HEZBOLLAH IN A TIME OF WAR: THE ROLE OF DISCOURSE

IN CRAFTING A MILITANT IDENTITY

A thesis submitted to Anglo-American University for the
degree of Bachelor in Journalism and Communications

Spring 2019

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that no portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree, or qualification thereof, or for any other university or institute of learning.

I declare that this thesis is my independent work. All sources and literature are cited and included.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

ABSTRACT

Hezbollah in a Time of War: The Role of Discourse in Crafting a Militant Identity

When in 2006 Hezbollah became entangled in a month-long war with the Israel, the attention of the world was immediately turned toward the conflict. The Lebanese, Arab, and international public understood that the implications and outcome of the war would be of great significance, and so did Hezbollah, a public relations powerhouse and an established player in the regional struggle for legitimacy. The group did not waste time to frame a discourse of popular resistance through which its target audiences would be able to view the conflict, and when it announced a "divine victory" at the end of the conflict, few disputed its narrative.

Several years later, however, the party became involved in the Syrian Civil War by siding with its ally Bashar al-Assad's regime and its popularity quickly waned. Despite Hezbollah's best efforts to justify its actions through propaganda, it was criticized for supporting an autocratic government, fueling sectarian tensions, and undermining Lebanon's security. One of the problems appeared to rest in the fact that the group's strategic interests were not anymore aligned with its ideological principles, and the audience realized it.

Through an analysis of Hezbollah's discourse surrounding those two conflicts and its comparison with the reality on the grounds, this thesis examines the manner in which the group's changing narratives reflect its existential crisis of choosing between its pragmatic objectives and popular legitimacy. External factors Hezbollah is dependent on strongly influence its decisions and the rhetoric used to justify them has the power to either strengthen or weaken its regional position and credibility.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Militant Agendas in the Era of Mass Communication

In a media landscape prone to quickly forgetting a story that failed to captivate the audience for longer than a moment, a well-crafted discourse has become the key to advocating social changes, political agendas, and ideological slogans, both positive and negative. While this truth applies to the majority of the modern world, perhaps nowhere is it as relevant today as in the Middle East, a region long plagued by political upheaval, foreign invasions, and autocratic regimes. The power of the discourse is a concept familiar both to newly emerging militias and well-established players, all attempting to achieve a firm regional legitimacy. The Lebanese Shi'ite Hezbollah certainly belongs to the latter, with its beginnings dating back to the 1980s and its gradual evolution from a minor guerilla group into a social movement and a political party. As a non-state actor, and yet the only Arab power to have successfully stood its ground against Israel while simultaneously establishing a solid footing in the political reality of Lebanon, Hezbollah has undoubtedly become a force to be reckoned with.

And yet the group's strength lies not only in its military capabilities and strategic successes, but in its ability to sway the crowds. Hezbollah has been crafting its persuasive narrative framework ever since the 1980s, but in our current era of mass communication and the World Wide Web when information can spread like wildfire, the group's propaganda capabilities have become perhaps even more effective than its traditional warfare. With a unit dedicated solely to psychological campaigning, Hezbollah has learned to gain advantage over its opponents through the management of information. However, each coin has two sides, and due to Hezbollah's dependence on foreign powers and its balancing between a militant agenda

and political legitimacy, the group's strategic interests are not always aligned with the sentiments of its audiences.

The aim of this thesis is to examine and construct an understanding of the manner in which Hezbollah's conflict discourse relates to this dilemma. More specifically, the analysis will be focused on investigating the specific manner in which the movement uses propaganda discourse in order to justify and rebrand its actions, and what consequences such strategies have on both the group's standing and the opinions of the regional and international community. The relevance of this area of study lies in the widespread consensus of regarding Hezbollah through the reductive image of a terrorist militia with a singular ideological goal of deafeating its primary enemies, Israel and the West, and viewing its media discourse as accordant with that train of thought. Creating a comprehensive idea of that discourse's complexity and the group's strategic goals may offer a framework for tackling security issues through counteracting not only the interests of Hezbollah, but also similar militant organizations with terrorist leanings that simultaneously enjoy widespread popular support due to their ideological principles. This thesis will thus attempt to construct the argument that Hezbollah's existential and identity crisis is, in fact, its primary weakness and that it reflected in the changing of its propaganda rhetoric in different conflict situations.

