HEZBOLLAH'S IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND THE DECISION TO ENTER THE SYRIAN CIVIL
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INTRODUCTION

From March 2011, the conflict in Syria has come along a path of tumultuous evolution: from spontaneous popular uprising to brutal civil war. There is no clear perspective for the conflict to end in the foreseeable future, particularly while many external actors are engaged in it. The situation in Syria and the circumstances that led to it are multi-layered and complex. The situation is dynamic to a point where establishing a full list of actors engaged in the conflict can present certain difficulties. The main intention of this paper is to describe the engagement of one specific non-state actor in the conflict: Hezbollah. The paper will attempt to investigate the relationship between the decision to enter the conflict in relation to Hezbollah's process of identity construction.

Identity and behaviour are not linked in a linear and unidirectional manner. During the course of my research on Hezbollah's involvement in Syria the idea of mutuality and reciprocity in the relationship between the two elements came forward. This paper will connect a few interests: firstly in the phenomenon of foreign actors entering interstate conflicts, and secondly the role of identity in the decision-making process to engage in a foreign war. At the same time, it will try to bring a new perspective in the already existing scholarship dealing with the motivations for external actors to enter the Syrian civil war. The emphasis will be on put on the constructivist perspective and issues of identity construction, that are understudied in the current scholarship on the topic and definitely omitted in the mass media coverage of the Syrian civil war. In addition, it will analyse the reciprocity between identity construction and the decision to enter such a conflict.

The main research question is to be posed as: How can we understand the reciprocal relationship between Hezbollah's decision to step into the Syrian civil war on the one hand, and its identity construction on the other? How can we understand Hezbollah's decision to enter the war in the context of its identity? How does the decision affect this group's identity, which has been continuously constructed and re-constructed in the past 30 years? Can the conflict in Syria affect, or even re-shape the construction of Hezbollah's identity? How does this comply (or disconnect) with Hezbollah's own ideas about self and role in the serves in the region? As the motivations and perceptions of identity of the two actors engaged do not exist in the vacuum, the broader local-regional context will be taken into account. After establishing the influence that identity construction had on Hezbollah's decision making, the paper will analyse the relationship between the two in the broader context of the Axis of Resistance, consisting of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. It will look closer at how this alliance has motivated some actions of Hezbollah in the past and what kind of influence could external factors have on the Party of God's identity construction.

The scholarship has analysed possible motivations of Hezbollah for participating in the Syrian war, with examples of Joseph Alagha (*Hezbollah and the Arab Spring*), Joseph Daher (*Hezbollah: The Political Economy of the Party of God*) and multiple peer-reviewed articles analysing the situation in Syria with special focus on Hezbollah. None of them, however, looked closely at the identity construction of the group and how this can (or cannot) shed light on the decision to go into war. These perspectives,

moreover, seems to miss the link between the ongoing reconstruction of Hezbollah's identity and the political decisions that it has been taking over the years – in the sense that as far as the suspicion of identity motivating the political decisions has been discussed, however the impact that political decisions taken by Hezbollah could have on its identity construction has not been brought up so much in the existing literature. This paper will attempt to be a starting point for further discussion from this angle.

Hezbollah is certainly not the only non-state actor engaged in the conflict, and not the first one to be brought up both in media and academia - among others the one that catches most of the public opinion's attention is definitely the so-called Islamic State[1]. However, Hezbollah is one of the longest operating, best established (with major international backing) and most combat-experienced non-state group engaged in the war. Its strong and intertwined international ties require an additional perspective on organisation's possible motivations coming both from within and from the outside – therefore the broader dynamics of the international relations of the Middle East need to be touched upon in order to grasp a full picture.

The identity of international actors is not fixed: it is in a constant flux, and changes to it are conditioned by both external and internal circumstances. The long process that took Hezbollah from being a radical, anti-establishment, Iran-sponsored guerrilla group participating in the Lebanese civil war, to the widely popular political party with a cross-sectarian and cross-class support base, was motivated both by the changes within the organization as by the changes in the environment around it. The thesis will analyse both internal factors – such as the changes in the Lebanese political landscape and the tumultuous domestic events of the past 30 years – and external circumstances, such as Hezbollah's involvement in the Axis of Resistance and its continuous engagement in the resistance against Israel.

The involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian crisis is placed in the regional context of the alliance known both in the scholarship as well as in the mass media as the Axis of Resistance. Its primary actors with the strongest mutual ties are Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. Understanding the presence of Iranian forces and Hezbollah in the Syrian civil war is crucial to picture the conflict as a whole. It matters especially in a broader context of regional relations dynamics, given the fact that the Axis, and particularly the relationship between Syria and Iran, has been one of the most unprecedented and persistent alliances in the Middle East:

„Generally speaking, there are three important reasons why the nexus between the two deserves attention: First, their alliance has had a significant impact on Middle East politics since 1979. Second, it has proven to be an enduring relationship, that has now lasted 30 years, which is extraordinary when one takes into account the volatility of the Middle East and its shifting political sands. Third, in certain respects many regional and political observers still misunderstand the alliance"[2]

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[1] The so called Islamic State will be referred to as IS in this paper.
[2] Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (New York/London: IB Tauris, 2009), XI.

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In the recent years, the Axis has exerted both symbolic and real power and influence on the Syrian civil war. Hezbollah has its own special power relationship with Syria, and this paper will investigate how this balance of power between the two actors (or lack of thereof), and their shared perceptions of threat, might have motivated the Party of God's decision to go to war.

The structure of the thesis is as follows as follows: after explaining the methodological framework on the conception of identity in the international relations and foreign policies, it will go onto analysing Hezbollah's identity and the transformations it has undergone during organisation's active years. Furthermore, it will attempt to place Hezbollah's and its identity conceptions in the context of Axis of Resistance: the analysis will focus on looking at dynamics between the sides in the last 30 years. From this point, the paper will attempt – based on available sources – to assess the level of Hezbollah engagement into the conflict in Syria and try to determine possible motivations. It will also investigate how the event of the Syrian civil war could have influenced the identity construction of the Party of God. Asking about Hezbollah's reasons for entering the Syrian conflict, the paper will try to evaluate the possible decision-making process in relation to the previously studied identity construction. The paper will also look into the question of sectarianism and its role in the Axis of Resistance – trying to answer the question whether real or perceived religious sentiments have that much influence over general foreign policy decisions.

There are some limitations to this study. First of all, the time scope – the critical portion of the study will focus on documented Hezbollah's actions in Syria from 2011 to 2016. Moreover, it is unfeasible to thoroughly track the decision making process for all three actors in the alliance – most of the documents in this regard are not available to the public. However, the material is still sufficient enough to draw some meaningful hypothesis about the motivations behind Hezbollah's foreign policy decision-making and to apply the constructivist approach towards identity in the foreign policy to contribute to a broader analysis of international relations in the region in the past few years. It should be a solid starting point for developing study on this topic in the future.

There is one important point that this paper will not attempt to explain thoroughly, however it is still worth mentioning – the eagerly discussed "sectarian" explanation that is used to justify the long-lasting relationship between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah (referring to the alliance as the "Shiite Crescent"). This study will argue that it is not religion that ties these three actors together – and, in fact, after taking a closer look it might turn out that their approaches towards religion will be quite dissonant – but it is their own perceptions of interest and threat that will matter the most in the end. Given the specific national (or group, in case of Hezbollah) identities of three actors, it will be worth looking at how religion can be used as a tool in justifying particular actions and operationalizing policies – however primary legitimisation will come from particular identities and particular interests that feed them.

To sum up, Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian conflict is a fact, however explanations for it both in scholarship and in the mass media are too focused on strategic considerations. The motivations behind the civil strife need to be analysed not only from a strategic standpoint, but also from the angle of identity construction and its influence on the decision-making process. This study is an attempt to bring more attention to this issue and possibly be a starting point for discussing Syria's future – in particular how dependent on external actors it might become. It will do so through analysis of possible

motivations behind Hezbollah's engagement and how that corresponds with the local alignment of alliances, in particular with dynamics of the "Axis of Resistance".

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the paper is a desk-based study, conducted at the Leiden University and the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. The study will use academic publications such as books, peer-reviewed journals and the available intelligence reports and press releases. The study is at the inter-section of International Relations and Middle Eastern Studies, in terms of theories and methodology drawing mainly from the IR scholarship on the topic; it will also draw from the foreign policy analysis used in the International Relations.

Theoretical basis for the analysis is rooted primarily in the constructivist conceptions of foreign policies and international relations, with particular focus on identity issues and threat perceptions of particular actors. Constructivism posits that international structures are alloyed with normative and material elements, that social structures constitute actors' identities and interests, and that the practices of actors embedded in that social structure not only reproduce the structure but also sometimes transform it.[3] Identity is a crucial factor in the analysis of this situation, primarily because:

"… [national] identity is a source of interests. Identity, however, does not cause action but rather makes some action legitimate and intelligible and others not so."[4]

There is no single agreement in the scholarship on what identity's definition is in the first place, and how it affects the foreign policy decisions. For the purpose of this paper, definition of identity will be taken from Wendt's analysis, being:

"… [identity is] a property of intentional actors that generates motivational and behavioural dispositions. (…) identity is at base a subjective or unit-level quality, rooted in an actor's self-understandings"[5]

Wendt goes onto establishing 4 types of identities: 1) personal or corporate, 2) type, 3) role and 4) collective. In case of this study, the identity that Wendt ascribes to states – personal/corporate – will be a starting point for analysing Hezbollah's self-perceptions and the motivations that are rooted in them. As Wendt points out, people (and by analogy – states) are distinct entities in virtue of biology, but without consciousness and memory – a sense of "I" – they are not agents[6]. Therefore, the most important conclusion coming from this definition of identity is that the actor needs to have an understanding of "Self" and in order to accomplish that it might place itself against the "Other" (this is particularly important in case of Hezbollah and its "resistance" identity).

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[3] Michael Barnett and Shibley Telhami (eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) 4.

[4] Michael Barnett, "The Israeli Identity and the Peace Process: Re/creating the Un/thinkable", in: *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, eds. Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 63.

[5] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 224.

[6] Ibid.

As Mark Lynch describes it, identity is in the constant process of being contested and challenged (in his example primarily by the public sphere[7]). Identity cannot be understood as a given and cannot be "fixed" – what we can observe in actors such as states and non-state groups is rather an evolution of identities dependent on both internal and external circumstances.

This study is based on the assumption of the constant flux of identity – especially in the case of Syrian war. As mentioned above, identity is a subject of continuous contestation and change – however it needs a particular trigger, a sort of "breaking point" to start an overturn/major change in its core. Significant internal or inter-state conflicts can serve as such breaking points from which a new identity will arise. The wave of the Arab Uprisings of 2011 can be treated as such a breaking point, from which a need for new definitions has emerged. It also proves further that identity is in a flux, and that particular decisions and external events can be also a justification for a particular shift in the actor's identity.

Uprisings of 2011 had provided a momentum that introduced major change in actors identities, self-definitions and, as a consequence, in the regional inter-state relations. For Syria however, this momentum has become a prolonged civil war. In its face, both Syria as a state and each actor that got involved into this situation must have confronted the decision to join the war with its own particular identities. This is the point where it will be crucial to look at Hezbollah's identity formation and its transformation in the event of Syrian war – since engagement in the neighbouring country domestic troubles definitely did not comply with the Party of God's main identity pillar of being resistance movement against Israel in the name of the Lebanese people. Therefore, on the identity level, the study attempts to confront the construction of Hezbollah's identity with the decision-making behind entering the Syrian war.

Identity forms the backdrop to the formation of conceptions of threat, opportunity and interests[8]. It is important to remember, however, that interests cannot simply be derived from identity, any more than they can be directly derived from international structure or economic concerns[9]. Nevertheless, the analysis of identity will be crucial to understanding how Hezbollah and other Axis of Resistance actors define their interests, and why did these interests feel threatened by the outburst of Syrian civil war.

The idea of "self", the identity of the actor can determine who is perceived as a friend, and who is seen as an enemy. In realist theory of IR, these distinctions are made based on the balance of power and "objective" threat that a lack of such balance may create, however in case of Syria and Hezbollah the causality needs to be analysed differently. Definitions are needed to fully grasp the context and explain the reasoning. Threat is defined as a situation in which one agent or a group has either the capability or intention to inflict a negative consequence on another agent or group[10]. Threat perception, however, is a function of the line drawn between the "self" and the "other"[11]. Therefore, what a group

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[7] Marc Lynch, "Jordan's Identity and Interest" in: Barnett and Telhami (eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy…*, 25.
[8] Ibid., 26.
[9] Ibid.
[10] David L. Rousseau and Rocio Garcia-Retamero, "Identity, Power and Threat Perception: A Cross-National Experimental Study", *Journal of conflict resolution*, vol. 51(5) (October 2007), 745.
[11] Ibid., 749.

perceives as a threat to its existence/interests, is tightly related to its identity and ideas that accompany it. The "stranger" the other, the bigger threat it poses to the "self[12].

Thus, identity is crucial to assessing threats. What the actor sees as a threat is strongly connected to how it sees itself. This dependence has been described as "socio-cultural explanation of threat perception"[13]. According to it, domestic society and its accompanying identities influence how a state's decision makers perceive threat – identity prevails over the realist perception of power balance, hence the latter becomes less relevant.[14] Changing of circumstances may trigger the change in threat perception. One of the critical signals that elevates threat perceptions is the breaking of norms[15]. In the case investigated by this paper, such breaking of norms appeared when previously stable and predictable Syrian regime had become severely undermined by the popular uprising. This event has disturbed its closest allies – Hezbollah and Iran – and caused them to step into what seemed to be at first domestic conflict. There is additional level to this "breaking of norms"; the common identity of the alliance has been threatened, since the regime overthrow in Syria could not guarantee keeping up the policies it used to conduct towards Iran and Hezbollah.

Moreover, and this also ties up to the issue of identity – actors identify threats more in relation to the stability of their own regimes rather than to material factors such as military capabilities or proximity[16]. There is one more question arising from the issue of threat perception: as Gregory Gause notices, states (and other actors) do not face threats in a one-at-a-time manner. Especially in the Middle East, actors face multiple threats at a time: they need to omnibalance (term borrowed from the neorealist approach in the IR), or so to say – prioritise between them[17]. Hence, this study is looking at yet another research question – why did Hezbollah prioritise the threat of Syrian regime collapse over the threat of Israel, or over the threat of potential domestic unrest?

Therefore, two factors are intertwined: the identity of Hezbollah as a group and the threat that the possible regime overthrow in Syria can present to it. Such a threat constitutes a "breaking point" for Hezbollah's identity, which needs to be adapted to the new circumstances and its perception of self may need to undergo a significant reconstruction in order to achieve the credible shift in its identity. This paper will attempt to answer what kind of threat perceptions might have had motivated the decision of Hezbollah to engage in the Syrian civil war, what is the actors' identity's influence on the decision-making connected to these threats and how these threat perceptions can impact the reconstruction of an identity of the actor.

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[12] Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero, 751.
[13] Janice Gross Stein, "Threat Perception in International Relations" in: Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, Jack S. Levy (eds)., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 373.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 374.
[16] F. Gregory Gause III, "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf", *Security Studies* 13:2 (Winter 2003), 274.
[17] Ibid., 282.

2. HEZBOLLAH'S IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND ITS ROLE IN LEBANESE POLITICS

The following section will go through Hezbollah's identity establishment and the changes it underwent during the years of its political activity in the domestic context. It will shortly discuss the circumstances of founding the Hezbollah and analyse how they influenced the organizations identity construction. It will focus on recurring themes in Hezbollah's identity and what reinterpretations in the domestic context, together with stages that Hezbollah went through as a political organisation in Lebanon. The central point of analysis will be the question of how Hezbollah's identity construction might have influenced its decision to enter the Lebanese politics and become a prominent actor in the domestic scene.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ORGANISATION

Hezbollah as a military political organisation was established in 1982, in response to the ongoing civil war in Lebanon and the Israeli invasion of the country that happened the same year. The impulse for creating an armed force, however, was not motivated exclusively by the attack of a foreign power. The mobilisation of the Lebanese Shi'a was motivated partly because of the few decades of a growing feeling of disenfranchisement among their community: they considered themselves to be under severe discrimination in comparison to other confessional groups in the country[18]. Thanks to the activities of the new generation of Shi'a clerics, among them Musa al-Sadr, the establishment of collective consciousness and mobilisation of the Shi'a community (and operational Shi'a identity) was possible[19].

The first organised Shi'a force in Lebanon was Amal (*Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya*, the battalions of Lebanese resistance), which has been an armed branch of the first Shi'a political organisation, *Harakat al-Mahrumin* (the Movement of Disinherited), established in 1974 by a young cleric Musa al-Sadr[20]. These organisations were an effect of the generation change in the Shi'a clergy happening from the 1970s: the traditional Shi'a religious leadership was losing its influence, while at the same time the young clerics were gaining extensive followers base and inspiring a tenfold increase in the numbers of Shi'a clergy at the time[21]. This wave of Shi'a political mobilisation was a welcoming environment for a new force, which was to grow to be a much more radical actor than Amal (and in this way gaining more popular support). The disappearance of Musa al-Sadr in 1978 during his trip to Libya added up to the growing discontent and confusion within the Lebanese Shi'a community[22], strengthening their motivation to get organized and fight for its right in the Lebanese scene. This event also allowed Hezbollah to rise to power with a new Shi'a leadership and contribute to recreation of Shi'a identity.

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[18] Dominique Avon, Jane Marie Todd, Anais-Triss Khatchadourian, *Hezbollah: A History of Party of God* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), 15.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 16.
[22] Ibid., 23.

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Hezbollah came into living in very particular conditions of a civil war, in which a few external actors were present as well: on top of a growing Syrian intervention into Lebanese domestic issues (turning into full-fledged occupation), the 1982 brought about the Israeli invasion. The Syrian government made its status official only a year after the civil war in Lebanon started, with the 1976 Constitutional Document[23]. Shortly after, the military intervention - under the name of "Arab Peacekeeping Force" (later on it changed to "Arab Force of Dissuation")[24]- reinforced Syrian power position in the country. This power shift transformed Lebanon from the country "with an Arab face" to an explicitly Arab state[25], which was not a satisfying shift for all the Lebanese communities who did not subscribe to the Syrian pan-Arabist ideology. This already strained domestic situation was worsened by the 1982 Israeli invasion, which divided the fighting Lebanese factions even further[26].

Even though the exact moment of Hezbollah's establishment cannot be properly traced[27], there three most popular "decisive moments" associated with it: victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the disappearance of Musa al-Sadr in 1978 or the Israeli operation Litani (in 1978, 4 years before the 1982's Peace for Galilee): all three events happened within a scope of 2 years and were quite influential on the Shi'a sense of community. After the Iranian revolution, many Lebanese Shi'a a new spiritual leader for their underprivileged society in Imam Khomeini[28]. It was around the period between 1978 and 1979 that an influential Lebanese Shi'a cleric, Abbas al-Musawi, has founded "The Hezbollah of Lebanon" together with his students and a group of *ulama*' (scholars)[29] – the organisation of the more academic nature. Hezbollah, the armed group as we know it today, made its first public statement in 1985 with the Manifesto, called also the Open Letter.

