests (namely its weapons supply lines) show that it did not act purely as a pawn in Iran's game in Syria. The religious and ideological rhetoric of defeating Israel and *takfiri* violence in Syria, the broader 'macro-level', can mostly be considered to have remained rhetoric due to the inconsistencies between this narrative and the actions on the ground, however dedicated Hezbollah might be to them in principle. Furthermore, Hezbollah's 'meso-level' environment: Lebanon, while supported more than the macro-level by actions in Syria, remained contradictory and secondary, however key Lebanon might be to its history and identity.

For the purpose of analyzing the war's implications for the literature, this essay identified three basic 'schools' within the scholarship. The 'proxy/terrorism school', the oldest, believes Hezbollah is a terrorist proxy group for Iran, whose own agency ranges from essentially non-existent (being little more than a separate arm of the IRGC) to a somewhat strategically placed client to the patron: Iran. The 'Lebanonization school' emerged around 2005 and believed that Hezbollah's ongoing politicization would lead to a normalization and demilitarization of the organization within Lebanese society, if it was given the security to do so. This school regarded the continued ties to Iran not to be the defining feature of the

organization, preferring to see it as a form of Lebanese (Shia) nationalist self-expression. The more diverse 'duality school' considers these aspects to be two sides of the same coin, generally interpreting Hezbollah's socio-political developments within Lebanon to be a facet contributing to its primary aim of continuing the 'resistance', normally interpreted to be aimed mainly at Israel.

The main implication of these findings for the literature are that a more nuanced interpretation of Hezbollah's relationship with Iran is necessary. Hezbollah is no Iran proxy but a regional player in its own right. Iran's influences remain significant and Hezbollah owes many historical and ideological debts to Iran. Disregarding this macro-level ideal in the manner the 'Lebanonization school' does by focusing more on the meso-level, ignores certain ideological ties that were exposed by the war in Syria. However, the nature of these influences is far more complex than most 'proxy/terrorism' scholars acknowledge, relating more to the pragmatic micro- than the ideological macro-level. Currently, Hezbollah's (non-ideological) ties to Iran are defined by their strategic alignment, which grants Hezbollah significant agency towards both its larger 'patrons' of Iran and Syria. The implications this has for the broader literature on sub-state militant groups, as well as proxy-patron relations, is that groups such as Hezbollah display a far greater resilience, longevity and agency than might be expected from a non-state military force.

While explanations involving religious motivations appear unconvincing, they certainly play a part in the mind of the Hezbollah supporter and foot soldier. Despite this, Hezbollah is no longer the radically zealous ideologue it might arguably have been, and was certainly accused of being, when it was founded. Arguments based on the defense of Lebanon seem plausible, but the actions in the field show that they fall short of coherence. This argument doesn't have to debunk the Lebanese or even the religious angle, however. After all, Hezbollah could mean little to the defense of Lebanon if it finds itself without reliable arms shipments and literal strategic backup. Additionally – within its logic of constant Israeli threat – Hezbollah could hardly be the champion of the Lebanese Shia if it had no defenses against Israel. Questions such as these point to the frictions that exist between pragmatism and zeal in ideologically motivated organizations such as Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's actions were placed squarely within the 'duality school', even though this school is in need of greater attention to Hezbollah's motivations as opposed to its internal processes. Knio's morphogenetic attempt to do just this has produced by far the most accurate description of the Hezbollah, although even his work underestimates the party's agency. Firmly established as a key regional player within the Iran-nexus, Hezbollah showed its capacity for cynical self-centeredness in the Syrian War. It appears even the Party of God is not beyond hypocrisy and moral degradation when faced with harsh choices.

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