The question that will be the basis of this argumentation will therefore be as follows: how do Hezbollah's changing narratives in times of conflict portray its existential crisis of choosing between strategic interests and popular legitimacy?

1.2. Methodology

As the aim of this research is to understand Hezbollah's conflict discourse, the method will consist of providing a background and a reconstruction of influences surrounding two recent wars involving the group, namely the 2006 Second Lebanon War with Israel and the Syrian Civil War. That part will be constructed through a research of international academic

and media sources concerned with the abovementioned events and the information obtained will be compared to Hezbollah's official discourse regarding the same situations. The understanding of that discourse will be formulated through an analysis of the group's propaganda material, including speeches, images, articles, songs, videos, games and other examples published on its various dissemination channels that will be described in detail in the following chapters. The analytical approach will also evaluate the group's actions, interests, and alliances in relation to their discourse. Hezbollah's narratives will be selected based on their persuasive power as understood through the most prominent media and mass communication theories, explaining the basis upon which influential rhetoric is built.

The first part of the research will provide a theoretical framework of the abovementioned theories as a means of understanding the spread and impact of propaganda. The following chapter will be focused on Hezbollah's background as a militant and political organization and on an overview of its main general narratives, channels of dissemination, and target audiences. The subsequent and central part of the thesis will present the context of the two selected conflicts and Hezbollah involvement in them, as well as an analysis of the main themes the group used in those situations to construct their discourse. The final section will be committed to the deductions stemming out of the analysis, their relation to the main thesis statement, and the explanation of Hezbollah's existential crisis argument, along with a number of concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Propaganda and Mass Communication Theories

With the relatively recent rise of the mass media and Internet as the platforms for the most dominant mass communication methods, the manner in which the audiences understand their reality and are affected by different worldviews has changed significantly. According to Eltantawy and Wiest, „new communication technologies . . . have become important resources

for the mobilization of collective action and the subsequent creation, organization, and implementation of social movements around the world" (1). While such trends may lead to positive political change by allowing vast numbers of citizens to reach information and take action, they also have the potential to facilitate the spread of radical content and allow militant organizations, such as Hezbollah, to recruit vulnerable individuals and gain significant influence in the political and social arena (Kaloglou). Although the terms mass communication and mass media can be defined in a number of ways, according to McQuail, commonly regarded as one of the most influential scholars in the field, it "indicates the entire systems within which messages are produced, selected, transmitted, received, and responded to" (qtd. in Putri 1). Those concepts seem to be well understood by Hezbollah, which has emerged as a public relations powerhouse in the Middle East in the three decades of its existence. The party skillfully employs its propaganda and mass communication strategies in order to influence the sentiments of its varied target audiences, and in doing so secure its position domestically, regionally, and internationally.

However, this most general explanation is only an overview of a whole, and naturally includes further theories within it that attempt to facilitate the understanding of specific effects propaganda and mass communication have on the society, the uses to which it can be applied, and its role in shaping the public values and opinions. Those, in turn, can be used in order to explain the effectiveness and prevalence of certain discourses within Hezbollah's propaganda, and the reasons its audience is often vulnerable to their persuasive power. The propaganda and mass communication theories that seem the most relevant and applicable to the abovementioned topic will be listed and explained in this chapter.

2.2. Agenda Setting Theory

The theory, first presented by McCombs and Shaw, claims that by choosing the specific topics on which it concentrates, the media also sets the public agenda to a certain extent (177).

The issues that tend to get more media coverage are also often perceived as more important by the audience than others, even if reality may suggest otherwise. In their view, it is the news producers who ultimately decide what position to assign to a certain story, allowing the consumers to gain a significant amount of information only on a narrow range of topics and often not even being aware of others. Thus, the media sets the "agenda" of the public perception. When it comes to Hezbollah content, the tactic of seeking an increased media publicity through, for instance, publishing shocking threats, violent narratives, and inside videos of its operations, may serve the abovementioned purpose. This applies especially, although not exclusively, to regional media, as the audience is frequently presented with a narrative not only coming from, but also focused on Hezbollah, automatically granting it the much desired attention and importance.