The 1982 Israeli invasion Peace in Galilee was the momentum that Hezbollah needed to come into light and begin the activity of a new armed political force in Lebanon. It has defined itself as an Islamic *jihadi* movement, conducting resistance activities to Israeli presence in Southern Lebanon[30]. Therefore, Hezbollah's primary incentive to come to life came from the external actor: its activities, however, in the end focus more on Lebanon. This chapter, therefore, will elaborate more on the identity that influenced its accommodation into the domestic political scene and how these local circumstances induced some shifts in the organisation's perception of itself. The chapter will analyse the evolution of Hezbollah's position over the years in Lebanon and will look into the recurring themes in its identity that were reinterpreted in the domestic arena in the past 30 years.

There are two primary sources that describe Hezbollah's self-perception – the 1985 Open Letter and the 2009 Manifesto. Both texts will be extensively used in the analysis in order to trace the evolution of identity construction over the years and the discourse that Hezbollah created around its activity in Lebanon. It will look also into interpretation and reinterpretation of the recurring themes.

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[23] Avon et al., 18

[24] Ibid., 20.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Avon et al., 21.

[27] Ibid, 22.

[28] Joseph Alagha, *Hizbullah's Identity Construction* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 19.

[29] Ibid, 20.

[30] Ibid.

2.1. BASIC NOTIONS OF HEZBOLLAH'S IDENTITY

The set of particular circumstances surrounding the birth of Hezbollah as a political group in Lebanon surely had critical influence on the way the Party of God defined itself. The events happening in Lebanon at the time and the actors involved in them are of crucial importance to the formation of organisation's identity, especially in context of theoretical framework in which identity is inherently relational[31]. Actors define themselves by who does belong to the group and – most importantly – who does not, and political actors define themselves through interactions with other actors[32]. Hezbollah emerged as a group in face of hostile interaction – Israel's military intervention, henceforth it began creating its identity in relation to this event and in contrast to the attacking actors. Therefore, it created what Castells calls "resistance identity": it was defining itself against another actor; by definition, resistance identity -

"… is generated by those actors that are in positions/conditions devaluated and or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society."[33]

Hezbollah, therefore, had been addressing the question of oppression and resistance, which had an influence on it as a social movement[34].

Identity definition proposed by Wendt – "a property of intentional actors that generates motivational and behavioural dispositions. (…) a subjective or unit-level quality, rooted in an actor's self-understandings"[35] – combined with Alagha's concept of resistance identity is an accurate theoretical framework to apply to Hezbollah's identity construction process. As the primary motivation of Hezbollah to appear was to stand in opposition to an external, foreign threat – and multiple domestic threats – the resistance and differentiation from other actors naturally became the pillar of its self-understanding. Topics of unity and cooperation were quite secondary in the identity construction of the group[36].

Another pillar that emerged in the construction of Hezbollah's identity was religion – referring to Shi'a branch of Islam. This was conditioned primarily by the confessional nature of Lebanon's political arena; in addition to that, the previously mentioned political mobilisation of the Shi'a community contributed to the emergence of Hezbollah as a Shi'a actor. Nevertheless, the Party of God was not exclusively dedicated to achieving objectives that would benefit only the Shi'a community – in invested a lot of energy in encouraging all the Muslims to reach the ultimate goal: creation of an Islamic state in Lebanon. This was the priority objective both in religious and political terms[37]. Hezbollah was vocally

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[31] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Identity Construction*, 24.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 25.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Wendt, 224.

[36] On the inclusive nature of Hezbollah and its allies see later in this paper.

[37] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Identity Construction*, 22.

against an idea, proposed in the 1980s, of dividing Lebanon into religious cantons, with Hassan Nasrallah stating that

"…the Muslims have no right whatsoever to even entertain the idea of a Muslim canton, a Shi'ite canton, or a Sunni canton… Talking about cantons annihilates the Muslims, destroys their potential power, and leads them from one internal war to another. Only the Islamic state upholds their unity"[38].

These two crucial concepts – pan-Islamism (important: with very few explicit references to the Shi'a branch of Islam) and resistance (understood both as resistance against Israel and as a general anti-establishment policy approach) have become the pillars of Hezbollah's identity at its beginning and went through multiple reinterpretations over the years. These notions were present both in domestic, as well as international discourse of the organisation. The organisation was focused on local goals, but with the global perspective in mind: instating the Islamic state in Lebanon was supposed to be the first step in the establishment of a broader Islamic order in the Middle East.

Over the time, however, the direction of Hezbollah's postulates in this regard had shifted: the Party of God focused more on becoming an influential actor in the Lebanese political arena. Hezbollah spent substantial part of the 1990s trying to prove that it had never wanted to become a state within a state; it dedicated significant resources to re-structuring its identity in a way that that it maintained its pillars, but also focused on tailoring it towards appealing more to the voters of Lebanon. The calls for an immediate instalment of the Islamic state in Lebanon turned into calling for the establishment of such in the indefinite future[39], while for the time being considering multi-sectarian nature of Lebanon as an asset, not as an obstacle[40]. Hezbollah went as far as to claim that they never were a party in the civil war and had not attempted trying to convince other people to their ideology[41]. During the 1990s the Party of God has worked on the bottom-up Islamisation, which concentrated on providing social services and working through grass-root organisations and NGOs. Hezbollah has used already existing administrative and infrastructural constructions to put its ideology through and gather political capital and local community support[42].

Thanks to these activities, in the first decade of 21st century Hezbollah has become a dominant political power in Lebanon. It dropped the jihad rhetoric from its official discourse and focused on incorporating also other sects in its political endeavours (Sunnis and Christians could have been found on Hezbollah's electoral ballots over the years[43]). Hezbollah has adjusted its policies to Lebanese politics' specifics[44] and gained the veto power in the Lebanese cabinet. Moreover, despite its known

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[38] Alagha, *Hizbullah Identity Construction*, quoting Nasrallah, 23.

[39] Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion*, (Pluto Press: University of Virgina, 2002), 16.

[40] Alagha, *Hizbullah Identity Construction*, 23.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Krista E. Wiegand, "Reformation of a Terrorist Group: Hezbollah as a Lebanese Political Party", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 32:8 (2009), 673.

[43] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Identity Construction*, 24.

[44] Joseph Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents: From the 1985 Open Letter to the 2009 Manifesto* (Amsterdam: Pallas Publications – Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 13.

ties to Syria and Iran[45], it proved its capability of an independent decision-making process and policy - shaping.

Following this overview, this chapter will focus on elaborating on crucial concepts in Hezbollah's identity formation: resistance and Islamism: it will investigate its incorporation into Lebanese politics ("Lebanonization"). It will analyse in greater detail the role that Hezbollah has played in the domestic scene. It will also look into the questions of pan-Islamism and religious affiliation; in the end, it will ask whether these perceptions of resistance and religion had influence on the decision-making in the domestic scene in the past 30 years.

2.2. RESISTANCE: THE OPPRESSORS AND THE OPPRESSED

As mentioned above, the foundation of Hezbollah's identity construction from the onset of its activity has been resistance. This angle of organisation's ideology is tightly connected to the influence that the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran had on Lebanese Shi'a community and to the Israeli invasion in Lebanon. The temporal coincidence of 1979 Iranian revolution, 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the civil strife that has been tormenting the country since 1975 formed crucial circumstances for the birth of Hezbollah's identity, which lead it to putting resistance as its primary goal and characteristic. These circumstances had also a substantial impact on the formation of Self and Other in Hezbollah identity structure, and how this contraposition between the two concepts would be produced and represented. It will delve into detail into the definitions of the concepts that were put forward in the 1985 Open Letter, therefore the definitions that Hezbollah used at the onset of its activity.

Wendt posits that "what really distinguishes the (…) identity of intentional actors (…) is a consciousness and memory of Self as a separate locus of thought and activity"; a particular "Other" is needed for determining the "Self"[46]. In case of Hezbollah, the consciousness and memory of Self has been created on the grounds of Shi'a identity and its feeling of severe discrimination and mistreatment in Lebanese community, resulting in political mobilisation[47]. In addition, this sense of self has been strengthened by the victory of Islamic revolution in Iran, where Shi'a community rose to power and quite abruptly became a major actor in both international and regional arena. However, in order to strengthen the feeling of belonging for its prospective members, Hezbollah has focused on the "Other" that posed the biggest threat to the survival of the community: the Other was found on three levels: regional - the invader (Israel), global - the imperialism (embodied by the United States) and domestic - conflicting Lebanese sects.

The 1985 Open Letter's outlines founding principles of Hezbollah, namely: "…the constituents of the Party's political ideology: oppressors and oppressed; Islamic State; relations with Christians; anti-Zionism; pan-Islamism; anti-imperialism; and jihad and martyrdom"[48]. The Party of God adopts the dichotomy of the "oppressors" and the "oppressed", characteristic for Marxism and invoked in the Iranian

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[45] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents*, 13.
[46] Wendt, 225.
[47] Wiegand, 670.
[48] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents…*, 15.

revolution as well. Nevertheless, Hezbollah does not refer to the concept of the "oppressed" in the basic Marxist understanding of the poor peasants and proletariat, it employs the more inclusive concept referring to an existential level of oppression: lack of freedom and dignity, unjust treatment, tyranny, impoverishment; regardless of class, religion and cultural background[49]. However, despite the inclusivity, the concept itself is formulated in a way that can be referred directly – but never explicitly – to Lebanese Shi'a in the South and the Shi'a community in general.[50] The fight against the oppressor is tightly connected to the fact that Hezbollah is acting in the name of Islam: the resistance is inherently Islamic in Hezbollah's view, in a way that it fulfils the obligation of the Islamic jihad. The act or resistance is equalled to the act of striving in the cause of God and Islam[51]. Resistance is also described as a moral duty of the oppressed who strive for the liberation from their oppressors:

"… resistance becomes a 'humanitarian' and 'moral' duty which all members of society, whether Muslim or otherwise, are obliged to undertake. The party acknowledges the existence of this moral element in its jihad with Israel, when it claims that 'the Resistance is spurred by humanitarianism and the defence of the land'. Nonetheless, 'our religious ideology is the first of its [the Resistance's] conditions' – an affirmation which underlines the religious underpinnings and essentially Islamic character of Hezbollah's resistance"[52]

The primary factor necessary for the establishment of Hezbollah's resistance identity is the definition of the "Other". Who are the "oppressors", the enemies of Hezbollah and how does it influence Hezbollah's identity construction?

The first and most important "Other" is Israel. In the Open Letter, Hezbollah is quite straightforward in its approach to Israel and its inhabitants[53], describing them as "… an aggressive, racist, expansionist, anti-humanist, cancerous gland instated by Western colonial powers in the Muslim heartland"[54]. Israel is never acknowledged as a legitimate state: it is referred to as an "Entity" and Hezbollah sees no option to ever make peace with it:

"That is why our confrontation with this Entity will only cease when it is completely obliterated from the face of the Earth. From this perspective, we do not recognize any ceasefire, truce, or peace treaty with it, whether arrived at by individual states or communally."[55]

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[49] Alagha: *Hizbullah's Documents* , 16.
[50] Saad-Ghorayeb, 15-16.
[51] Ibid., 122.
[52] Ibid., 126.
[53] There is an argued contradiction between Hezbollah's declared respect for the people of the Book (which should include the Jews) and the actual treatment of Jewish Israelis – with argument for conflating Jewish, Israeli and Zionist identities – on it see: Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents…*, 19.
[54] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents…*, 19.
[55] Open Letter, as quoted in Alagha, in *Hizbullah's Documents…*, 48 (all the quotes from the Open Letter and the 1985 Manifesto used in this paper are coming from this source).

This kind of discourse allows no space for a compromise. By analogy, all other actors who collaborate with Israel or at least acknowledge its statehood are described as treacherous (defeatist) and are accused of inflicting harm to the Muslim *umma*. In terms of identity formation on the most basic level – Hezbollah's existence in the shape that it emerged in 1982 is justified primarily by the existence of Israel. The Party of God is established in order to eradicate the Jewish State from the maps of the Middle East; this goal defines the entire purpose of Hezbollah's being. The remaining "Others" and the consequences related to that exist only in relation to the first one.

Due partly to its enmity to Hezbollah's greatest ally – Iran – and partly due to the support it has been expressing towards Israel over the years, another "Enemy", or "the Other" for Hezbollah is the United States. Section 3 of the Open Letter is explicitly titled "America is behind all our catastrophes"[56]. The section starts with very uncompromising description of Hezbollah's approach towards the US:

"We are dedicated to fighting and uprooting vice and debauchery… The first root of vice is America (…) They invaded our country, destroyed our villages, slit the throats of our children, violated our sanctuaries, and appointed rulers who committed the worst massacres against our umma. Those rulers do not cease to support the allies of Israel; they do not allow us the right of self-determination."[57]

Thus, in Hezbollah's view, there are two external "Others", against whom the resistance must be conducted: the United States as the main evil, and Israel as a regional proxy fulfilling American policies in the Middle East (yet positing a more direct threat to Lebanon and Hezbollah). In Hezbollah's view, taking the United States out of the picture would make it significantly harder for Israel to maintain its powerful position in the Middle East, and would make it harder for it to survive as a state. These two allies are unbreakably intertwined in Hezbollah's discourse, since the support of the United States (who, in Hezbollah's view, is manipulating the entire international community) for Israel is constant, and it led to the misery of the Palestinians, and thus all the Arabs and Muslims in the region. Against this "evil", the Islamic *umma* (represented by Hezbollah) is opposed. Analogically, any entity or group cooperating with the United States or Israel can become the enemy of Hezbollah by proxy. For example, all the international organisations that include the United States are also perceived as hostile to Hezbollah – e.g. NATO is dubbed a "wolf" in the Open Letter[58].

Based on the same analogy, in the domestic scene the Phalange (a predominantly Maronite militia) had become Hezbollah's arch enemy, due to their participation in the massacres of Sabra and Shatila refugee camps and well known collaboration with both the United States and Israel. Consequently, the country's Maronite-dominated government is called "the Lebanese defeatists"[59], which shows Hezbollah's unfavourable attitude towards the institution of the Lebanese state as such. In addition, the Party postulated creation of the Islamic state in Lebanon, based on the example of the

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[56] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents…*, 41.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., 42.
[59] Ibid.

Islamic Republic of Iran[60]. Moreover, Hezbollah was against opposition in Lebanon, since it conforms with the structure imposed by the Maronite government and henceforth acts from a "scarecrow position."[61]

In short, at the foundation of Hezbollah's identity lay its enemies; they define the organisation's objectives in the domestic scene:

"We are now in a state of progressive confrontation with our foes, until we achieve the following goals
1) *To expel Israel (IDF) for good from Lebanon, as a prelude to its total annihilation, and the liberation of Jerusalem and its holy cities from the occupation;*
2) *To expel the Americans, the French, and their allies from Lebanon for good, thus rooting out any influence of any colonial power on Lebanon;*
3) *To submit the Phalangists to just rule, and make them stand trial for the crimes they have committed against Muslims and Christians, through encouragement from America and Israel;*
4) *To allow our populace the right of self-determination; to freely choose the political system that they aspire to. We do not hide our commitment to (the rule of) Islam, and we invite everybody to choose the Islamic system (of government/governance), which alone is capable of guaranteeing justice and dignity to everyone, thus preventing any colonial attempt to invade our country again".*[62]

Hezbollah's identity construction is founded on a way it perceives its enemies and how it identifies the threat they pose to its existence. Therefore, the core concepts of Hezbollah's identity are motivated from the outside of the organisation, however how the party presents them and reinterprets them in the future is not dependent on the external actors.

Even though Hezbollah has defined the United States as its arch enemy and the source of all evil, the Party of God's goals – at least the ones presented in the Open Letter – have a domestic priority over the global outreach. Even though the organisation was quite explicitly talking about the global scope of the Islamic revolution it wanted to be a part of, in the end it focused more on a domestic scene. From the very beginning, even though the terrorist acts conducted abroad had a goal of primarily drawing attention to the civil war in Lebanon, the mistreatment of the Shi'a community and last but not least, the Israeli occupation.

Hezbollah and its resistance project was not only limited to the external "Others" who defined its identity: the resistance was also targeted against the unjust sectarian system of rule that was governing in Lebanon from 1943.

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[60] Alagha, *Hizbullah's documents*, 17.
[61] Ibid., 45.
[62] Ibid., 43-44.

2.3. HEZBOLLAH AS A POLITICAL PARTY: FROM TOTAL REFUSAL TO ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT

Hezbollah started out as an organisation that deeply despised the Lebanese confessional system and the sectarianism in the country. The at the time ruling Maronite establishment was seen as traitors. The perception of the "oppressiveness" of the state of Lebanon did not stem from the un-Islamic nature of the Lebanese state, but from its "fundamentally oppressive" configuration which was founded on the Maronite community's political supremacy[63]. The institutionalised hegemony of Maronites, based on the outdated social census from the 1940s, produced the depiction of it as 'a rotten sectarian system'.[64] The cooperation happening between the Maronite government and the Israel was also a trigger for Hezbollah's contempt of the Christian community in Lebanon.

It is not of a surprise, then, that the section 5 of the Open Letter is explicitly titled "The Zionist-Phalangist coordination":

"The Zionist occupation continued to rape the lands of the Muslims till it succeeded in occupying two-thirds of Lebanon. All this in full coordination with the Phalangists who condemned all attempts to resist the invading forces. The Phalangists took part in executing Israeli plans and policies so that they could be rewarded with the seat of the presidency in Lebanon."[65]

The Phalange has collaborated with Israel and contributed to the massacres of Sabra and Shatila (which resulted in killing as many as 4500 civilians, mainly Palestinians and Lebanese Shi'a, and deeply traumatised the Lebanese society). At its beginning, Hezbollah was very explicitly advocating for the idea of an Islamic state as a just system of rule (with the condition of the voluntary establishment of such system[66]). Hezbollah was therefore against arranging confessional "states within a state", or religious cantons in Lebanon. It also vehemently opposed the sectarian shape of domestic politics, pointing out that the Shi'a community had been long overlooked in the political decision-making.

While hostility towards the government, especially during the civil war, does not come as surprising, the disdain of political opposition in Lebanon is not expected. After all, opposition also had a similar "enemy" (though probably referring to it in slightly more neutral terms) and wanted a change in the existing power balance in Lebanon. However, Hezbollah did not think of the oppositional organisations in Lebanon, which acted along the structural lines of the confessional state, as their "friends"; they were dubbed "defeatist" along with the Maronite establishment and the Phalange:

"We consider any opposition that manoeuvers within the specified guidelines of the regime or those specified by the oppressive world powers to be a scare-crow opposition that in the end accomplishes nothing since ultimately its interests converge with the existing regime"[67].

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[63] Saad-Ghorayeb, 26.
[64] Ibid., 26.
[65] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents*, 42.
[66] Saad-Ghorayeb, 36.
[67] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents*, 45.

"Thus, we are not concerned with any call of political reform that is based on [upholding the privileges of] the rotten sectarian system. Likewise, we are not concerned about the formation of any cabinet or fielding any [Hizbullah] member to become a minister, since any governmental ministry is part and parcel of the oppressive, unjust regime"[68]

Hezbollah's opposition to the pre-Ta'if political system rendered it not only an 'anti-system' party which sought to change the very system of government, but a revolutionary one, which sought to change it from "outside the system".[69] The establishment of the Islamic state was supposed to be voluntary, but the right of self-determination and the freedom of choice are framed in religious terms[70].

Hezbollah explained why it considers overthrowing of the existing regime one of its priorities:

"Based on (our vision and prediction of the Lebanon) we confront the existing regime with the following two standpoints:

1) *It is the product of world arrogance and oppression and part of the political map that is an adversary to Islam*
2) *It is an unjust regime in its very foundations, which is resistant to any change or reform. Rather it is incumbent upon us to completely uproot it in conformity with the Qur'anic verse (5:45) "Whoever does not judge according to what Allah has revealed, those are the evildoers!""*[71]

Looking from this point of view, it is clear to see Hezbollah's dedication to the principles of the Islamic rule as the only just system of governance. The opposition against the Lebanese state is expressed in religious, though not sectarian terms. Nowhere in the Open Letter is Hezbollah defining itself as "Shi'a". It refers to Islam and its principles, however it does not discriminate against other branches of Islam, as long as they share goals and enemies with Hezbollah.

It is also this contestation of the state system that caused Hezbollah to fall apart with Amal as another Shi'a political force in Lebanon: it claimed that the main reason of this conflict was the importance that Amal attained to gaining political power. As elaborated by Nasrallah, "Amal is more concerned with the affairs related to power and the domestic agenda than it is with the resistance priority", which Hezbollah regards as a clear instance of misplaced priorities.[72]

Hezbollah was therefore against both the ruling party, as well as the opposition that (in theory) it should be friendly towards as they shared the common "oppressor". This kind of radical approach was desirable during the war, where the concepts of the resistance and anti-systemic contestation of the state were motivating Hezbollah's activities and alliances during the conflict. In addition to that, .

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[68] Alagha, *Hizbullah's documents*, 45.
[69] Saad-Ghorayeb, 26.
[70] Ibid., 36.
[71] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents…*, 45.
[72] Saad Ghorayeb, 115.

However, at the end of the conflict and with the concluding 1989 Ta'if Accords, Hezbollah had to find itself a new way to express its identity and to accommodate the new Lebanese political landscape.

2.4 MILESTONE: THE DECISION TO GO INTO ELECTIONS

If there was one event that truly redefined the Hezbollah's ideas and concepts about itself, it was the decision to take part in the first post-civil war Lebanese election in 1992. The party stood in front of a choice where it could either participate and be an active part of the Lebanese political life. This could have both pros and cons for the party, such as loss of credibility - after all, it was anti-systemic to begin with and called for the abolishment of the unjust sectarian system. On the other hand, though, through incorporation into Lebanese politics Hezbollah could be able to fulfil its primary goal – resistance against Israel.

The causal relationship at first might look as if it was the event of the elections that had inspired the Party of God to produce the change in its identity. This hypothesis has some solid arguments: the change of political landscape could have made Hezbollah realise that it had no chance of survival as an armed resistance in the new circumstances without achieving an operational compromise with the current power structure. In addition, there was also a suspicion that the party might have decided to "soften" its discourse due to the shifts that were happening in the Iranian leadership at the time[73]. These allegations were denied by Hassan Nasrallah, the Party Secretary General, himself, in a series of post-election interviews in 1992[74].

The crucial argument to understand Hezbollah's decision to participate in the earlier contested Lebanese sectarian system is the priority of resistance and of the Holy Jihad. Hezbollah has made it clear more than once that they are more invested in overthrowing the occupation of the Lebanese land than in overthrowing the regime (however unjust it might be)[75]. Even though from its previous statements it might look as both the resistance and the anti-statism are the fixed components of Hezbollah's identity, in the face of the changing political landscape one took priority over another[76]. The resistance priority[77] was best explained by Hassan Nasrallah:

"In reality, we were, and will always be, the party of the resistance that [operates] from Lebanon in reaction to occupation and daily aggression. Any party, movement or faction that abandons resistance under any pretext, and for any reason, is giving up on a sacred duty. Our participation in the elections and entry into the National Assembly do not alter the fact that we are a resistance party; we shall, in fact, work to turn the whole of Lebanon into a country of resistance, the state into a state of resistance. (…) As for the domestic situation, we feel that paying attention to it is a responsibility that we cannot abandon. There is a dialectical link, here, between the resistance and the internal situation in Lebanon,

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[73] After the death of Khomeini, the more moderate Imam Khamenei took over.
[74] See: Nicolas Noe (ed.), Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, London: Verso, 2007.
[75] Saad-Ghorayeb, 112-114.
[76] Ibid., 113.
[77] On the priority of resistance above all other components of Hezbollah's identity, see Saad-Ghorayeb, 112.

because for the resistance to survive there should be a community that adopts it and adopts the resistance fighter. This means that, in order to remain steadfast, that fighter needs to secure all the support he needs politically, security-wise, culturally, and economically – and [he needs to] be provided with the means of livelihood." [78]

With the transition of Lebanon from a conflict-torn state into the country that was entering a long-awaited period of stabilisation it was no longer possible for Hezbollah to act on the premises it acted during the civil war. Therefore, Hezbollah, motivated by the wish to preserve the core elements of its identity construction, decided to change their representation in the public discourse and evolve in its role in the domestic scene.

The new discourse, however, was not designed to suddenly express support for the Lebanese state as an institution. This was explicitly made sure of by Naim Qassem, a prominent Hezbollah leader:

"Participation in parliamentary elections is an expression of sharing in an existing political structure, Parliament being one of the regime's pillars. It does not, however, represent a commitment to preserving the structure as it is, or require defence of the system's deficiencies and blemishes"[79]

In addition to that, Hezbollah has made it clear that it has not given up on the idea of the Islamic State as such – however the achievement of this was no longer a priority for the organisation: it would be happy if the Lebanese people voluntarily decided that the Islamic state is they preferred way of state organisation:

"Regarding the project of the Islamic Republic, I can assure you that we will never propose this option per se in Lebanon, neither through statements, slogans or speeches. We also said that this sectarian system is unjust and corrupt, and should therefore be replaced by another that reflects the will of the Lebanese people and establishes justice, security, peace and equality. (…) We are in effect saying to the Lebanese people that if they choose an Islamic system, we would hasten to support it. We believe, based on our Muslim faith, that a system that rests on Islamic principles will be able to solve all Lebanon's problems, be they legislative, legal, intellectual, spiritual or moral"[80]

In the end, it might be stated that the events in Lebanon have influenced the identity shift in Hezbollah, but also that Hezbollah's identity was what motivated the change of expression and the reinterpretation of definitions it has been using: fulfilling its holy goal of Islamic resistance and Jihad pushed it towards "softening" the discourse that was applied to achieve it. Hezbollah had to prioritize on its goals and also on the identity pillars it wanted to make more salient at the time.

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[78] Nasrallah in an interview with Al-Watan al-Arabi, 11 September 1992, as quoted in: Nicolas Noe (ed.), Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, London: Verso, 2007, 88-90.
[79] Naim Qassem, Hezbollah: The Story from Within, Kindle edition.
[80] Nasrallah in an interview with Al-Watan al-Arabi, 11 September 1992, as quoted in: Nicolas Noe (ed.), Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, London: Verso, 2007, 90.

2.5 THE 2009 MANIFESTO: THE REINTERPRETATION OF CONCEPTS

This conceptual shift is best expressed by Hezbollah in the second identity statement issued by Hezbollah in 2009 - Manifesto. The difference in approach and the understanding of resistance, the self and the other is a result of the political and social change that both Lebanon and the Party of God had went through in the 30 years of Hezbollah's activity. The following section will focus on the reinterpretation of the basic concepts of Hezbollah's identity published at the end of the 2000s.

2.5.1. RESISTANCE 2.0 AND THE INCORPORATION INTO LEBANESE POLITICS

In the 1982 understanding of resistance, it was a tool to achieve a total reform of the reality that Hezbollah was a part of at the time: eradication of its main enemy and abolishment of the existing oppressive political system.

The 2009 Manifesto follows the principles presented in the 1982 Open Letter and sticks to Hezbollah's general rhetoric, yet it is a much different document than the Open Letter. First of all, it is more structured and dropping the character of the utopian appeal that the Open Letter had; it is a comprehensive political statement with the clear outline of the Party's ideology and its postulates and goals. Moreover, it is a final confirmation of Hezbollah's transformation: from a revolutionary, guerrilla group into one of the most prominent actors in the Lebanese political scene.

Resistance, of course, is still the foundation of organisation's self-definition. Hezbollah has not stepped down from the harsh (to put it mildly) critique of its enemies – the United States and Israel. Two first sections of the Manifesto are devoted directly to describing the menace that American hegemony (forced upon the international arena after the fall of the Soviet Union) is to the world and to all the oppressed[81]. The victories that the Party of God took over its enemies are also listed in the Manifesto, with the 2006 war with Israel presented as a success on the Hezbollah's side[82]. The party reaffirms its dedication to eradicate Israel as a state and to counter the US hegemony. The echoes of George W. Bush's War on Terror can also be traced in the new Manifesto[83]; Hezbollah seems very much focused on differentiating between terrorism and resistance, describing its own activities as the latter, and accusing the US of the former:

"In this framework, the Bush Administration decided to establish a correlation between terrorism and national resistance, and this in order to disarm the resistance of its humanitarian legitimacy and its righteousness of cause, and to justify the waging of all forms of wars against it. The last bastions of

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[81] Alagha, *Hizbullah's documents*, 118-120.
[82] Ibid., 124.
[83] Hezbollah was on the list of terrorist organisations that George W. Bush targeted in his announcement of War on Terror.

defence that peoples and countries use to uphold their freedoms, dignity and pride were to be removed."[84]

"It is doubtless that US terrorism is the mother of all world terrorism. In all respects, the Bush Administration has transformed the US into a threat against the world at all levels"[85]

What is visible is that the general stance on Hezbollah's relationship with the US and Israel has not changed; what is different from the 1982 is the way that Hezbollah is communicating it. There is no ground-breaking shift: the way in which resistance against the US and Israel is described is different mainly because of all the things that happened in the 24 years between the Open Letter and the Manifesto. The events of the 1990s and 2000s allowed Hezbollah to convey the exact same message, but using new arguments (see the focus on "terrorism", a notion absent in the Open Letter) and creating new discourses.

The principles on which the just state should be built are also drastically different from the Open Letter. There are no more mentions of the Islamic order in these requirements; Hezbollah refers to democratic institutions and freedoms that should be granted to Lebanese people. Moreover, it acknowledges the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Lebanon[86], focusing on the nation and its unity in its manifesto.

Resistance is also interpreted as a nation-making tool, dedicated to the well-being of people of Lebanon. Even the discourse around the arch enemy, Israel, is conducted in a different way: Israel is a threat to the country of Lebanon and the nation of Lebanese, and because of that it should be neutralised (not because of a threat it poses to the Islamic revolution)[87].The issue of attitude towards the Lebanese state and its confessional structure is the one that underwent the most significant evolution in the years between the Open Letter and the 2009 Manifesto. Hezbollah went from an ideological-revolutionary version of Islam to review its political ideology, or to even put it on the shelf and develop a secular political programme.[88] This is clearly visible on the pages of the 2009 Manifesto.

First of all, Lebanon is referred to as "our homeland and that of our fathers and forefathers, just as it shall be the homeland to our children, our grandchildren and the generations to come"[89]. The striking difference between the Manifesto and the Open Letter is that Hezbollah identifies itself as a Lebanese entity; it diverged from expressing itself as a transnational group influenced the ideology of pan-Islamism.

Hezbollah in 2009 Manifesto remains consistent on its views of confessional system in Lebanon. It claims that sectarianism is the reason of all challenges that Lebanon faced in the past decades. However, it no longer repudiates all the institutions of the structure of the state – there is a dramatic shift in the approach towards opposition:

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[84] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents*, 120.

[85] Ibid., 120.

[86] Ibid., 32.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Alagha, *Hizbullah Identity Construction*, 31.

[89] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents*, 122.

"In a true democracy, the door remains ajar for the proper alternation of power between ruling government supporters, on the one hand, and the opposition or various political coalitions, on the other"[90].

Later on it is added that Hezbollah agrees with the vision of democracy and abolition of sectarianism outlined in the 1989 Ta'if Accords; what is more important, until the moment that these system is implemented, Hezbollah acknowledges the consensual democracy based on sectarian grounds[91]. This was sort of a safeguard of Hezbollah, showing that it still adheres to the ideals of abolishing sectarianism: nevertheless, the Ta'if accords were constructed in a way that would make eradication of sectarianism from Lebanese politics nearly impossible.

These changes have not happened without a reason. Hezbollah had to step back in its plans of installing the Islamic Republic in Lebanon after the events of the Iran-Iraq war[92]. Accepting the UN Resolution 598 that has ended this conflict resulted in Iran and Khomeini abandoning the project of establishing an Islamic Republic in Iraq; therefore, this type of regime could not had been introduced in Lebanon either[93]. The global Islamic (Shi'a) revolution did not work out, so both Iran and Hezbollah had to look for other ways to define themselves as both domestic and international actors. As mentioned in the one of previous sections, Hezbollah also had to prioritise its objectives in Lebanon and decided to put resistance first, since they stated that "if we want to give a people the right to choose [the political system it wants], it must be first free [from occupation] and only then can it choose"[94]. The external enemy must be first dealt with, and only afterwards the society can focus on the choice of Islamic (or another just) rule of governance.[95]

In the period between the Open Letter and the New Manifesto all of the Hezbollah goals had become tailored to strengthen its position in the domestic scene and gain popular support. These could not have been achieved with the widespread radical Islamic revolution in the Iranian type, so Hezbollah had to look for some other means and to figure out its new identity after the end of the Iran-Iran war and at the end of the Lebanese civil war. Hezbollah's views on Lebanese state and politics are the ones that evolved the most in 30 years: they went from the total denial into acceptance and incorporation (even though still keeping up the anti-establishment mode). Hezbollah learnt that it cannot found its identity fully on irredentism: it needed allies in order to survive. The alliance with Iran (which had been substantial to Hezbollah's existence) was not enough: friends were needed also on the domestic level. That's why the organisation focused on the grass-root movements and bottom-up activism in order to gain popular support. The identity of Hezbollah thus shifted from revolutionary contestant of the state system into the fully-fledged political party, opposed to the government but willing to operate in the previously-contested

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[90] Alagha, *Hizbullah's documents*, 125.

[91] Ibid., 125.

[92] Pol Morillas Bassedas, "Hezbollah's Identities and their Relevance for Cultural and Religious IR" (Barcelona: Institut Catala Internacional per la Pau, December 2009), 27.

[93] Bassedas, 27.

[94] Saad-Ghorayeb, 115.

[95] Ibid., 115.

system. Hezbollah switched from achieving its goals through revolution to achieving its goals through the state structure and institutions – especially its primary goal – the resistance against Israel.

3.2.3. UNITY OF MUSLIMS AND INCLUSIVINESS

As mentioned before, Hezbollah has been founded as an organisation that expressed the frustration and disempowerment of Lebanese Shi'a in the 1970s and 1980s. However, in its rhetoric it never referred explicitly to this one branch of Islam; it had more of a universal message to "all the oppressed" of the world, and called upon all the Muslims to unite and act against the "oppressors".

However, Hezbollah's connection to the Shi'a Islam and identity has been strong from the very beginning of the organisation. The Party referred to Imam Khomeini as its *faqih* (the jurisprudent), and adopted the *wilayat al-faqih* as its leading religious ideology, which made its sectarian affiliation quite clear. Most of its leadership came from the Shi'a clergy, as well: the sectarian angle could not be overlooked in the establishment of the organisations. Also, the historic circumstances have been tense in terms of religion: in the Lebanese civil war the political divisions ran along the lines of confessional ones, henceforth certain political powers adapted the religious discourse in self-identification.

In the Open Letter of 1982, Hezbollah had very strong religious views. Its ideology was Islamic to the core, in the Iranian 1979 revolution spirit. The organisation defined creation of the Islamic state in Lebanon as one of its primary goals[96] and referred to the system of Islamic government as the only just and fair political system. The governance based on the *wilayat al-faqih* was presented in opposition to the "oppressive" confessional system that had brought Lebanon to the civil war:

"From this perspective, we do not want to impose Islam on anyone, like we do not want others to impose upon us their convictions and their political systems. We do not want Islam to govern Lebanon by force, as political Maronism is governing now.
However, we affirm our conviction in Islam as a doctrine, political system, intellectual foundation and mode of governance."[97]

Hezbollah in its first statement comes out as an organisation that will not discriminate against religious affiliations of its followers: Islam is the Open Letter can be seen as a tool to achieve a fair political system in Lebanon (and later on – worldwide), but what is more important, Islam has a role to play in the liberation of all the "oppressed" of the world, no matter what race, religion or nationality; it is a mean to achieve the freedom from the oppressors, America being the biggest of them. The Party of God addresses it explicitly in the passage on its "friends": it presents the approach in which everyone who wants to take part in the revolution to overthrow the oppressive world hegemony is in the end following the rule of Islam, whether they are Muslim or not:

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[96] See earlier in this chapter.
[97] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents…*, 44.

"Friends, wherever you are in Lebanon, and no matter which thoughts you entertain and although we disagree with the tactics and manner of confronting [our enemies]… we share with you our primary strategic goals… the necessity of breaking the chains of American hegemony in Lebanon… ridding our country from the despicable Israeli occupation… and frustrating all Phalangist endeavors to exercise hegemony over politics and administration. So let us consolidate our front and bury our differences so that we can achieve our common goals of making Lebanon the burial place of American and Zionist projects.

You [our friends] carry ideas that do not conform to Islam… but this does not preclude cooperation with you in order to achieve these goals… especially since we feel that the motives which exhort you to struggle are Muslim motives in the first place, origination from confronting oppression and tyranny that have been practiced and imposed upon you… even if these motives were harboured by un-Islamic ideas, they have to converge back to its essence, then you witness that revolutionary Islam spearheads the struggle to face tyranny and oppression"

The revolutionary motives against the oppressors are equalled to "Muslim motives": the strife for social justice is presented as inherently Muslim; it which shows that Hezbollah is not really interested in a religious conversion of the growing group of its supporters: more than that, it is interested in gaining support for its cause, no matter the religion. It's the motivations that matter. Not all Muslims are resistance fighters, but all resistance fighters (in Hezbollah's understanding) fulfil the Muslim duty.