2.3. Framing

The concept of framing is related to the agenda-setting theory, but takes it a step further. It does not only focus the attention on a certain topic, but rather focuses on its essence, places it in a specific field of meaning. As explained by Goffman, individuals tend to interpret their reality according to their own framework, consisting of two elements: natural and social (8-9). The former consists of their own set of values, and the latter signifies the social context in which they function. The frames created by those factors greatly influence how information is understood, processed, and further communicated. Media, by tapping into those frames with a deliberate selection of specifically framed topics does not only tell the audience "what" to think about, but also "how" to think about it. This theory can therefore be applied not only to the manner in which the news media portrays Hezbollah, but also to the frames the group itself uses in order to publicize its agenda in a favorable light (e.g. "a Divine Victory", "fighting for independence" etc.).

2.4. Cultivation Theory

Originally proposed by Gerbner and Gross, the Cultivation Theory claims that a long-term exposure to television or other mass media has a capacity of strongly affecting the viewers' beliefs about the world and makes them susceptible to the messages presented. Furthermore, they present the idea of resonance; the media's power of shaping the audience's perception can be intensified if the content corresponds with their real experiences. Although still debated nowadays, the theory could be seen as a basis for the popularity of Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV channel among the Shi'ites and other Arab audiences, for the group's gradual approach to radicalization, and also for targeting individuals that are vulnerable to the messages due to their personal experiences.

2.5. Medium Theory

The Medium Theory focuses primarily on the traits of the medium itself, rather than on what is being communicated and in what manner. It states that, in fact, a medium is not simply a news outlet or a platform for content, but rather the "symbolic environment" of any message. According to McLuhan, the most prevalent medium of an age affects the perception of the viewers by providing them with a specific balance of the senses, through which they understand their environment (McLuhan 34). Therefore, the presentation of Hezbollah-affiliated communities from which the propaganda material comes, the idea of a utopian state, the corresponding merchandise and the prevalent rhetoric in general could be understood through this theory as an attempt at creating their own symbolic environment.

2.6. Two-Step Flow Theory

The concept of the two-step communication flow originated from a study conducted by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, in which they observed the mechanics of communication during American elections. The theory, subsequently further developed, states that "ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population" (Katz and Lazarsfeld 309). Therefore, in their view, the media's power in shaping

public opinions is limited, and is not sufficient without the influence of interpersonal communication, especially coming from the opinion leaders. This idea is greatly present in Hezbollah's management of its relationship with the audience, from the presentation of the group's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and Shi'ite religious leaders as the symbols and role models of its ideological values, its commitment to personally interacting with the families of its fighters, to its social and political involvement serving as a reinforcement of the disseminated narratives.

2.7. Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory differs form the traditional mass communication theories that emphasize the sender-message structure by presenting the audience as active, rather than passive consumers of content. Its core assumption is that individuals themselves choose the specific media that satisfy their personal needs. In that manner, it presents an audience-centered approach, and puts focus on how consumers choose to utilize the media, rather than how the information they passively receive affects them (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch). This theory could be applied to the "pull" rather than "push" tactics often employed by Hezbollah, the manner in which the group allows its potential followers to actively seek out content and be the first to approach, and its reliance on the follower-based echo chamber to further spread the relevant narratives.

2.8. Viral Marketing Theory

The concept, as the name itself states, is not a theory of general mass communication, but is rather focused specifically on marketing. It presents the view that encouraging individuals to spread a message propagating a certain brand, organization, or idea within their social circles and networks significantly increases the reach, and consequently the effect, of that message (Kaikati and Kaikati 6). The self-selection of specific content among individuals allows for better targeting and increases the chances of that content making its way to interested

individuals, especially ones that may otherwise be rather difficult to reach. This also allows the message to be more "provocative, sharper, edgier and even perhaps 'darker'" (Stewart, Ewing and Mather 2). The usage of virulent publicity on social networks, posting repetitive content on multiple accounts, and "flooding" the Internet with radical messages are tactics frequently employed by Hezbollah, and therefore may be understood through the views of that theory.

2.9. The Mere Exposure Effect

Another marketing and persuasion theory, based on extensive research of a specific psychological phenomenon, the mere exposure effect states that a high level of exposure makes it easier for individuals to process information. Repetitive images are better memorized, and in turn the more one is exposed to an idea, image, person and so forth, the more positive their response will be (Zajonc 2). The theory has been proven to increase sales and recognition in product marketing, especially when it comes to social media (Donnellan 29), and in a similar manner could be applied to Hezbollah's tactic of creating a vast number of connected user accounts and repetitively releasing the same content, in order to maximize the audience's exposure to their messages. Similarly, the frequent repetition of ideas and sentences in Nasrallah's speeches serves the same purpose.

2.10. The Likability Heuristic and the Principle of Authority

The following is a part of Cialdini's six principles of persuasion model, and involves several components; physical attractiveness, similarity, compliments, contact and cooperation, and conditioning and association. All of those state that the approach a sender of the message takes in order to influence the recipient greatly influences the outcome. It states, for instance, that an association with either positive or negative concepts influences how people feel about a product or idea. Furthermore, individuals tend to favor people and things that they find in some way similar to themselves, or that they can relate to. The rule continues in that manner with all the other components, and is aimed at increasing a popularity of the message. Similarly, another

part of Cialdini's model involves the power of authority. According to him, an audience feel a strong pressure of compliance to the requests of someone they regard an authority, based on their title, clothing, and trappings (accessories, indirect cues creating an authoritative position) (Cialdini 15). Therefore, in order to apply the principles to Hezbollah's propaganda, one may focus on the adjustment of content to specific social groups (e.g. Shi'ites, the general population of Lebanon, the Arab world), the usage of authority figures, and the association of narratives with religious or nationalistic tropes.

2.11. Lattitude of Acceptance

Another persuasion theory, applying not only to marketing, but also media and the Internet in general, it states that once individuals judge the message to be in what Perloff calls their lattitude of acceptance, they tend to adjust their attitude in order to accommodate the new input (60). Correspondingly to Cialdini, Perloff states that traits such as similarity or credibility stretch one's lattitude of acceptance (149). He presents specific tactics that can be used in order to manipulate one's responses and ensure commitment to an idea, product, or request. One of those is the Foot-in-the-Door tactic (also called the Snowball Effect), stating that once a target is persuaded to make a small commitment, they will also be increasingly compliant to further requests (Perloff 247). This, then, could be applied to the gradual radicalization processes in Hezbollah's schematics of recruitment, its commitment to implementing an education system accordant with its ideology in Lebanon's Shi'ite districts, and a long-term mutual commitment before a supporter is expected to fight in the group's battles.

2.12. Additional Remarks

Apart from applying the abovementioned mass media and propaganda theories, this thesis will also attempt to combine different materials demonstrating Hezbollah's discourse in order to construct an overview of its rhetorical management of conflict situations. While a vast number of scholarly researches focuses on the group's propaganda as a whole or in one specific

conflict, the author found that those observations cannot be universally applied when attempting to understand Hezbollah's motivations and shifts in discourse. Therefore, this thesis will aim to provide a clarification of this issue in the form of comparison of discourses surrounding different conflicts and thus provide an evaluation of its complex system of branding itself depending on the circumstances.

3. Hezbollah and Information Warfare

3.1. Background and History

Hezbollah, translated as "Party of God", is a Lebanese hybrid organization of Shi'ite militants, actively engaging in the local social structure, politics, and terrorism. Founded in 1982 (although the group's official manifesto was released only in 1985), it emerged as an after-effect of Shi'ia marginalization, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and Israel's invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), when the group separated from the politically more moderate Amal. Hezbollah's main objectives are the establishment of an Iran-inspired Islamic regime in the region, resistance to and destruction of Israel, and the expulsion of Western forces from the Middle East (Brennen 14). The group, currently led by Hassan Nasrallah, found its ideological inspiration in the Iranian Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini, and essentially serves as a proxy to Iran's foreign policy, receiving vast financial (ca. $200 million annually) and military support from the state's Revolutionary Guard Corps (Masters and Laub). Hezbollah's direct influence extends over Lebanon's Shi'ite districts, namely parts of Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley. Its involvement in the community's social life and the services it provides, including operating schools and medical units through a network of multiple NGOs, construction of infrastructure, financial support for the families of martyred Hezbollah fighters and civilian war victims, has won the group a widespread support among Lebanon's Shi'ites, and allowed it to enter the political arena as an official party, gradually gaining political power in the country. However, due to its