This is a very inclusive approach: it has allowed the organisation to take in people from other branches of Islam, or even the Christians that were not in favour of Maronite policies. However, this call still remains quite radical: it comes from the phase where Hezbollah was more focused on the violent and total overthrow of the existing world order rather than on the incorporation into local politics. Moreover, this approach originated from the Iranian revolutionary ideology, which was also focused on spreading the revolution worldwide and not on exclusion of confessional groups that did not follow the rule of law of Shi'a Islam. The inclusiveness and cross-cultural, cross-class and cross-religion attitude was strongly represented both by the Iranian spiritual leadership and by Hezbollah clerics. This has allowed both groups to present their ideologies as world-wide revolutions and not as local fights relevant only to the region.

It is highly probable that Hezbollah's inclusiveness has allowed it to conduct the change in its personality more smoothly after the end of Lebanese civil war. After all, explaining the shift from radical (referred to as terrorist) organisation focused on overthrowing the unjust system to the political party engaging in the state structures was probably easier given Hezbollah's concept of the "oppressed" and the egalitarian approach to the religious denominations of people who wanted to fight for the common cause of the liberation from the world oppression.

The inclusiveness of Hezbollah as a political organisation became more salient in the years following the Ta'if accords. With the decision to participate in the electoral processes in Lebanon, Hezbollah had to work out the way to gain supporters outside Shi'a affiliated groups. It has decided to shift the course of its political programme from putting the emphasis on the religious identity towards the emphasis on national identity. Henceforth, this policy is often called "Lebanonization" or *infitah*

(opening)[98]. "Nationalising" the identity and adjusting the organisations strategy to get more involved in the state politics resulted in even bigger inclusiveness of the party as a political actor.

Hezbollah's principles remained the same at the basis: the organisation's ideology was still to fight the oppression, and to establish a just system in Lebanon. Moreover, the definition of "friends" of Hezbollah had not changed either in any drastic way: it was cutting across religious, class and national boundaries. However, the main change happened in the tools engaged to achieving the goal of liberation: Hezbollah shifted its focus from the irredentist claims and calls to establishment of the Islamic order outside of Lebanese state structures, to engaging into local politics and becoming an active part of the state apparatus[99]. The post-civil war political pragmatism had been enhanced by the fact that Hezbollah has realised that it would be impossible to gain popular support with such strong religious denomination (despite the inclusiveness) and with total lack of acceptance of state structures.

Despite the change of discourse, Hezbollah has not completely abandoned its religious affiliation. It adapted to become a part of Lebanese political scene and state system and gain popular support outside its traditionally confessional base, but it has also worked to sustain support in the Shi'a community and continuously strengthen its position. Hezbollah had invested a lot of resources into the grass-root movements and bottom-up investments in the most underprivileged Shi'a neighbourhoods. In this way the Party had built an extended network of welfare and social services. These have been primarily, but not exclusively aimed at Shi'a communities: by doing that Hezbollah was able to emphasize its status as a truly Lebanese party, caring for all the citizens rather than a challenge to the state's pluralist system; at the same time, it managed to maintain its ties with the community it has risen from.[100] In addition to that, such activities allowed for the bottom-up Islamization process.

From this angle, the 2009 Manifesto reconfirms the policies that had be instated at the time of its publication: it calls both for unity of Muslims (and calls for the end of sectarian tensions between the Shi'a and Sunni), and reaffirms its dedication to the global goal of liberation: the approach that overcomes religion and class is especially visible in the passage where Hezbollah admires the Liberation Theology Movements from South America.[101]

To sum up, Hezbollah from its very onset had been an inclusive organisation, uniting people across class and religion, as long as they shared the common goal of the overthrow of the global oppression. From the 1985 Open Letter to 2009 Manifesto the principles remained the same: Hezbollah still wants to come out as an inclusive organisation that's ideology cuts cross-class and cross-religion. What has changed it the goals on the domestic level and the following shift in the means towards achieving organisations goals. The focus on Hezbollah's incorporation to the Lebanese political scene has allowed it to become even more inclusive on the domestic level and gain popular support among the other sects active in the country.

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[98] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Identity Construction*, 114.
[99] Bassedas, 26.
[100] Ibid., 20.
[101] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents...,* 130-133.

2.6 CONCLUSIONS

Hezbollah's identity was primarily influenced by the events that were happening in Lebanon in the early 1980s – the civil war and the Israeli invasion. The hostile environment in which the organisation had rose to power determined the way it would defined itself – in contrast to its enemies, therefore adapting the resistance identity, where the basic notion of Self is inseparably connected with the notion of the Other. Hezbollah created a resistance type identity, which majorly influenced its decision making as a group.

Henceforth, the core concept of Hezbollah identity is resistance. This has been the guiding principle for the group's activity in the past over 30 years, both internally and externally. Hezbollah has proven itself very dedicated to the concept of resistance, which might be found as a motivation for some of its domestic actions. Additionally, resistance in Hezbollah's discourse was tightly connected to the concept of the Islamic jihad, which was the holy duty of every Muslim. This connection has motivated majority of Hezbollah's actions during the civil war, and resistance was the ultimate goal that could excuse the violent means to achieve it. The oppression, however, in Hezbollah's understanding, came also from the within. The resistance was addressed also against the unjust sectarian system of government in Lebanon, which was promoting the hegemony of the Christian Maronite group.

From the 1985 Open Letter, Hezbollah appears as a radical organisation without much space for dialogue in Lebanese context: it was an "either with us or against us" type of political group at the time. It did not want to improve the system, it wanted to destroy it: everyone who thought otherwise became the enemy (hence the lack of agreement between Hezbollah and other opposition parties in Lebanon at the time). However, this particular expression of its identity formation was challenged by the end of the civil war and necessity to adapt to new circumstances.

Hezbollah's identity formation and the change in underwent in domestic conditions proves that the organisation identity is in the constant flux, however Hezbollah carefully crafts its discourse about it in order to not appear incoherent. The organisation has managed to go from the anti-state, violently aggressive and unpredictable actor to the fully-fledge political party. It went from anti-state (in quite literal sense of the word) to anti-establishment in the matter of 10 years. The tool to connect the conflicting, or even competing elements of the its identity (since at first being anti-state, yet participating in the elections) was constant creation and recreation of the discourse Hezbollah applied to express its identity and the reinterpretation of its core concepts.

Hezbollah had been using the same notions from its very beginning to define itself: resistance, Islam and anti-sectarianism. All the pillars of its identity are equally important, however in order to achieve their reinterpretation, Hezbollah was willing to make some aspects of its identity more salient than others. The example is the focus on resistance against Israel, and not on contestation of the Lebanese sectarian system before the 1992 elections.

In addition to that, it is not only Hezbollah's identity that was motivation for its actions; it is also external events that had impact on the identity shifts. After the end of the civil war and the Ta'if accords, it was the change of the political circumstances that motivated the shift in the identity of the group (it needed to stop being so openly anti-state), but it was its identity principles (resistance) that motivated

Hezbollah to step back in the area of its contestation of the Lebanese governance system in order to keep up the resistance priority and its ability to conduct the resistance against Israel.

Moreover, another aspect of group's identity – inclusiveness – facilitated Hezbollah's shift from the anti-regime guerrilla group into the Lebanese political party and the consequent changes in organisation's collective identity. Since Hezbollah from the very beginning was declaring willingness to cooperate with anyone who shared their goals – regardless the class, nationality and even religion – it was more reliable to act as a representative to all Lebanese people, not only the Shi'a of Lebanon. Due to the tactics of "nationalizing" resistance project and referring to it as a cause for all the people of Lebanon, Hezbollah was able to make its shift towards acceptance of the Lebanese state more plausible.

Summing up, there is an inseparable bond between Hezbollah's identity construction and its decision making. It is crucial to remember that the organisation's identity is in a constant flux, which is best shown by its turn from the anti-government guerrilla in to a party with its representation in the Lebanese parliament. This example is to be kept in mind when assessing possible future decisions of Hezbollah – their motivation would come from the identity it has built over the years, but in particular circumstances this construction would need to be reinterpreted and rebuilt. This seems to be the case in the decision to entry the Syrian war.

3. THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HEZBOLLAH, IRAN AND SYRIA

Hezbollah, as any international entity, does not exist in the vacuum. It is one of the most intertwined non-state actors: its relationship with its allies is particularly strong and hence has consequences that other alliances do not. The allies in question – Syria, Iran and Hezbollah – are often referred to as the "Axis of Resistance", "Axis of Refusal", or – with the sectarian undertone - the "Shiite Crescent". For the sake of this paper, the relationship between the three will be referred to as the Axis of Resistance, since it is the resistance cause that ties the group together in their official discourses.

On the both strategic and identity level, all three actors share the common goal: the neutralisation of Israel. Even though Iran and Hezbollah are expressing this wish in quite radical ways (such of the eradication of the Zionist entity), and Syria is concerned more with the regaining of the land (especially the Golan Heights), the resistance against the Jewish State is ultimately something that keeps these actors together. Only Hezbollah's existence is based on the existence of Israel (as explained in chapter 2), but the case of Israel and its occupation of the Arab land has been a vocal part of the both domestic and international discourse of Syria and Iran.

Hezbollah could not have come into being without Iranian help. The formalisation of the group was possible only because Iran was truly committed to the establishment of an armed group that would represent the new wave of Islamic renaissance in the region: Amal was too secular for the Islamic Republic's liking and too focused on domestic goals. Hezbollah, who's foundation was built upon young Shi'a clerics, was better equipped to represent Iranian interest outside the borders of the Islamic Republic. Iran could also support Hezbollah as its own foreign policy "project" of spreading the great Islamic Revolution further in the region. The Party of God, also by geographic proximity, had potential to represent another of Iran's crucial interest in its agenda – the annihilation of the state of Israel. Hence the anti-Israeli stand of Hezbollah in early stages complied fully with Iran's foreign policy towards the Jewish state at the time. Thus, it was also in the interest of the Islamic Republic to provide both ideological support and the supplies needed for Hezbollah to function.

The alliance between Syria and Hezbollah seems more of a marriage of convenience: objectives and goals of both actors not always had been compliant. Syria had already been present in Lebanon at the time of emergence of Hezbollah as an organisation: the cooperation between the two was facilitated majorly by the Party of God's sponsor, Iran. Syria saw in Hezbollah its chance to delegate the logistical effort to fight Israel in the South of Lebanon (which Syria saw as the part of the Greater Syria, *Bilad al-Sham*)[102] and perceived supporting Hezbollah as forwarding its own foreign policy goals against the Jewish State. Throughout the years, together with Hezbollah's growing engagement in Lebanese politics, the objectives of both actors have become more and more contradictory. Even though Hezbollah has become more Lebanon-oriented, it was also aware that it needed Syria to sustain the relationship with Iran. Therefore, the history of relations between Hezbollah and Syria is far more complex and is

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[102] Abbas William Samii, "A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands: Assessing the Hizbullah-Iran-Syria Relationship", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 62 no.1 (Winter 2008), 38.

based on a power-struggle and negotiations about the zones and degree of influence of each actor on Lebanese politics.

The following paragraphs will look at the relationship between all three actors, with the particular focus on the Iran-Hezbollah and Syria-Hezbollah angle. Firstly, it will look on how Iran has influenced ideological stance of Hezbollah and what possible impact on the decision-making it might have had with providing the Party of God with resources; following that, the chapter will try to recap and assess the relationship between Syria and Party of God in the last 30 years, and try to determine whether their common history and influence on identity construction had been behind Hezbollah's decision to go into the Syrian civil war.

3.1 IRAN'S ROLE IN HEZBOLLAH'S IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The establishment of Hezbollah would not had been possible but for the 1979 Iranian revolution and the ideological shift it had brought to the region. It was on this particular wave of new Shi'a leadership that Hezbollah was able to rise to power as a political organisation. The angle from which the connection between Iran and Hezbollah will be analysed in this part is more ideological then political, as it was the Iranian revolution's ideology that had the biggest influence on the shape of Hezbollah's identity construction (especially in the early stages). What is worth mentioning, this part focuses only on Hezbollah's identity formation in relation to Iran – not on the actual political relationship between two actors. The connections between them will be attended to in the following chapters of this paper.

The general Shi'a political mobilisation in the late 1970s-early 1980s in Lebanon was greatly inspired by the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran and was partly built on hope of backing and reinforcement of the Islamic state in Iran[103]. In order to understand this connection, a closer look at the ideological relationship between Iran and Hezbollah is necessary.

First of all, Hezbollah from the very beginning acknowledged the religious leadership from Iran: the cornerstone of this relationship was a shared belief in *wilayat al-fakih* - the guardianship of the jurisprudent[104]:

"*In the 1980s, Hizbullah regarded* wilayat al-faqih*, as defined by Khumayni, as its true Islamic cultural identity and adopted it, in its original formulation, under the motto of: "The Islamic Revolution in Lebanon". Hezbollah recognized Khumayni as the official* marja' al-taqlid *(religious-legal authority of emulations) of the Islamic republic and as the first* faqih *(jurisprudent, jurisconsult) (…) to assume the title of the deputy of Imam al-Mahdi and to establish an Islamic state*"[105].

This acknowledgement of the *wilayat al-faqih* was resonating strongly with the early Hezbollah's postulates of establishment of the Islamic state (and abolition of the nation-state that Lebanon is). In the

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[103] Wiegand, 670
[104] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Identity Construction*, 46.
[105] Ibid, 46.

Open Letter, Hezbollah claims that Khomeini "detonated the Muslims' revolution" and was "bringing about the glorious Islamic renaissance"[106].

Moreover, Hezbollah quite quickly adapted the revolutionary rhetoric and the semantics of struggle and resistance:

"[Hezbollah] resolutely situated itself within the dual Khomeinist perspective of revolutionary struggle and the fight against Israel. It embraced marginality, rejecting any compromise with the established Lebanese system. Its top priority was jihad against the occupier (…)"[107]

All the themes that Hezbollah has undertaken in its Open Letter (as mentioned before) resonate strongly with the statements that Iran was making at the time. In addition, following the spiritual leadership of Khomeini had yet another advantage – the Imam quite quickly defined his stance on Israel as an entity with giving Yasser Arafat keys to the Israeli embassy in Teheran and defining his primary goal as to destroy Israel [108]. It was very handy for Hezbollah to take his spiritual mentorship and to follow this goal in the face of the 1982 invasion. Common goal and common enemy facilitated the cooperation between the actors.

The goal of establishing a greater Islamic state after the 1979 Iranian revolution was as well ideological as political. Henceforth, Hezbollah had become a tool for expression of Iranian revolutionary ideas as well as it had been a proof to the inevitable spread of the new politico-ideological order onto the Muslim world. Hezbollah was fully aware that it needed Iranian backing (both on ideological and political grounds) to survive, which might have had influence on another aspect of its identity: inclusiveness. The organisation followed the path of pan-Islamism, not Islamism as such: it refuted the idea of acting as the religious force and instating the religious order within the nation-state. Hezbollah, together with Iran, in its early stages postulated establishment of a bigger entity uniting all the Muslims under the rule of religious law, which would override both the borders and the laws ruling the nation-state.[109] The official documents from this time refrain from referring to Lebanon or Iran as sovereign states, as this would involve denying their status as provinces of a greater Islamic entity[110]. In addition, the achievement of this entity would be voluntary to all the people that would like to be a part of it.

In the aspect of creating the pan-Islamic state, Hezbollah has changed its views after the end of the Lebanese civil war[111]. As mentioned before, the organisation shifted its identity to be able to operate within the given nation-state frames, and not to act towards abolishing them. It was a necessary step to continue to conduct the resistance project, therefore it is possible to say it was easier accepted by the Iranian leadership. Despite the adaptation into domestic politics, Hezbollah could not repudiate the *wilayat al-faqih* principle – it just needed to readjust it to the new political circumstances. In order to achieve that, it still sought the "legitimacy" from the *faqih* to make the decision about participating in the

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[106] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents…*, 40.
[107] Avon et al., 26.
[108] Ibid., 24.
[109] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Identity Construction*, 51-52; Bassedas, 24.
[110] Bassedas, 24.
[111] See in chapter 2.

national elections in 1991[112]. Since it has been granted, Hezbollah had no problem from the ideological standpoint to become a part of the structure they so vehemently opposed – it was justified in the terms of greater good for the people and that possible benefits for the resistance outweighed the loss for the idea of the pan-Islamic state.[113] The interpretation of *wilayat all-faqih e*volved parallel to the growing engagement of Hezbollah into domestic Lebanese politics – the culmination point of this being the decision to participate in the Lebanese cabinet after the 2005 Syrian withdrawal, legitimacy for which was secured from Shaykh 'Afif al-Nabulsi – the head of the Association of Shiite Religious Scholars of Jabal 'Amil in south Lebanon – and not Khamenei[114]. It was justified with the interpretation of the *wilayat al-faqih* principle taking into consideration that the Islamic Republic of Iran does not have to be perceived as the jurisconsult of all the Muslims, and as a result not all Islamic movements have to abide by the orders and directives of *faqih* or the regime.[115] This proves the previously mentioned argument of Hezbollah focusing more on the domestic activities and harbouring more "Lebanese" identity, while turning away from its radically Islamist and pan-Islamic views.

To sum up, there are two salient aspects of Hezbollah's identity construction that are connected to the 1979 Iranian revolution: first of all, adopting the *wilayat al-faqih* principle as the guarding principle of the organisation and secondly, the commitment to establishment of the pan-Islamic state. This, together with the strong focus on the resistance against the imperialistic United States, formed the solid basis for the ideological alliance between the two actors. Hezbollah is called the "brainchild" of the post-revolutionary Iran for a reason: but for this event, its establishment and identity construction in the way we know it today would not had been possible. Even though Iranian revolution provided the solid foundation for the organisation's identity and principles, Hezbollah proved that also that could be subject of contestation and evolution throughout the years. This development reflects the general direction in which the Party of God's identity construction had been going in the last three decades – from the radical, anti-state and pan-Islamist organisation towards the mature political party, focused on domestic issues and realising its programme through participation in the state structures.

3.2 STRATEGIC-IDEOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH IRAN

Without incentives and support from Iran, there would be no Hezbollah. It is not to say that Hezbollah is fully Iran-dependent and would have not come to being without the Islamic Republic; rather than that, it was Iran who was able to capitalize and put into action the Lebanese Shi'a's political frustration and turn it into an institutionalized movement. As mentioned in the previous chapter, close ties between the two actors are also a part of Hezbollah's identity construction – explicitly stated in the documents that represent the organisation's self-perception.

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[112] Alagha, *Hizbullah's Identity Construction*, 52
[113] Ibid., 53-54; the idea of the Islamic state was not completely lost though, it was postponed to the indefinite future.
[114] Ibid., 54.
[115] Ibid., 53.

Iranian support for Hezbollah goes on two parallel levels: ideological and logistical. Both are intertwined, however it is possible to distinguish between the type of influence each of them has on Hezbollah's decision making. The logistics are more connected to the foreign policy agenda of Iran and the geopolitical situation of the region as such; ideological level serves the purpose of gathering support and identity legitimisation both locally and regionally.

Iranian revolution gave the Shi'a movement in Lebanon space for expressing their long-overdue frustration about their own disenfranchisement. In practical, material terms Iran provided necessary resources and supplies for launching the group's activities: it was the Iranian ambassador in Damascus, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, who reputedly directed majority of efforts in founding Hezbollah. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) had set up camps in the Beka'a Valley and provided military training, arms and leadership for the resistance movement against the Israeli in the south of Lebanon. On top of that, Iran has continued to provide financial subsidies ever since. In return, Hezbollah has acknowledged the Iranian leadership (however on a more spiritual than direct level – see later in this chapter) – moreover, its leaders have been regularly received in Teheran[116] from the onset of the organisation to this day. The Hezbollah project was not some undercover operation that Iran has conducted secretively to help its foreign policy goals: it was a public, state-sponsored partnership, which from the beginning was supposed to serve (or at least help in a significant way) a particular agenda of the Iranian Revolution. The support was explicitly legitimised in state documents: the new Iranian constitution (adopted in 1979) mandated the revolutionary regime's involvement with the Lebanese Shi'a. Article 3 asserts that the government is duty-bound to provide "unsparing support to the dispossessed of the world" and Article 154 says that the government "supports the just struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe"[117]. Henceforth, the phrasing of the document in this way might have inspired Hezbollah to adopt the dichotomy of the "oppressors" and the "oppressed" in its identity construction: in this way, Iranian interference was justified and made "legal" both for the domestic and foreign audiences.

However, the close cooperation between Iran and Hezbollah would not be possible without the external event of Israeli invasion of 1982. At the invasion's onset, Iran was hoping to make Amal, the first Lebanese Shi'a movement, cooperate in forwarding Iranian goal of eradicating the state of Israel, or at least removing it from the south of Lebanon. As it later turned out, Amal was more interested in pursuing local goals and getting involved in the ongoing Lebanese civil war; moreover, they were inclined towards alliances with Maronite Christians, the fact which Iran was not willing to agree on. Hence, the Islamic Republic would have had little chance of mobilizing a significant pro-Iranian political movement capable of competing with the Lebanon-centric Amal without the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (in this case, the Tehran-Damascus relationship also facilitated this process as Syria was not interested in alliances with the Maronites either)[118]. The Israeli interference in Lebanon created a new space in the Shi'a public sphere - a space for Iran to neutralize the anti-Palestinian bias institutionalized in Amal and shift a part of the Shi'a from their previous preoccupation with their rights inside the Lebanese system

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[116] Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, (London/New York: Routledge, 1997), 123.
[117] Samii, 34-35.
[118] Samii, 123.

to countering the external enemies of Islam[119]. Separation of this political potential from the Amal-dominated Shi'a environment resulted in establishing the new political movement, Hezbollah:

"Military activities were just one aspect of Iranian involvement in Lebanon, but early efforts to advance Ayatollah Khomeini's religio-political views through contacts with Amal had not borne fruit. Meanwhile, splits among Lebanese Shi'a had emerged, after the political leadership of Amal, represented by Nabih Berri, and the more religious members of the organization – some of whom would go on to leadership positions in Hizbullah – disagreed on how to fight Israel and on the necessity of alliances with Maronite Christians. Some of the Iranian personnel who remained in Lebanon after the main IRGC contingent departed helped create the committee that would serve as Hizbullah's first decision-making council (this would eventually become the Majlis al-Shura*). The committee's final document, the so-called* Manifesto of the Nine*, was submitted to (…) Khomeini. [he] approved the document, thereby enshrining the theocratic concept of Guardianship of the Supreme Jurisconsult (*wilayat el-fakih*) for the Lebanese Shi'a".* [120]

This also shows how the foreign policy goals and spiritual leadership were intertwined from the very beginning of the alliance between Hezbollah and Iran. Hezbollah's cooperation with Iran had a better potential of mobilizing the frustrated Shi'a minority, as Iran claimed to champion the "deprived masses" and this corresponded to the Lebanese Shi'a's perception of their historical experience, while Iran's revolution was a model of how such people could overpower a militarily powerful oppressor.[121] Another important symbolic that was used to mobilize the Lebanese Shi'a within the discourse of the oppressors and the oppressed was the Karbala Paradigm. During the Iranian revolution of the 1979, the oppressed Iranian masses came to represent Hussein and those who died with him during the battle of Karbala, while the Shah and his regime were associated with the Umayyad rulers. Imam was also emphasised as a model for rebellion also against foreign imperial powers. In the Lebanese case, we could see a shift in the Karbala paradigm from resisting the oppressor, to resisting the invader Israel, as Karbala narrative has proved to be a flexible set of symbols, ready to evolve in accordance with changing political trends. (…) Hence Hezbollah created a conceptual shift through its interpretation of the Karbala Paradigm and changed its understanding: With Hezbollah the Karbala paradigm becomes resistance against the oppressor/occupier rather than a revolt against a ruler. In this case, the foreign occupying state is Israel and its ally, the USA.[122] This example also shows the extensive influence that the Islamic Republic had on the pillars of the identity construction of Hezbollah.

There is a particular causal relationship between what kind of support a non-state organisation can get from a state and how they make decisions influenced by it:

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[119] Ehteshami and Hinnebusch., 124
[120] Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Why Does Iran Need Hizbullah?", *The Muslim World*, Vol 106 (January 2016), 136.
[121] Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, 123.
[122] Rola El Husseini, "Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria", Third World Quarterly, Vol 31, no. 5 (2015), 805.

"… state support has a powerful, yet indirect effect on violent non-state actor decision-making by shaping the options available to groups' leaders. (…) they empower such organisations to undertake long-range planning and adopt a long-term perspective towards their struggle. (…) sponsored violent non-state actors can also leverage the financial resources provided by sponsors to pursue 'hearts and minds' campaigns predicated on their ability to provide social services and welfare benefits". (….) through the resources they provide, state sponsors fundamentally shape both the environment within which terrorist and insurgent leaders make decisions and the options available to them"[123]

From the onset of Hezbollah, Iranian impact is reflected not only in the openly-stated religious leadership affiliation and shared identity features: it showed itself in the very core of Hezbollah's structure. This closeness manifested itself in the Iranian officials' participation in the key decision-making bodies of Hezbollah. The 17-member *Majlis al-Shura*, which was created by Iran's ayatollah Fazlollah Mahallati – a top figure in IRGC contingent – and which did not hold regular meetings until May 1986, included "one or two" IRGC representatives or officials from the Iranian embassies in Beirut or Damascus. The *Majlis al-Shura* continues to include at least one IRGC official[124]. Therefore, Iran had some influence on how the organisation is governed, but also on how the identity of the Party of God is structured. The premise of the organisation's activity (at least in the early years) – terrorism and martyrdom – was also legitimised by Khomeini's endorsement of the movement[125].

Again, politics, identity and religion come intertwined; it is not only the decision-making bodies of Hezbollah that were influenced by Iran – the clerical leadership mirrored that of the Islamic Republic itself. The education of most of its leaders in Najaf or Qom gave the movement powerful trans-state connections.[126] Hezbollah's charter states that matters of debate which cannot be decided by the organisation's governing council should be referred to the decision of the Supreme Leader.[127]

In terms of material support, the primary resource that can be provided by the state to the non-state organisation is money. Due to the specifics of the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah the numbers are hard to trace. Even though there are no accurate accounts on the size of Iranian funding, reportedly the material assistance provided by the Islamic Republic was annually valued at approximately $140 million during the 1980s, and subsequently declined to between $50 and $100 per annum in the later stages. Besides financial resources, Iran also offered Hezbollah's cadres a safe haven on its own territory and negotiated with Syria to procure it a sanctuary closer to home, in Lebanon's Beka'a Valley.[128] Hezbollah has acknowledged receiving millions of dollars of financial support annually from Iran; while much of this funding has not come from government sources, it has

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[123] Marc R. DeVore, „Exploring the Iran-Hezbollah Relationship: A Case Study of how State Sponsorship affects Terrorist Group Decision Making", Perspectives on Terrorism, Volume 6, Issues 4-5 (October 2012), 85-86.
[124] Akbarzadeh., 137.
[125] DeVore and Stahli, 351.
[126] Ehteshami, Hinnebusch, 139.
[127] El Husseini, 809.
[128] Marc R. DeVore and Armin B. Stahli, "Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness: Internal and External Determinants of the Rise of Violent Non-State Actors", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27:2 (2015), 337.

been derived from foundations and charitable organisations that are directly controlled by the Supreme Leader. [129]

The logistical support of Iran to Hezbollah has been extensive and stable throughout the years. The factor that facilitated it was also Iran's relationship with Assad's Syria – who provided the territory for running all necessary operations in transferring resources. That was not an easily earned help, as Iran only convinced Assad to permit Iranian aid to transit its territory by promising to annually provide Syria with nine million tons of free oil. Only later Hezbollah's efficiency at combating Israel gradually convinced Syrian leaders that it could play a key role in Syria's regional strategy.[130]

The two levels of this relationship bring mutual profits to both actors: material support is a survival factor for Hezbollah without a doubt; the religious affiliation had been helping to spread the ideals of the Iranian revolution (up to some point, as the 1979 events did not cause a wave of revolutions in the region in the end). Hezbollah needs Iran, but Iran also needs Hezbollah: this relation is reciprocal, even though the power imbalance has been evened out in the recent years with the growing domestic independence of Hezbollah.

It has been documented that when Hezbollah got more engaged in the local politics, it had become gradually more independent from Iran in its decision-making processes, and also this independence has spread to the spiritual level – when Hezbollah searched for the endorsement of its politics from the Lebanese cleric, and not the Supreme Leader in Iran[131] . Iranian support, however, remains undisputable. However, it is important to point out that:

"(…) State sponsorship can contribute markedly to non-state actors' capabilities. However, the ability to use the resources sponsors provide depends heavily on such characteristics internal to the non-state groups themselves as their decision-making processes and members' backgrounds. In Hezbollah's case, although Iran's provisions (…) enabled Hezbollah to equip large insurgent forces, the organization's operational successes were a product of tactics devised and implemented by its Lebanese cadres, who drew more heavily on their prior experience in Lebanon's Civil War than on the inexpert advice offered by Iran Revolutionary Guards Corps. Consequently, Iranian support strengthened Hezbollah only insofar as the organization creatively adapted its inputs to Lebanon's unique environment."[132]

In the end, it was not the fact that Iran supported Hezbollah that allowed the organisation to achieve success in its operations – it was the way in which the provided resources were used that enabled Hezbollah to grow to its current dimensions and position.[133]

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[129] El Husseini, 809.
[130] DeVore and Stahli., 338.
[131] See chapter 2.
[132] DeVore and Stahli, 332.
[133] Ibid. 351.

Iranian sponsorship had a powerful, yet indirect effect in shaping both Hezbollah's decision-making processes and the strategic options that its *Shura* could choose between.[134] Nevertheless, over the years, there have been examples of the direct influence of Iran on Hezbollah's actions. Hezbollah as an organisation based in southern Lebanon and an actor that emerged in the middle of Israeli invasion during Lebanese civil war, was more willing to engage in activities targeted towards these two issues: combating Israel and solving the civil war crisis[135]. Organisation's list of enemies had been extended by the leverage that Iran held over Hezbollah and it was at times Iran's foreign policy goals that were motivating the behaviour of the Party of God.

Iranian leaders periodically attempted to use Hezbollah as a proxy to attack its enemies and therefore coaxed the organization to enlarge its target list to include objectives it would otherwise have never considered[136]. Alternatively, when Iran was worried that Hezbollah's activities could be harmful for the Islamic Republic foreign policies, it used its leverage against Hezbollah in order to restrain the organisation[137].

Hezbollah grew to fame as a terrorist organisation, however its first major act of terror – the October 1983 attach on the American and French contingents in the MNF (Multinational Force) – was inspired directly by Iranian leadership:

" (…) Iran's ambassador in Syria, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, initiated preparations for the attach by contacting the Iranian IRGC commander in the Beka'a Valley to request that Hezbollah attach the MNF. The IRGC commander, Ahman Kan'ani, convened a meeting with key Hezbollah decision-makers, including future general secretaries Abbas al-Musawi and Hassan Nasrallah. The fact that the impetus for the attack came from Iran's Damascus Embassy suggests that Syria may have requested Iranian aid in countering MNF activities it considered prejudicial to its interests in Lebanon"[138].

The suicide attack that Hezbollah conducted on Iranian orders resulted in 300 military personnel deaths and precipitated the MNF's withdrawal from Lebanon, easing the way for Syria's eventual return to Beirut[139].

Another example is the 1982-1991 Lebanese hostage crisis; it is believed to be inspired by the Islamic Republic since the event that triggered the kidnapping of foreigners was the disappearance of four Iranian personnel travelling in a Christian-controlled region in Northern Lebanon. In order to encourage the United States to cooperate in finding the missing diplomats, Iranian agents kidnapped David Dodge, president of the American University of Beirut, and smuggled him into Iran via Syria. The direct involvement of Iran backfired since USA quickly located Dodge and managed to convince Syria to pressurize Iran to release him. In the face of this failure, Iran decision-makers chose to use local proxy

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[134] DeVore, 96.
[135] Ibid., 96.
[136] Ibid., 96.
[137] Ibid., 96.
[138] Ibid., 97.
[139] Ibid.

for pursuing its strategy[140]. Henceforth, Hezbollah (despite its leaders' opinion that kidnapping Europeans might cause the organisation more trouble than profit) got engaged in the abductions of foreigners conducted between 1982 and 1991. Even though Hezbollah denied organisation's direct role in these events, there is evidence that suggests participation of at least two prominent Hezbollah military commanders – Imad Mughniyah and Husayn al-Musawi in these kidnappings.[141] It is clear from the abovementioned examples that Hezbollah's decision-making in the 1980s at times was heavily dependent on Iran and the Islamic Republic's objectives in the region. These actions could be presented in the frame of the resistance priority, however the resistance against the USA was never as vocal in Hezbollah's discourse as it was in the Iranian one.

With the "Lebanonisation" of Hezbollah, the examples of direct Iran intervention grew scarce – for a few reasons. Firstly, Hezbollah (although with Iranian consent to do so) decided to step into local politics and participate in the elections. Moreover, Syria grew to be the bigger concern in Lebanon as it was physically present in the country up until 2005 and actively meddling in the domestic political scene there. Finally, Hezbollah, as a more active domestic actor, over the years had become gradually more independent from Iran. Thus, in the most recent years, ideological and logistical linkages are still evident, but direct operational linkages between Hezbollah and Iran have been more difficult to pinpoint. It is difficult to estimate the exact extent of the influence Iran has had over the decision-making process in Hezbollah, or whether Hezbollah would have been able to maintain itself in the absence of Iranian support.[142]

3.3 RELATIONSHIP WITH SYRIA: THE MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE

3.3.1 SYRIAN PRESENCE IN LEBANON

The link between Hezbollah and Iran seems quite straightforward: one actor stood behind the creation of the other, with the strong ideological ties that have survived its ups and downs. The relationship between Syria and Hezbollah, however, is more complex and the power dynamics are different than in case of the Islamic Republic. To understand the relationship between Syrian government and Hezbollah better, it is needed to mention the context of Syrian presence in Lebanon between 1976-2005.

Syria was already involved in the Lebanese civil war at the time of establishment of Hezbollah. Syria's 1976 intervention in Lebanon was most immediately motivated by the grave security threat from the prospect that civil war and partition of Lebanon would open the door to Israeli penetration; however, the conflict also presented an opportunity for Damascus to insert itself as arbiter and draw Lebanon under its politico-military wing.[143] As Syrian presence on the ground lasted 30 years, this endeavour can be seen as successful.

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[140] DeVore, 96.
[141] Ibid., 97.
[142] El Husseini, 810.
[143] Ehteshami, Hinnebusch, 72.

Assad became a part of multiple factions fighting each other in the civil war. When, after 15 years, the war ended, he needed some legitimisation for its presence on the ground other than "a peacekeeping mission". This presence received formal status in May 1991, with the signing of the "Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination between Syria and Lebanon", which state that the policies of both countries would be fully coordinated on any issue, whether internal, pan-Arab or international, and which also allowed Syrian army to stay in Beirut and in other areas in Lebanon, in spite of the clause in the Ta'if Agreement calling for the Syrian army's departure.[144] Thus, with this treaty, Lebanon regained the much-needed stability after exhausting civil war, but lost its independence, de facto turning into a sort of Syrian protectorate. This state of matters received consent of the Arab world, Israel and the United States – it was nicknamed "the Syrian peace", and analogy to the 'Roman Peace" which meant forced peace between hitherto fighting actors due to the control of the Roman Empire in the lands in annexed.[145]

Accomplishing this feat required gently dealing with Lebanon's democratic political system, which held periodic elections. As Assad could not prevent the renewal of these elections after the civil war, he could not allow these elections to be completely free either since he had to make sure they would produce the desired results. Electoral intervention was therefore chosen as the optimal method.[146] Syria had influence over the electoral system, composition of the candidates list and sometimes intervened in a more drastic way. There were a few examples of Syrian "intervention" in the electoral results, such as an unsolved murder of the not-Syria-preferred president Rene Moawad (widely believed to be inspired by Assad), and on the contrary – prolonging the term of the pro-Syrian Elias Harawi (against the Lebanese constitution). Syria was also making all the effort to install politicians and officials friendly towards Assad in most of the public institutions.[147] The real power of Assad was also consolidated by the fact that Syria had become the biggest armed force in the Lebanese territory; its job was to disarm the militias and to provide security while the national army was being reconstructed.[148] It was also a power move on the Syrian side to allow only Hezbollah to maintain its arms after the Ta'if accords: Syria needed them as they could be used against the Party of God's and Assad's common enemy – Israel.

This dominance lasted until 2005; it was in 2000, after the withdrawal of the IDF forces, when the Syrian presence in Lebanon became less and less justifiable. Moreover, the 2005 assassination of the very domestically popular prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, which was probably inspired by Syria, exhausted Lebanese patience with Assad. This was the event that finally made Syria withdraw from Lebanon, even though the influences remained strong – due to ties to Hezbollah.

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[144] Ido Yahel and Or Honig, „The Father's Success and the Son's Failure: Explaining the Growth of Lebanon's Resistance to Syria's Invisible Occupation", *Digest of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 26, no 1. (2016), 138.
[145] Ibid., 132-133
[146] Ibid., 139.
[147] Yahel and Honig, 139.
[148] Judith Palmer Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*, (London/New York: IB Tauris, 2005), 45.

3.3.2 SYRIA-HEZBOLLAH RELATIONSHIP

Syrian presence in Lebanon is one thing that most certainly had influence on Hezbollah, however the Hezbollah-Syria axis was not always overlapping with Syrian-Lebanese relations and interests.