radical ideology and military operations, Hezbollah is currently recognized as a terrorist organization by the United States, Israel, Canada, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, with the United Kingdom and the European Union only applying this status to its military wing (Stanford University). The group's most prominent and well-known attacks include the suicide bombings of the US Embassy and US Marine quarters in Beirut in 1983, the 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847, and the 2006 killing and kidnapping of Israeli soldiers on the Israeli-Lebanese border, that led to the 34-day War between the two states. More recently, it has also garnered regional and international attention due to its active involvement in the Syrian Civil War, in which it fights on the side of President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Hezbollah's organizational structure is headed by a seven-member Shura Council, which is responsible for cooperating its affairs, including in financial, military, social, or legal areas. The group also operates political councils and a military wing, and while its recruits are mostly Lebanese Shi'ites, it also aims on reaching potential foreign supporters, from regions such as the United States, Europe, or South America (Weimann 3). In order to reach them, Hezbollah has been conducting an extensive propaganda campaign ever since its establishment, and it has managed to expand its psychological influence to the media and the cyber world.

3.2. Propaganda Dissemination Channels

One of the key channels of dissemination of Hezbollah's propaganda is its Al-Manar ("The Beacon") TV station, broadcasting from Beirut since 1991 and currently banned in several states. Nonetheless, the station can be watched around the world, aiming to spread the group's messages far beyond the Lebanese public. Along with the Al-Nur radio station, also owned and operated by Hezbollah, Al-Manar has a continuous programming that includes political commentary, news, self-produced documentaries, Islamic programs, speeches of Hassan Nasrallah and other leaders of the group, and numerous messages inciting to violence against Israel and the United States, or aiming to recruit potential fighters (Stanford University).

Currently, Al-Manar is one of the leading media organizations in the Arab world and its website was ranked the second most popular news site in Lebanon in 2012. In that same year, the station launched iPhone and iPad apps that provide news content (Meir Amit, "Terrorism" 37). Al-Manar plays a key role in Hezbollah's information efforts; almost all of the group's operations are recorded by the station's cameramen and broadcast soon after they happen, as was the case with the 2006 war. The channel was the first to announce the capture of Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah, and the first to broadcast the victorious speech Nasrallah gave when the war ended (Brennen 65). It was also essentially the only source of war footage, and both Israeli and international media outlets broadcast its material; that certainly served Hezbollah's interests when it comes to upholding its desired image worldwide and eventually helped sway the popular opinion toward perceiving Israel as an unjustified invader (Kalb and Saivetz 20).

Except for the TV and radio stations, Hezbollah's media network consists of several newspapers and magazines, such as *Al-Ahad*, *Al-Intiqad*, *Al-Bilad*, or *Al-Wahda* (Brennen 63), and numerous websites, most popular of which is Nasrallah's personal website, publishing his speeches and other propaganda materials. Some Lebanese media that are not directly owned by Hezbollah are nonetheless affiliated with it, and their content is aimed at propagating the group's interests; the most notable of those are the *Al-Akhbar* newspaper and the Al-Mayadeen TV channel (Meir Amit, "Terrorism" 2).

Just like other militant groups, Hezbollah is active on social media and operates numerous accounts both directly and through supporters, many of which have hundreds of thousands of followers. In fact, it was one of the first designated terrorist organizations to be active on sites such as Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Instagram, or release applications for Apple Store and Google Play, primarily for Al-Manar station. It also uses Whatsapp and Telegram for communications (Ben Solomon). Due to many of the group's websites being hosted by servers in several U.S. states, such as Ohio, Florida, or Michigan, the U.S. Congress passed a special

bill in 2015 that would clarify that allowing any accounts affiliated with Hezbollah to remain online is illegal, and that extends also to social media companies (Ben Solomon). Since then, many of such accounts have been suspended or deleted, however, the users are usually quickly directed to new pages (Staff, "Hezbollah Says"). Apart from social media Hezbollah also uses video games as an attempt to reach its younger audiences (Anti-Defamation League).

3.3. Target Audience

Just like most militant groups, Hezbollah shuffles a number of narratives and approaches tailored specifically for its target audiences. Considering its main official goals, including the furthering of pro-Iranian interests, the eradication of Israel, capturing of Jerusalem, and eventually the establishment of an Islamic regime within Lebanon and the Middle East in general, it needs to navigate its propaganda in a manner that will not only incite, indoctrinate, and recruit, but also intimidate and threaten. The direction will, naturally, depend on the targeted group. According the Brennen, the group's audiences can be divided into three simple groups, namely the domestic audience, the enemy audience, and the neutral audience, whose opinions are yet to be swayed either one way or the other (65-68). This division could further be divided into more specific subgroups: the Lebanese public (especially Shi'ites), Iran, the Arab and Muslim world in general, the Western world, and Israel (Meir Amit, "Terrorism" 5).