While Iran was interested in Hezbollah as both its armed wing outside the Islamic Republic for fighting Israel and also as a propaganda tool for spreading the Islamic revolution, Syria at first did not see that much profit in collaborating with the Party of God. Assad had no interest in spreading the new Shi'a religious revolution: he was interested in beating Israel and control over civil war-torn Lebanon was crucial to achieving this goal. Henceforth, when the tensions between the Lebanese Shi'a rose in the 1980s, Syrian regime tried to play them against each other in order to pursue its own agenda[149]. Conflicted local actors could serve as a justification to the prolonged presence and the "peacekeeping mission" under the pretext of which Syria entered Lebanon in 1976.[150]

While Iran patronized Hezbollah, Syria, seeing it as both a threat and an opportunity, had a much more ambivalent and sometimes quite hostile relation with it. Some sources claim that Syria invented its differences with Hezbollah to get Western approval for its pacification of Lebanon. It would be more accurate to say that Syria so exploited the very real differences it had with Hezbollah for the exact same purpose.[151]

Syrian ambitions in Lebanon, briefly touched upon in the previous paragraph, at first could have been seen compatible with Hezbollah and its identity construction in the formative years. Hezbollah could serve Syria's interest of defending Lebanon's southern border and defeating Israel (without potential losses on Syrian side). At first, Hezbollah did not seem interested in building up the "Lebanese" side to its activities; henceforth, it should have not had much against Syrian control over the country. However, even during the war (with the seemingly compatible objectives), Syria and Hezbollah grew some significant differences. Secular, pan-Arab Syria increasingly came to see resurgent Islamic militancy as another major obstacle to its drive for hegemony in Lebanon. This put further strain on the Syrian-Iranian alliance[152]. It was due to Hezbollah's obedience to Iran, which (under the rule of Khomeini) was still primarily focused on spreading the Islamic revolution to the Middle East and beyond. Because of that, Hezbollah had developed a long-standing, albeit ambivalent relation with Syria. In the early 1980s, right after the Israeli invasion, it rendered Syria immense services in the struggle against the Israeli occupation, Western multinational forces and the Gemayel government. However, when Syria managed to join forces with Amal against Israel, Assad had less need of Hezbollah and tried to reign it in as early as 1984. Syria believed Hezbollah's Islamic vision to be incompatible with the pluralistic secular Lebanon it sought to reconstruct. Hezbollah was fiercely independent of Damascus but Syria needed control over it in order to calibrate the pressure of Shiite resistance against Israel in the south.[153]

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[149] Ehteshami, Hinnebusch, 129-130.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid., 124.
[152] Ibid., 131.
[153] Ibid., 131.

The relationship between Syria and Hezbollah could not have existed without the main driving force behind early Hezbollah's operations – Iran. The agreement for cooperation needed to be three-partite to have any operational value. Assad and the Iranian leadership agreed to a strategic framework to govern their relationship with the group: Tehran would organize Hezbollah, subsidize it, and provide it with weaponry. Damascus would oversee Hezbollah operations against Israeli troops to ensure that Hezbollah operations did not expose the Syrian army to military confrontation with Israel and would allocate the Beka'a Valley as a location for the IRGC to establish training camps. Moreover, Syrian authorities would secure the supply route and assist with logistics.[154]

Theoretically, it should have been a well-functioning organism. The realities – especially in the circumstances of the prolonged civil war tearing up Lebanon – turned out to be different. After initial Syrian tolerance of Hezbollah and its activities in Lebanon, Syria grew to see it as a problem. The differences between Hezbollah and Syria in this period preliminary rose from the incompatible foreign policy objectives of Iran and Syria. The main problem was Hezbollah's actions that were motivated by Iranian foreign policy (such as foreigners' kidnappings in the 1980s) were often against Assad's political objectives – for example after the kidnapping of Dodge he threatened to expel IRGC from Lebanon. It is true that Assad's support for Hezbollah was not unconditional. He expected to maintain a tight grip over the group[155]. In addition to that, he expected Iran to be less unpredictable in the actions it used Hezbollah for – Assad believed that he had leverage in this situation as without his support the survival of Hezbollah would not have been so obvious. During the course of the civil war, Hezbollah rose to significant power: Assad learnt to see it not only as a resistance movement, but also as a strong political force in Lebanon.[156]

Hezbollah would, until the 1990s, prove more an obstacle than an aid to Syrian ambitions in Lebanon[157]. To this point, coincidence of two events helped to shift Syrian-Hezbollah relations at the beginning of the 1990s: the end of the civil war and Hezbollah's decision to go into Lebanese politics together with the 1989 death of Imam Khomeini the rise of the pragmatist Rafsanjani. As Syria's dominance in Lebanon was consolidated, mainstream Hezbollah leaders, encouraged by Rafsanjani, realized they had to adapt to Syria's power and struck a working alliance with Damascus: in return for Syria's support for its unique role at the head of the Islamic resistance in the south, Hezbollah would tailor its activities to serve Syrian strategy in the conflict with Israel.[158] With Hezbollah's entrance to Lebanese politics, the alliance became necessary to fight against common enemies in the Lebanese political arena.[159]

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[154] Robert G. Rabil, „Has Hezbollah's Rise Come at Syria's Expense?", Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 14 Issue 4, (Fall 2007), accessed online on: https://www.meforum.org/articles/2007/has-hezbollah-s-rise-come-at-syria-s-expense (access date: 22nd April 2018)

[155] Rabil, accessed online on: https://www.meforum.org/articles/2007/has-hezbollah-s-rise-come-at-syria-s-expense (access date 22nd April 2018)

[156] Rabil, accessed online on: https://www.meforum.org/articles/2007/has-hezbollah-s-rise-come-at-syria-s-expense (access date 24th April 2018)

[157] Ehteshami, Hinnebusch, 129.

[158] Ibid., 137.

[159] Ibid., 137-138.

Syria was eager to cooperate with Hezbollah as long as it did not exhibit ambitions to become too independent. There were a couple methods that Syrian regime used in order to curb Hezbollah's growing domestic ambitions: for starters, it was deft exploitation of Amal-Hezbollah rivalries that gave Syria control over both movements.[160] Then, the regime had been continuously "convincing" Hezbollah to prepare a joint candidate list in Amal, which would prevent either of the actors from obtaining substantial power in the Lebanese political system.[161] This rule applied also to other political parties, not directly tied to Assad's regime: all Lebanese politicians aspiring to top governmental positions quickly understood that no one would be able to secure one of five most important posts (president, prime minister, speaker of the house, minister of defence and minister of the interior) without total commitment to all aspects of the "joint Lebanese-Syrian foreign policy" that was being orchestrated at the time of the early 1990s.[162]

There might be a connection between the power that secular Syria held over Lebanon from in the 1990s and the "Lebanonisation" and de-radicalisation of Hezbollah. Even though there is lack of proof and the shift in Hezbollah's identity is more likely to be the effect of many internal and external circumstances, it is safe to say that the Party of God would not be able to achieve major political success in Lebanon if it had stuck to its radical Islamist policies that were a core of its identity at the beginning.[163] The Party of God did not abandon its priorities completely in face of Syrian suzerainty over Lebanon; nevertheless, Hezbollah leaders understood the need to compromise party's ideology to adjust to Lebanon's changing circumstances. The Islamization of Lebanon still remained a central point of Party's agenda, but it became more of a long-term objective[164]. Hezbollah, however, was not a powerless actor in face of Syrian domination in the region. The relationship was mutual: while Syria was using Hezbollah to engage in direct fights with Israel without having to take any casualties within the Syrian army, Hezbollah also had won a powerful ally in its refusal of disarmament. When all the militias were due to disarm after the Ta'if Accords, Hezbollah – excusing itself with the need to conduct "resistance" in the South of Lebanon – was still able to keep up its combat activities.

All the meddling that Assad had employed in order to curb Hezbollah, was accepted by the party without bigger opposition. There is a pragmatic explanation to that, as seen above (the power balance), however there is also an explanation in the Hezbollah's identity construction. The rationale behind the Party's decision to acquiesce to Syria's demands was that its resistance priority would have been seriously jeopardised had it disregarded Syria's wishes.[165] Syria could have directly obstructed resistance activities in the South if Hezbollah did not comply with its objectives in Lebanon; moreover, were the situation with Amal to become hostile (if Hezbollah opposed explicitly the Syrian meddling between the two parties), the Party of God could have been drawn into another civil war in the south and that could divert its attention from the resistance priority.

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[160] Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, 129.

[161] Yahel and Honig, 139

[162] Judith Palmer Harik, 45.

[163] Ibid., 46-47.

[164] Rabil, accessed online on: https://www.meforum.org/articles/2007/has-hezbollah-s-rise-come-at-syria-s-expense (access date 24th April 2018)

[165] Saad-Ghorayeb, 115.

Hizbullah sacrificed its political independence and integrity, and perhaps even its political size, for the sake of preserving its resistance to the Israeli occupation. Thus, there is much truth in Nasrallah's claim that, rather than subordinate its resistance to its political activity, Hezbollah's political activity serves its resistance.[166]

The breakthrough year for the Syria-Hezbollah relationship was definitely year 2000, when two major events have happened: first, Israel withdrew from the "security zone" it had been occupying since the civil war in South Lebanon, and in Syria, Hafez Assad died and his son, Bashar, became his successor.

After death of Hafez Assad, his son Bashar (who, during the 1990s, had been responsible for the Lebanese matters in Syrian establishment) took a different approach – giving the Lebanese state more freedom in solving their own issues (to stop the "pilgrimages of Lebanese officials to Damascus"[167]). Bashar, in contrast to his father who tried to curb Hezbollah's power, decided to tighten the relationship with Hassan Nasrallah. Not only did Bashar welcome Nasrallah in Damascus warmly, he also enhanced the supply of weaponry to Hezbollah[168].

This rapprochement with Hezbollah had yet another long-term effect on both Lebanon and Syria – after the 9/11 events and the launch of American War on Terror, USA became openly interested in the issue of disarming Hezbollah and ending the Syrian occupation to Lebanon.[169] This has resulted in growing international pressure to curb Hezbollah's activities and coerce Syria into withdrawal from southern Lebanon. Colin Powell, visiting Damascus in May 2003, demanded Assad to close terrorist organizations' offices, decommission Hezbollah's armed groups in Lebanon and support the extension of Lebanese army authority throughout southern Lebanon[170]. Apparently, the War on Terror changed the perspective on Syrian presence in Lebanon; it was no longer perceived as "Syrian Peace", but as occupation: the American Congress had started to call upon Syria to "halt Syrian support for terrorism [and] end its occupation of Lebanon". This call was also reiterated in the UN Security Council Resolution 11559, calling for Syrian withdrawal and Hezbollah's disarmament[171].

Not only external pressure exerted by the USA and the West had influence on Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon: internal circumstances have changed as well. After 15 years, Israel has left southern Lebanon. It was primarily because of Hezbollah that the IDF left 2000; paradoxically, the power balance in the country has shifted due to that, and Syrian presence was made less and less justifiable. The voices calling for Syria's exit from Lebanon – personification of which was prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri – were also growing substantially.

Syria did not want to give up that easily – after all, the situation in Lebanon was under control, and Hezbollah was easily used as a proxy in fighting Israel, which limited any losses (financial, personnel

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[166] Saad-Ghorayeb, 116.
[167] Yahel and Honig, 140.
[168] Rabil, accessed online on: https://www.meforum.org/articles/2007/has-hezbollah-s-rise-come-at-syria-s-expense (access date 27th April 2018)
[169] Rabil, accessed online on: https://www.meforum.org/articles/2007/has-hezbollah-s-rise-come-at-syria-s-expense (access date 27th April 2018)
[170] Rabil, accessed online on: https://www.meforum.org/articles/2007/has-hezbollah-s-rise-come-at-syria-s-expense (access date 27th April 2018)
[171] Avon et al., 73-74.

and otherwise) on Syrian side. Therefore, the assassination of prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005 (in which Syria never admitted its participation) was the final blow to Lebanese public's acceptance of Syrian presence in the country[172]. The death of Hariri, for the public quite obviously by the order of Assad, sparked the national protest which later on were referred to as the Cedar Revolution.[173] These events, together with the external (primarily American and French) pressure have caused Syrian troops to withdraw on 26th April 2005.[174]

The Cedar revolution has put Hezbollah in a precarious position: firstly, it had to rethink its position within Lebanon; secondly, it had to strike a working relationship with Syria within the new power balance in the region that the withdrawal had caused. Moreover, the internal power relationship between the Assad regime and the Party of God has changed: even though many officials in the Lebanese establishment were still pro-Syrian, Hezbollah was no longer the junior partner[175] in this alliance. It had become a self-sufficient actor in the Lebanese political scene, and its position has been strengthened by the "success" in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. Therefore, after Syria had withdrawn from Lebanon, Hezbollah focused on strengthening its position within the state and tightened its relationship with Iran[176]. The ideological "victory" in the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war also facilitated the strengthening of Hezbollah's position in Lebanese politics.

Syrian relationship with Hezbollah is seemingly a "marriage of convenience", where both actors had at times conflicting interests but for the past 40 years tried to make the alliance work. The evolution of the relationship is quite linear: Syria had started from the position of the local hegemon - already present in Lebanon at the time of Hezbollah's creation. Hezbollah, for Syria, at the beginning came up as an interruption, only later to see its potential in being a useful tool for pursuing Assad's agenda, especially in terms of fighting Israel. However, in the over 30 years of the alliance, the power balance has evolved – the same way that Hezbollah's identity and position in the country has changed. At the time of Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Hezbollah has been a well-established local actor and a fully grown political party. No longer was it just a tool in the hands of the powerful Assad regime – they were an important Lebanese player, at the time more invested in the domestic than foreign policy. Syria still kept up its ties with Hezbollah, but as reflected in the 2009 Hezbollah's Manifesto, the Party of God had become an entity of its own, with the priority in domestic policies and its own goals abroad.

Moreover, the relationship with Syria was from the very beginning based on material and logistical support: there was no or little spiritual leadership in this alliance. Syria never supported the idea of the Islamic state that the Hezbollah was so into at the beginning of its activity: on the contrary, the Syrian regime had been one of the most secular ones in the region. That angle was also a source

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[172] Ibid., 74.

[173] Rabil, accessed online on: https://www.meforum.org/articles/2007/has-hezbollah-s-rise-come-at-syria-s-expense (access date 27th April 2018)

[174] Rabil, accessed online on: https://www.meforum.org/articles/2007/has-hezbollah-s-rise-come-at-syria-s-expense (access date 27th April 2018); also: Avon, Todd, Khatchadourian, 75.

[175] Rabil, accessed online on: https://www.meforum.org/articles/2007/has-hezbollah-s-rise-come-at-syria-s-expense (access date 27th April 2018)

[176] Rabil, accessed online on: https://www.meforum.org/articles/2007/has-hezbollah-s-rise-come-at-syria-s-expense (access date 27th April 2018)

of conflicts between the Assads and Hezbollah – in the Lebanon they wanted to rule Syrians did not see a space for creation of the Islamic state.

All in all, motivations for the Syrian-Hezbollah alliance were more connected to the power struggle within Lebanon and the geopolitics of the region.

3.4 CONCLUSION: THE SYRIA-IRAN-HEZBOLLAH TRIANGLE

Separate relationships of Syria and Hezbollah and of Iran and Hezbollah had been analysed above, however it is the dynamics between all three actors that shape the power balance of the alliance and impact the decision making.

Syria's relationship with Hezbollah happens on a different level than the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran. Iran is a founding father of Hezbollah, it's a sponsor in material and spiritual sense. Assad's regime (first Hafez, later Bashar) approach towards Hezbollah is completely different from the Iranian approach, even though at first sight they might look similar.

It is the agreement between Iran and Syria that builds the foundation for the Hezbollah's success in the region: Iranian financial and ideological support together with the supply routes that Syria was willing to deliver in exchange for no interruptions with its agenda in Lebanon. At the beginning the hopes that Iran and Syria had in Hezbollah seemed quite similar: they both aimed at using Hezbollah as a tool in achieving its foreign policy goals (namely: eradication of the state of Israel) with minimal losses on their side (both in terms of troops and international reputation). However, over the years a few things in the power balance between the three actors have changed: most importantly, Hezbollah grew and evolved to be the dominant local actor, focused on domestic agenda in Lebanon and investing its resources in building the country's independence – on the contrary to fulfilling external actors' goals. This evolution reflects the path that the Hezbollah's identity went through from its inception to the current day – from the radical Islamic guerrilla to the well-established political party in the criticised, but not anymore contested system.

There is definitely much proof of both Iran and Syria influencing the Hezbollah's decision-making process – both in indirect (providing resources – Iran) and direct (exerting control over the country – Syria) ways. However, the power that has been acquired by Hezbollah by "victory" in the 2006 war with Israel and by its growing engagement in the Lebanese politics, seemed to shift this balance and to direct the Party of God more towards the domestic goals than following foreign agendas. This was reflected most explicitly in the 2009 Manifesto, in which Lebanon was referred to as a motherland and the country of Hezbollah.

Iran had influence on the Hezbollah's identity construction in its early stages, and in more spiritual way: the ideals of the 1979 Iranian revolution were the groundwork for establishment of Hezbollah and for the definition of itself, the goals it wants to achieve, the enemies it wants to fight and the way it sees the world – as a dichotomy of the oppressors and the oppressed. The Iranian religious leadership accepted by the Party of God also impacted the way that Hezbollah had defined itself. In case of Syria, the situation is different: the only common goal for Assad and Hezbollah was eradication of the state of Israel, while there was no ideological agreement between the actors. The main influence

Syria had on Hezbollah's identity construction is that it permitted creation of a space to continue with the resistance project even after the end of the civil war in 1989, therefore it could keep up its resistance priority and continue to define itself through the lens of this activity.

4. HEZBOLLAH IN SYRIAN WAR

Hezbollah's presence in the Syrian war at the time of writing this paper (2016-2018) is undeniable. The group has invested significant manpower and resources in supporting Assad's regime in its fight against the rebels. The question remains: what was the decision-making process behind this move? How does the fact of engagement in the Syrian war correspond with Hezbollah's identity construction? How does the decision to go to war affect the reconstruction of Hezbollah's identity?

Attempting to answer these questions, the current chapter will look into the state of Hezbollah's actions in Syria, then into the elements of its identity construction described in chapter 2 and the way these elements can explain the decision to engage in the Syrian conflict.

4.1 EVOLUTION OF HEZBOLLAH'S PRESENCE IN SYRIA

Hezbollah has openly joined the Syrian conflict in the early 2013, however the organisation has been conducting operations on the ground since 2011[177]. It has started with issuing a statement supporting the regime in May 2011, before the uprising turned violent[178]. The group, however, went quite smoothly from verbal expressions of support to more concrete actions.

At first, Hezbollah was serving more of an advisory role[179], due to its experience in guerrilla fighting and also due to its reluctance to openly engage in the conflict (which was expected to have a harmful influence on group's position in Lebanon). However, as early as the autumn of 2011, reports of Hezbollah fighters being killed in Syria started to surface[180]. There have been other accounts of the Assad's regime utilising Hezbollah fighters for open confrontation with either demonstrators or (at the time being) newly formed Free Syrian Army. Rumours from that period were never publically confirmed and as difficult to verify, were rebuffed by Hezbollah's leader, Hasan Nasrallah, as untrue[181].

Nevertheless, Hezbollah's engagement continued to expand. Throughout 2012, more and more Hezbollah fighters were reportedly present in Syria, both training the regime forces and acting against the rebels[182]. Hezbollah's tried to keep the deaths occurring in connection to this conflict low profile. However, from the funeral of Ali Hussein Nasif in October of 2012, which draw massive public attention and presence of substantial crowds, denying the Party of God's involvement in the war became

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[177] Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria", *Middle East Security Report 19*, Institute for the Study of War (April 2014), 9.

[178] Ibid., 11

[179] Ibid.

[180] "7 Hezbollah Fighters Killed in Syria", YaLibnan, http://yalibnan.com/2011/09/02/7-hezbollah-fighters-killed-in-syria/; Oren Kessler, "Syria Uprisings Stir Old Divisions in Neighboring Lebanon", Jerusalem Post, 10 August 2011, http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Syria-uprising-stirs-old-divisions-in-neighboring-Lebanon both accessed 30/05/2017

[181] Sullivan, 11; http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0623/Why-Hezbollah-has-openly-joined-the-Syrian-fight accessed 30/05/2017

[182] Sullivan, 12.

unfeasible. Hezbollah, however, claimed that Nassif was killed doing his "jihadist duties," a phrase used to obscure the location and activities of Hezbollah martyrs and continued to deny any direct engagement in the Syrian conflict whatsoever[183].

Hezbollah's role in the conflict escalated significantly during the late 2012 and early 2013, enhancing their influence on the battlefield, multiplying fighters sent to direct combat against the anti-regime forces.[184] Hezbollah expertise was needed since they had significant know-how about the urban and guerrilla fighting, priceless in the face of the arising civil war[185]. What is worth noting, Hezbollah intensified its operations in Syria parallel to Iran, which officially introduced the Quds Force (IRGC-QF) onto the ground in 2012[186]. These circumstances and the reinforcement of Iranian-Syrian-Hezbollah axis during this time proves the point of the broader perspective needed for understanding the latter's role in the Syrian civil war.

The breakthrough for Hezbollah's involvement with the Syrian war came with the Al-Qusayr offensive, happening between April and June of 2013[187]. The scale of operation on the Party of God's side was larger than before: according to most sources, up to 1700 fighters were sent to the front at the time[188]. This operation ended in the regime forces (backed by Hezbollah and Iran) success, and following that Hezbollah no longer wanted to keep its operations secret: in the speech of 25th May 2013, Hezbollah's leader, Hasan Nasrallah, said:

*"We will continue along the road, bear the responsibilities and the sacrifices. **This battle is ours**, and I promise you victory"[189] (emphasis added)*

Such a declaration meant an open war, with all the consequences arising from this situation. Casualties on Hezbollah's side spiked, meaning that most of the fallen fighters were granted the name of "martyrs" and buried with all the appropriate honours[190].

After the Al-Qusayr offensive, Hezbollah engaged into fights in Aleppo and Homs, however not on a large scale[191] and without any decisive success. Hezbollah's fighters actively participated in multiple

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[183] Sullivan, 12.

[184] Josh Wood, "Hezbollah Offering Direct Help to Syrian Army, Rebels Say", New York Times, 17th October 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/18/world/middleeast/hezbollahs-hand-seen-backing-the-syrian-army.html?pagewanted=all accessed 30/05/2017

[185] DeVore and Stahli, 344.

[186] Ali Alfoneh, "What Is Iran Doing In Syria?", Foreign Policy, 21st September 2012, https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/21/what-is-iran-doing-in-syria/ accessed 30/05/2017

[187] Sullivan, 15-17

[188] Al-Arabiya, "Hezbollah sends more fighters to Syria after rebels issue ultimatum", 29th May 2013, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/05/29/Hezbollah-sends-more-fighters-to-Syria-after-rebels-issue-ultimatum.html accessed 30/05/2017

[189] Nicholas Blanford, "Why Hezbollah has openly joined the Syrian fight", The Christian Science Monitor, 23rd June 2013 http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/nasrallah-hezbollah-syria-speech-rockets.html#ixzz4iae8uEvK accessed 30/05/2017

[190] Sullivan, 17

[191] Ibid. 17-18.

operations supporting regime's offensive on Damascus in late 2013[192]. The group has taken measures to reconquer the terrain of Qalamoun, which - being a Syrian-Lebanese border territory with rebellion's strongholds - is strategic to Hezbollah's own existence. Few of the towns in the province were recaptured by regime forces with support from Hezbollah, however – estimating from the numbers of casualties within Hezbollah – the group's engagement has been significantly smaller than in case of Al-Qusayr.[193]

From admitting its involvement in the civil war in 2013, Hezbollah's scope of engagement varied according to circumstances, however its support became crucial for conducting and effective civil war in Syria. It became one of the core forces to exert Assad's regime power over war-torn, conflicted country. Tracing the entirety of its operations is unfeasible, however from surfacing reports it is clear that the organisation has been primarily used by the regime in urban surroundings for clearing retaken cities[194] (most recent example of which is the siege of Eastern Aleppo in December of 2016). From the fatalities that Hezbollah suffered, the group's participation in military operations can be deducted: major losses in May of 2013 coincides with Al-Qusayr, losses in February 2015 coincide with the ongoing combat in Qalamoun, and a general rise in fatalities by the end of 2015 can be correlated with Russia stepping into the equation – which caused greater mobilisation on Assad's allies side.[195]

Summing up, at the end of 2016 Hezbollah deep involvement in the Syrian civil war was undeniable. The group has invested major financial and human resources in supporting Assad's regime, despite general disapproval both domestically and regionally. Participating in war seems to have brought (even on purely logistics level) more harm than good to Hezbollah – they sacrificed many fighters, among them top commanders, and also made some enemies regionally, domestically and worldwide (on that below).

4.2 IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND THE DECISION TO GO TO WAR

As described in detail in chapter 2, Hezbollah's identity underwent a significant evolution over the years. Some pillars of it, however, remain unchanged and the focus for this part of the paper would be on confronting those elements with the decision to enter the Syrian conflict.

Not so long ago, in 2008, Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah claimed that

"Hezbollah does not want to engage in feuds with any regime […] we do not want any bitterness with any Arab regime, we do not want any rivalry with any Arab regime, we clearly do not want to engage in any conflict with any Arab regime, not security wise, politically or militarily, even in the media"[196].

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[192] Sullivan.

[193] Ibid., 22.

[194] Ibid., 26.

[195] Ali Alfoneh, "Hezbollah Fatalities in the Syrian War", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 22nd February 2016, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-fatalities-in-the-syrian-war accessed 30/05/2017

[196] Joseph Daher, citing Al-Ahed News, *Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God*, (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 170.

This approach has changed no more than three years later, with the Arab uprisings happening all over the Middle East.

The context of the entire wave of the "Arab Spring" in the Middle East is needed to understand the controversy surrounding Hezbollah's entry to Syrian civil war. There is a visible contradiction between its reaction to the Arab Spring in other countries and the strong stance on Syria's situation:

"Hezbollah was elated by the Tunisian and Egyptian street politics and youth power. In this Arab Spring, Hezbollah issued political declarations blessing the Tunisian and Egyptian people in particular, and the Arab masses in general, for their drive for 'freedom and dignity'. Hezbollah's Secretary General, Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, added '… this is the true path when people believe in their resolve… this is the New Middle East created by its own people'. He concluded, 'Your Spring had begun; no one can lead you to another winter. Your belief, vigilance, and resilience will overcome all difficulties and make you triumphant"[197]

Hezbollah's support for the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East had been selective and dictated by its own political interest. The group has supported the Houthis in Yemen and the Shi'a community in Bahrain, describing their fight as the resistance against the oppressors (hence subscribing to Hezbollah's most important ideological pillar). However, when people of Syria rose against the Alawi regime, Hezbollah reacted in a completely different way[198], condemning the uprisings and finally engaging militarily. How is the resistance performed by the Syrians different (and less justifiable) from all other acts of resistance that had swept the region in 2011?

The decision to enter Syrian conflict also contradicted the tendency in Hezbollah's political strategy, expressed best in its 2009 Manifesto – i.e. focusing more on domestic political scene and strengthening Party of God's position within it. Engagement in a foreign conflict, moreover – first in years conflict that is not against its main enemy, Israel, but fellow Muslims, appears to be an unexpected move. The following paragraphs will position the pillars (elaborated on in chapter 3) of Hezbollah's identity against the decision to enter Syrian civil war – and will show how they do (or do not) correspond with it.

4.2.1 RESISTANCE

Hezbollah is defining itself primarily in juxtaposition to Israel; the core of Hezbollah's existence is built in contrast to the Jewish state and the principles it represents[199]. After the end of Lebanese civil war in the 1990, and the 2000 Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Hezbollah took up only one more massive direct confrontation with Israel – the 2006 war, deemed as a victory in the Arab world.

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[197] Joseph Alagha, "Hezbollah and the Arab Spring", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol 1 no. 2 (2014), 193-194.

[198] Alagha, "Hezbollah and the Arab Spring", 194.

[199] See chapter 2 in this paper.

As mentioned in previous analysis, Hezbollah applies the discourse in which the world is divided in the dichotomy of the oppressors and the oppressed. This dichotomy served the Party of God quite well in the first wave of Arab uprisings – as recalled above – where the masses stood up to the oppressive regimes of Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain. In 2011, at the very beginning of the wave of protest, civil disobedience against the regimes sweeping the regions was seen by the Party of God as a part of the "resistance project" that Hezbollah's entire existence had been dedicated to[200]. The authoritarian regimes in the region had been described as serving the American and Israeli interests in the Middle East and hence they deserved their fall.

The trouble for this rhetoric has arisen when peaceful protests started in Syria and were brutally confronted by the regime forces. Hezbollah, despite organising massive rallies of support for the revolutions happening in Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen, kept silent about Syria. It was only in September 2012 that Hassan Nasrallah confronted the contradictory positions of Hezbollah according the ongoing events in the region and explained the reasoning behind this. He declared that the party's position is based on two decisive criteria: first the Syrian regime's stance on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict ant the readiness of the regime to engage in reform. In Hezbollah's view, Syrian regime opposition to the Israeli state – and support of the Palestinian resistance – was the reason why the Western and Arab countries were together engaged in toppling the Syrian regime (as the protests in Syria were seen by Hezbollah as motivated by the West). He argued later that the West was engaged in providing weapons to the protesters – even though the resistance in the first months was largely peaceful and no organised armed forces were formed.[201] Moreover, Hezbollah claimed that the Syrian regime was willing to take up the dialogue with the protesters: according to Nasrallah, Assad's regime was ready to engage in reform.[202] It is important to notice, however, that Hezbollah had seen the need to change the way that Syrian regime interacted with its citizens prior to the uprisings.

These examples show that Hezbollah was fully aware of the contradictory position it had been presenting in its reactions to the Arab uprisings of 2011. How can this contradictory discourse be related to the pillar of Hezbollah's identity – the resistance? How can one civil disobedience be a part of the resistance project, and another – happening in similar circumstances – be described as the evil plot against the ideals Hezbollah stands for?

There are no simple answers to the questions above, however when looking deeper at the concept of resistance in Hezbollah's identity construction, there is logic in the arguments put forward in this instance. Hezbollah, as mentioned above, sees the world as a dichotomy: divided into oppressors and the oppressed. All civil disobedience aimed at toppling this imbalance of power is supported by the group. However, the resistance against Israel in particular is the most important priority for the Party of God. Thus, it can be argued that the resistance in Hezbollah's understanding happens on multiple levels. First one – global - is the world-wide fight against the oppressors of this world, the crusade against the

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[200] Daher, 171.

[201] Joseph Daher, "Hezbollah, Syria and the Arab Uprisings", retrieved at
https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/hezbollah-syria-and-the-arab-uprisings/ (access date: 25th May 2018)

[202] Joseph Daher, *Hezbollah: The Political Economy…*, 173.

power imbalance. On a more local level – Hezbollah had dedicated its activities to the ultimate goal of fighting Israel and resisting the oppression that this state represents to the Middle East.

Along these lines of understanding concept of resistance in Hezbollah identity construction, it is worth getting back to the 2009 Manifesto, the milestone of Hezbollah's transformation from Islamic guerrilla into a mature Lebanese political party, in which the Syrian regime was described as having:

"… a distinctive attitude and supported the resistance movements in the region, and stoop beside us in the most difficult circumstances, and sought to unify Arab efforts to secure the interests of the region and challenges. Hence, we emphasize the need to adhere to the distinguished relations between Lebanon and Syria as a common political, security, and economic need, dictate by the interests of the two countries and two peoples, by the imperatives of geopolitics and the requirements for Lebanese stability and facing common challenges."[203]

Syria in this passage is deemed crucial to keeping up Hezbollah's most important battle – resistance against Israel.

Resistance understood as a concept happening of various levels is the key to understanding how the contradictory stance of Hezbollah on the Arab Uprisings of 2011 could comply with its identity formation/evolution. The approval, even enthusiasm (Hezbollah went as far as to organise rallies in support of the protests in Egypt and Bahrain in March 2011) was expressed by the Party of God to the first wave of the Arab uprisings – and it was because Hezbollah was in favour of the resistance against oppression all around the world. The regimes that were first hit by the anti-establishment protests (Tunisia and Egypt) were identified in Hezbollah's view as pro-Western and pro-Israeli – especially Egypt, which had been the first Arab country to seek peace with Israel in the 1970s. Hence, the anti-regime incidents could have been interpreted by Hezbollah as acts against its own arch enemies – the United States and Israel. It was "natural" – and therefore in line with the organisation's identity – to support these protests. Analogically, Bahraini uprising, where the oppressed majority of population was rebelling against the small group of rulers (happening to be of different Islam branch as well[204]) was endorsed by Hezbollah since it represented performing resistance on the global level.

Situation had abruptly changed with the outburst of the Syrian uprising. Even though the reaction to the protests against Assad's regime seems contradictory to previous statements about other uprisings, it is deeply rooted in Hezbollah's understanding and performance of the concept of resistance.

Hezbollah, despite the significant identity construction's evolution it went through from its establishment in the 1980s, has never changed or given up on its primary goal: destruction of Israel (or Zionist Entity, as they prefer to call it). As an organisation, it had been brought to life by the opposition to Israel; it was funded and supported in order to fight the Jewish state. The enmity with Israel is at the core of Hezbollah existence. Henceforth, when looking at supporting resistance in the case of the Arab uprisings of 2011, it is in line with Hezbollah's identity construction.

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[203] Daher, *Hezbollah the Political Economy…*, quoting the 2009 Manifesto, 179-180.
[204] This chapter will touch upon the question of sectarianism later on.

The decision to go to Syrian war can be then related to Hezbollah's identity primary pillar: resistance against Israel. Over the years, Syria had an outstanding record of supporting Hezbollah in its fights with the Jewish state. It is worth mentioning here that Hezbollah at the time of onset of Syrian civil war had been a well-established, independent domestic actor: Syria had been gone for the country for 6 years and Hezbollah still managed to upkeep its position in the domestic arena. It did not need Syria for its survival within Lebanon, on which it had been focusing its policies in the recent years. However, Syria was still needed for Hezbollah as its long-standing ally in the harsh no-compromise stance against Israel (with most of the Arab states leaning towards some sort of peace agreement with Israel at some point). From the Arab countries in the region and beyond, it was mainly Syria who in the 2000s was still ready to take a very zero-sum game approach towards Israel. Hezbollah could not allow itself to lose an alliance that supported the goal that had been the foundation of its existence ever since.

Therefore, Hezbollah's support for Syria is not that contradictory with its support for other Arab uprisings. Resistance is understood as a concept happening on multiple levels: the one closer to home had always been a priority for the Party of God. When faced with a choice of supporting the global movements of resistance and protecting the crusade it had conducted against Israel for the past 30 years, Hezbollah has chosen to construct a discourse about joining the Syrian conflict that is faithful to the most important pillar of its identity; explaining this decision in such terms, the Party of God is able to dedicate itself to support the regime that had proven helpful in achieving this goal.

4.2.2 "LEBANONIZATION" AND DECISION TO MEDDLE WITH OTHER COUNTRY'S AFFAIRS

Hezbollah, as proved in its 2009 Manifesto, has changed its priorities over the years. It stayed faithful to its primary goal – defeating Israel, however it took a 180 degree turn on its stance towards Lebanon as a state. As described in chapter 3, from 1982 to 2000s Hezbollah went from contestation of the state system and nation state as such, to being incorporated into domestic political scene and actively participating in the Lebanese government structures.

The decision to stop contesting the existence of the Lebanese state and go into domestic politics dates back to Hezbollah's participation in the 1992 post-civil war elections. Ever since, the Party of God had become an indispensable element of Lebanese politics. Its actions were focused on protecting Lebanon as a state and even the 2006 "Divine Victory" was a victory in the name of Lebanon. The decision to engage militarily in the Syrian conflict was difficult to explain in light of this tendencies.

Nasrallah justified Hezbollah's presence as a precaution against civil war in Lebanon –

"If Hezbollah did not fight in Syria, there would have been a Civil War in Lebanon and hundreds of car bombs. We did damage control and diminished the repercussions of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon" [205]

However, this approach had a few traps on the way. Firstly, Lebanon went quite unharmed by the Arab uprisings – it had been experiencing some domestic unrest ever since the 2005 Hariri

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[205] As quoted in Daher, 182, citing Al-Manar.

assassination, therefore protests in various forms were nothing new in the political landscape of this country. Lebanon's problem was not necessarily in the oppressive system of the government, but rather in its lack of stability whatsoever. Moreover, Syria had not been present in Lebanon for 6 years at the onset of the Arab uprisings – of course the unrest that was happening next door might had caused some trouble in Lebanon as well, however the claim that there would have been a civil war without Hezbollah's intervention seems far-fetched (in fact, it is Hezbollah's engagement that is resulting in more trouble "at home"). Hezbollah had built its popular appeal in Lebanon on two pillars: firstly, by providing services (water wells, schools, hospitals, broadly understood infrastructure) to impoverished areas of Lebanon despite the religious denomination of its inhabitants; secondly, with its long-standing opposition against Israel and the readiness to protect Lebanon from the threat that it poses at all costs (as the 2006 war proved).

Once the decision about going into Syrian civil war went public, major concerns along the lines mentioned above rose in Lebanon:

"[Hezbollah] traded accusations with the Western-backed March 14 coalition, which compared Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria with the Israeli Defence Forces (…) According to March 14, Hezbollah behaved like the IDF by invading and occupying land and encroaching on the ;sovereignty and territorial integrity' of Syria, a UN member country, in order to protect its back (…) Furthermore March 14 argue that Hezbollah's involvement in Syrian civil war was diminishing its availability across the Lebanese-Israeli border and its distracting its vigilance in dealing with any Israeli imminent threat"[206].

With the decision to enter the Syrian civil war Hezbollah had majorly undermined the public legitimacy it had enjoyed in the 1990s and the 2000s. The entire bottom-up, grass-root work that Hezbollah had been conducting since the 1992 election, became a subject of contestation in the Lebanese public sphere. Hezbollah was not able to connect its identity of a Lebanese party that acts above the religious and social divisions and the fact that it openly engaged in the Syrian warfare on the side of the regime.

The participation in Syrian civil war had become another milestone in the Party of God's identity construction. With the 2009 Manifesto, with all written down in paper, Hezbollah seemed to have it all conceptualised and figured out: it kept up the resistance against Israel and the general oppression as its top priority, but this resistance was transformed from the anti-establishment guerrilla into a nation-making tool[207] that allowed Hezbollah to represent itself as a domestic actor, focused primarily on well-being of the state of Lebanon and its people. The decision to go to the Syrian conflict stood in explicit contradiction with this image that had been put forward in the past 20 years. Therefore, the Party of God decided to re-create the discourse of its identity and make some other aspects of it more salient than the ones just mentioned.

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[206] Alagha, „Hezbollah and the Arab Spring", 198.
[207] See in chapter 2.

4.2.3 PAN-ISLAMISM VS. SECTARIAN STRIFE

Hezbollah's religious denomination was very clear from the beginning of its activities in Lebanon: by subscribing to the *wilayat al-faqih* rule, the Party of God made it clear that the branch of Islam it wants to follow in its actions is the Shi'a one. The tight relationship with Iran and Syrian Alawis (the sect that Bashar Assad belongs to) could have been the reason to consider the group sectarian. In the Syria-Hezbollah context, there were particular episodes of sectarian support in relations, such as the endorsement that prominent Lebanese Shi'a leader Musa al-Sadr gave to Hafez Assad at the beginning of his rule: when Syria was discussing its constitution, it kept in power the Article 3 (which state that the president must be a Muslim); in 1973, Musa al-Sadr was persuaded to declare Alawis as "Twelver Shi'as" (as previously they were considered a part of Islamic heterodoxy) and therefore true Muslims, enabling Hafez Assad to become president.[208] Despite such ties, both actors were dedicated to a non-sectarian discourse: Syria focused on secular pan-Arabism, while Hezbollah had prioritised the pan-Islamic approach in its identity construction and political strategy, subscribing more to the "oppressors" and the "oppressed" in its discourse.

In the domestic scene, even at the time of contestation of the Lebanese state and fight for the establishment of the Islamic state in the broader Middle East, Hezbollah had always emphasized its dedication to religious inclusiveness: it had called upon all the oppressed of the world, regardless their class or religion, to join the fight for the better world. This view had not changed much after the Party of God decided to join the national elections in 1992. Hezbollah, by engaging into local politics, was even more able to prove its dedication to acting "above divisions": it established allies with parties coming from different sects, it also provided the grass-root help for many impoverished groups in Lebanon, regardless their faith or sect. It became the party that gained following across classes and confession in the country. From the 1990s on, Hezbollah also dropped the idea of establishment of the Islamic State in the Middle East; it stopped contesting the Lebanese state and it embraced the sectarian system that had been in power in Lebanon since 1943 – but worked hard to improve it in its favour.

Strong relationship with Iran also directed Hezbollah's approach towards religion – in the early stages it also propagated the idea of the Islamic state, ruled by Sharia and led by the *faqih* – the postulate was to join the secular and religious power in one institution. These postulates were pan-Islamic – their appeal was meant to reach all the Muslims around the world (and especially in the Middle East) and unite them in achieving this goal. Even though Hezbollah not always followed the pan-Islamic, tolerant discourse domestically (after all the not-so-clear engagement in the assassination of the Sunni prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri had damaged its popularity domestically), in general it had a programme of a party that was dedication to inclusion and bridging the gaps in the society.

Therefore, the shift in the discourse that happened after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict might be surprising. Nasrallah, while confronted with the fact that it had been present in the Syrian combat, claimed (among other arguments) that "Hezbollah's support for the Syrian regime was not only for the

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[208] Christopher Phillips, "Sectarianism and conflict in Syria", *Third World Quarterly*, 36:2 (2015), 365.

Hezbollah and the Shi'a, but also for Lebanon and all its various religious communities against the threats of *takfiri* forces."[209] The use of the word *takfiri* - the infidel – implies a strong, negative religious connotation.

The employment of the discourse where no longer the fight is conducted against "oppressors" but against "infidels", implies a major shift happening in Hezbollah's identity construction. The Party of God seemed to have lost its pan-Islamic outlook. Using such discourse also means refuting the previous cross-sectarian and cross-class approach.

It is not to deny the fact that Hezbollah had targeted groups of different faiths before – its primary enemies, the United States and Israel come from different religious denomination (respectively from Christian and Judaism traditions). What is new in the event of the Syrian civil war is the fact that it is the first time when the enmity based on religion is expressed towards the fellow Muslims, even if they follow different branches of Islam from the one that Hezbollah subscribes to.

Some scholars claim that the event of the Arab Uprisings, especially in Syria, had woken up the ancient Sunni-Shiite conflict that had been present in the region for ages. The argumentation here is to prove rather that the pre-existing (pre-existing to the civil war, not ancient) sectarian identities have been politicised to explain the decision-making behind the decision to go to war. This sectarian discourse, however, did not come to use from the very beginning.

Syrian opposition at the onset of the protests applied the discourse that invoked national identity rather than religious one – they called up for the reform of the regime in the name of a better functioning Syrian state[210]. At this point, Hezbollah – despite its open support for Assad's administration – also called the postulates of Syrian people legitimate and called upon the establishment to consider some reasonable reforms. This had changed when the Syrian regime itself started to invoke the sectarian undertones in the developing conflict[211] – around 2012 Nasrallah was openly talking about fighting the *takfiris*. Since both the regime and opposition in Syria had started to group according to ethno-sectarian sentiments, also Hezbollah applied the sectarian discourse. It was also quite an easy explanation in domestic arena because of couple reasons. Firstly, the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (the IS) had grown to become to most dangerous and prominent threat to both Syrian regime and Hezbollah in the region. This fuelled the shift of the conflict from state-oriented to sectarian, as the IS identifies explicitly with the radical version of Sunni Islam. Moreover, the broader regional discussion about the conflict became sectarian as such: Gulf countries (with Saudi Arabia in the forefront) accused Iran of fuelling sectarian violence in Syria by sending troops there and interfering with the sovereignty of Syria[212], which coincided with Hezbollah's troops being sent there at similar time.

Even though Hezbollah had applied the sectarian discourse to its participation in the Syrian conflict, it claimed firmly that its engagement in the Syrian war has the aim of preventing the sectarian conflict in the region in the first place:

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[209] Daher, 181.

[210] Phillips, 359.

[211] Ibid., 369-370.

[212] Ibid., 370.

"Nasrallah claimed that Hezbollah's intention in intervening was to decrease sectarian tensions because, in his view, the destruction of Shiite shrines could spark revenge and lead to a broader sectarian war in the region. [He also stated that] a pre-emptive fight against radical groups inside Syria was necessary to prevent these extremists from posing a threat inside Lebanese territory. In both cases, Hezbollah denied acting on sectarian grounds, particularly in its messages addressed to non-Shiite audiences."[213]

Hezbollah was invoking its Shi'a identity aspects to gather more following and more recruits to be sent to Syria. However, the decision to make the Shi'a aspect of Hezbollah's identity more salient was not an initiative that came directly from Hezbollah: it was rather an adaptation to the discourse that was being created by participants of the conflict, as well as regional actors responding to the war[214].

Referring to specifically Shi'a aspect of Hezbollah's identity, despite previous inclusive and pan-Islamic declarations, might have had another reason:

"In the context of the Syrian Civil War, Hezbollah's Islamic identity was not convenient for justifying involvement in a conflict that required a fight against other Muslims. This is why Hezbollah and Nasrallah tried hard to portray the group's military intervention in Syria as a move not against Sunni Muslims but against "terrorist" and "excommunicators" (referring to ISIS and other extremist groups) that posed an existential threat to the region. Similarly, the group rejected charges that it was acting on a sectarian basis (…) In Hezbollah's war in Syria, its defence of Shiite was visible in two ways. First, it protected religious sites, such as the Saida Zainab shrine in southern Damascus, that are sacred primarily for the Shiite followers of Islam. Second, it fought against the extremist groups, such as ISIL, which follow a strict interpretation of Islam and regards Shiites as apostates and rejecters."[215]

The use of sectarian discourse in its reaction to the Syrian conflict and the decision to join it had risen the argument that Hezbollah is an explicitly Shi'a organisation working to realise the Iranian agenda in the region. The most radical stance is that Hezbollah is committed to preserving Shi'a Islam in the region and that existence of radical Sunni armed groups creates a survival threat to this branch of Islam, as Alagha puts it:

"(…) for Sayyid Nasrallah to make the extreme decision to be involved in Syria, a decision that he knows will be probably fatal to its party's stand on the Lebanese political scene, ought not to be dismissed as just a political mistake, but as a suicide mission, a last cartridge to counter what is certainly perceived as a deadly force against Shi'a Islam's survival in the region."[216]

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[213] Zafer Kizilkaya, „Identity, War, and Just Cause for War: Hezbollah and Its Use of Force", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol 28. No. 2 (June 2017) 95-96.

[214] See earlier in this paragraph.

[215] Kizilkaya, 95.

[216] Alagha, "Hezbollah and the Arab Spring", citing Fontan, 197.

The Sunni armed fundamentalist groups were a real threat: however, they were not a threat to the Shi'a Islam, but to the Assad's regime. Hezbollah did not come to war with the intention to save Shi'a Islam from eradication: it came with the intention to guarantee the survival of its Syrian ally, and the sectarian discourse was used as a tool in justification of this decision.

4.3 IDENTITY AND THE JUST CAUSE TO GO TO WAR

As previous paragraphs have shown, Hezbollah tried to create a discourse about its intervention in Syria that complied to the pillars of its identity – resistance, focus on Lebanese issues and Islamism. These are explanations that might be challenging to defend. Hezbollah was fully aware of that challenge and therefore decided to reconstruct its identity in order to justify the decision to enter the Syrian conflict.

Hezbollah was able to explain its decision to participate in the Syrian civil war in terms of resistance against Israel. Syria had been its biggest ally in the region in most fights against Israel: one of not so many left Arab countries taking a radical approach towards the Jewish state. Hezbollah needs Syrian regime survival in order to guarantee the continuous support for its goal of defeating Israel and returning the land it considers Lebanese (Sheba'a farms) and Syrian (Golan Heights) to its previous owners. This explanation seems contradictory with its loudly proclaimed ideals of fighting against all the oppression in the world, as the masses in Syria turned against the oppressive regime. It also stands in conflict with Hezbollah's initial support for other Arab uprisings in the region. However, Hezbollah had to prioritise what is more important for its own survival and decided to support the actor that could provide help in fighting its arch enemy, Israel.

The "Lebanonisation" of Hezbollah does not comply with the decision to heavily engage militarily in a foreign conflict. Despite using arguments that the unrest in Syria could cause spillover of the fights into Lebanon, Hezbollah had hard time explaining the decision to enter Syria as a cause that serves Lebanon and its people. On the contrary, it had caused the unrest domestically – both political actors and public opinion in Lebanon were heavily against Hezbollah's engagement in Syria. The domestic support had dropped low and Hezbollah had lost many of its followers at home.

Hezbollah was unable to create a discourse around its engagement in Syria that would explain this decision in terms of its identity build and solidified over the years. The resistance argument is defendable, but far-fetched, the explanation that argues that this decision is taken for the benefit of Lebanon has not met public's appreciation. To Hezbollah's "rescue" came the arrival of the sectarian discourse created about the Syrian civil war.

In the event of the conflict becoming represented as a sectarian war, and more participants defining themselves in terms of religious affiliation, Hezbollah took a bold step to re-create some parts of its identity. It had dropped the pan-Islamic outlook that it presented since the onset of the organisation (however in different forms: first it was the appeal of creation of the Islamic state, then the cross-sectarian activities in Lebanon) and decided to make its Shi'a aspect of identity more salient than before. It is not to say that Hezbollah had suddenly become more Shi'a oriented: the organisation had been explicitly Shi'a by its subscription to the *wilayat el-faqih* and its close relationship to the Iranian leadership. It is in the face of the Syrian civil war that Hezbollah had decided that it will be most beneficial

for its interests and survival to join the sectarian discourse around the conflict and make its Shi'a aspect of identity the prominent one.

5. CONCLUSION

In 2011, Hezbollah took a risky and at first self-destructive decision to enter the civil war in Syria. After the analysis of the organisation's identity construction, its domestic, regional and international ties and how these relate to the decision to join war on Assad's side, the analysis should help to answer research questions stated at the beginning of this paper:

How is Hezbollah's identity influencing its decision to enter the Syrian conflict? Is the Syrian conflict, in return, impacting the construction of Hezbollah's identity?

Hezbollah's identity construction had motivated its actions from the very beginning: the group was established in the first place to fight Israeli occupation of Lebanon, and the resistance became the foundation of its identity, and its priority in all its actions. This is the most salient aspect of Hezbollah's identity structure, as proven in chapters 2, 3 and 4.

Resistance has been at the core of Hezbollah's activity both in foreign and domestic policies. In foreign policy, the perseverance of Hezbollah in fighting Israel had been ongoing since 1982, and the dedication to it gave the Party of God a large local support base. Priority of Resistance allowed Hezbollah to make some compromises with some other aspects of its identity – namely, the opposition against sectarian system ruling Lebanon – in order to preserve the ultimate goal of eradication of Israel. Hezbollah entered the domestic political scene, adjusting to the existing procedure and power allocation, but only because this move was making it possible for the Party of God to dedicated fully to the objective of resistance against Israel. It was also willing to give up some space in the domestic scene for Syrian meddling and domination, as such a powerful ally with a shared enemy created much better opportunity for Hezbollah to succeed in fighting the Jewish state. Therefore, the conflict in Syria can be perceived by Hezbollah as a threat, not only in material sense, but also from the level of its identity construction.

Hezbollah as an actor in Lebanon is not only existing in the domestic context, but also in regional one – and so does its identity. Hezbollah is a part of the Axis of Resistance: two other actors involved had different influence on its identity construction. Iran, through direct ideological support, had impact on how the Party of God perceives religion, interpreted the religious dogmas and how it conducts a discourse around Islam. As an additional incentive, Iran is deeply involved in funding Hezbollah, which allowed the Party of God to reach its scope as of today. Syria, on the other hand, had more of a material influence on Hezbollah (providing supply routes and interfering in Lebanese sovereignty and government). On the ideological level, Syria has contributed mainly to the survival of a strong dedication to the cause of resistance against Israel.

The conflict in Syria, then, is a proof that Hezbollah's identity is both domestic and international issue: it affects Lebanon, but it can also affect its allies. It is also a perfect example of the reciprocity between identity and the decision to enter the Syrian war. As stated in chapter 4, Hezbollah's dedication to resistance may be an underlying premise on which it decided to take a risky step in trying to save the regime tha.t was always sympathetic towards the goal to annihilate Israel. Without Syria, Hezbollah's chances for fighting Israel in case of a conflict grow substantially smaller both on ideological and material level. The notion of resistance (*the* Resistance – own emphasis) have been extended to the struggle of

the Syrian regime against the IS[217]. On the other hand, the event of Syrian civil war and Hezbollah's participation in it, created a shift in circumstances that had significantly influenced the construction of Hezbollah's identity and ignited its restructuring.

Hezbollah decided to make some previously not exhibited aspects of its identity salient in order to justify its presence in Syria. The Party of God gave up its pan-Islamic, inclusive outlook in favour of referring to the Shi'a branch of Islam as is strongest motivation and denomination, which turned the organisation against other sects that previously supported Hezbollah within Lebanon and externally. Implying a discourse in which the Muslim opponents in Syria were referred to as "infidels" also did not bring many supporters to its cause. It is not to say that Hezbollah single-handedly is responsible for rising sectarian tensions in the region after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011: it is rather to say that facing the possibility of not being able to find substantial arguments in favour of its presence in Syria, the Party of God decided to join the sectarian discourse that (at this moment) was rising in the region.

As mentioned in chapter 1, identities are in a constant flux. They undergo construction and reconstruction, adapting to both changes from within actors that possess it and from external factors. In case of Hezbollah, it had faced a very particular choice: it could stay firmly loyal to the ideals it propagated and constructed its identity on for the past decades – resistance against Israel, pan-Islamism, Lebanon-oriented policies, however standing by its values could not guarantee the group's material survival. After analysing possible benefits and losses, Hezbollah decided to take a controversial decision – deconstructing its image in Lebanon and compromising its identity, but this shift was needed in order to protect its survival.

Hezbollah therefore took a decision that regardless of the conflict outcome, will serve as a "breaking moment" in its identity formation. When the conflict ends, the organisation will no longer be able to propagate the ideas that it did before the Syrian war: its image as an inclusive, Lebanon-focused actors it severely undermined by its actions. In this regard, it is possible to say that the decision to enter the way will have impact on Hezbollah's identity, a bigger than any other event in the past 10 years; as Kizilkaya puts it:

"… War can cause identities to be constructed and reconstructed. Creating a new identity usually means eliminating a previous one, as seen in the example of Yugoslavia and Bosnia. Changing an identity can entail adjusting its content or salience. (…) the content of a just cause to use force is identity dependent. In other words, identities possessed by groups or states determine both their ethical consideration of the righteous grounds for taking up arms and the way in which they legitimize their decision on war to the public. Justification is usually achieved by presenting a positive image of the self while demonizing the other side in the conflict."[218]

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[217] http://english.almanar.com.lb, see Hezbollah's statements in which it usually referes to the fights in Syria as Resistance.
[218] Kizilkaya, 81.

This is the kind of justification that Hezbollah used in its explanation of the decision to enter the Syrian conflict. Hence, the conflict is not sectarian as such: it is the sectarian discourse that serves best Hezbollah's interest in having the "just cause" for the war.

All of this argumentation is not to say that the literature to the day is wrong in ascribing the motivations for Hezbollah's participation in the more material terms: cutting off the supply routes via Syria would mean an existential threat to the Party of God. This has been dealt with in the literature regarding Hezbollah and its stance of the Arab Spring: this paper has no intentions to undermine this analysis. The goal here is more to add an important angle to the analysis and show that identity issues are as relevant to the decision-making process as the realpolitik and the will to survive.

There are two final conclusions to this argument,. Firstly, the concept of resistance and its interpretation is crucial to understanding Hezbollah's identity and its decision-making logic. Resistance has motivated Hezbollah's actions both in domestic and international arena, and the decision to go to the Syrian war is not much different from that. Secondly, the causal relationship between the war and identity in this case is that while at the same time identity motivates the decision to enter the conflict, the conflict determines the shift in the identity construction. Since the conflict in Syria and actors participating in it could jeopardise Hezbollah's resistance project's survival, it is considered a "breaking point" that could cause Hezbollah to enter the path leading to yet another re-construction of its identity in order to have a better ideological ground for justifying its engagement in this conflict. Hezbollah compromised some pillars of its existence in order to protect the one it considers core to its own understandings of the self. These will not be easily recovered, as well as public's trust that had been built on this. Hezbollah decision to enter the war in Syria seems to have redirected its identity in the durable manner, stepping away from the ideals it has subscribed to in the previous stages of its political identity both in Lebanon and abroad.

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