Similarily as is the case with the Palestinian Hamas, Hezbollah needs to uphold a delicate balance between its political interests domestically and its resistance narrative. On the one hand, it attempts to portray itself as the benevolent governing party, that dedicates all its resources and manpower to the social services it provides throughout Lebanon and to its ideological cause. On the other hand, one of its actual primary aims is its ongoing conflict with Israel, and in that context it wants to keep an image of a strong and resilient military power, ready for numerous sacrifices in order to protect its people and fight the aggressor (Brennen

66). This approach was well portrayed during its 2006 war with Israel, in which its main goal was "to gain a symbolic victory in the eyes of its domestic, neutral, and even enemy audience through psychological warfare" (Brennen 64). To appeal to the audiences at home and neutral, foreign ones (including the media) the group exploited collateral damage caused by Israeli rockets (even though it deliberately hid its weapons and fighters in civilian areas), in order to portray the enemy state an utterly cruel aggressor. On the other hand, the group spread big amounts of material documenting its own alleged benevolence in helping to rebuild homes, care for the wounded, and its bravery in fighting the obviously greater military force. Such disparage was strengthened by the groups efforts to limit international journalists' full access to certain areas, and even staging events, such as sending on-signal ambulances on an orchestrated "parade" through the streets (Kalb and Saivetz 16-17). When addressing the Israeli audiences, however, both civilian and military, Hezbollah espoused an entirely different narrative; one of strength and aggression. On its media outlets and online, the group would boast about its vast weapons arsenal, advertise its readiness to bomb Israeli civilian targets if the attacks on Lebanon do not cease, and try to lower the enemy's morale by publishing pictures of dead Israeli soldiers and civilians (Brennen 65). After the eventual ceasefire between the two sides, Hezbollah did not hesitate to instantly announce its victory through its Al Manar TV channel. The group's rhetoric and information strategy during this conflict will be further portrayed in the following chapter.

Although in its early years Hezbollah may not have made much of a division between its audiences according to age, in the 2000s it started to expand its propaganda portfolio tailored specifically for youth by releasing video games. The first, called "Special Force" was put on the market in 2003, its sequel "Special Force 2" was released in 2007, and the latest Hezbollah video came out in 2013. All of those games have common themes; they recreate some of Hezbollah's past operations against Israel and allow the player to take part in the simulation,

filled with copies of actual weapons used and real people from the enemy's side (Anti-Defamation League). Apart from the games, the group targets younger audiences, especially those worldwide, through an extensive use of the Internet and the social media. The group's websites and accounts operate in seven languages in order to reach the most widespread following. Those languages are Arabic, English, French, Farsi, Hebrew, Azeri, and Spanish (Meir Amit, "Terrorism" 6).

3.4. Main Goals, Themes, and Narratives

The themes of Hezbollah's online propaganda shuffle narratives in various levels of "intensity" of its Islamic goals, as it aims to gain and uphold its credibility with the target audiences in several different forms: as a political party, a social organization, a terrorist group, and a political resistance. Those themes and roles can sometimes be intertwined; for instance, the social service wing's propaganda can also serve the purpose of the resistance, as Hezbollah highlights its role as the savior and benefactor of the Lebanese people in the face of Israeli aggression. At other times, however, it needs to downplay one role for the purpose of another, as in order to gain most widespread support throughout the population of Lebanon, its Islamic Shi'ite ideology cannot overshadow its attempts at maintaining an image of an inclusive group, taking care of all (or at least most) Lebanese sects. Specifically for those reasons, leaders of the organization, such as Hassan Nasrallah and Na'im Qassem have occassionally suggested that the goals the organization described in its manifesto are becoming gradually more disconnected from its current activity (Stanford University).

A more specific division of the group's main propaganda themes and narratives can be based on the content of its websites and social media accounts. The first, and perhaps most prominent category would be the general glorification of Hezbollah and the careful crafting of its benevolent image in contrast to Israel's aggression, very present especially in its wartime propaganda and aimed not only at local, but also international audiences. What serves that

theme is also the constant underscoring of the group's alleged victories and its continuous rise in strength, paired with the indimidation of the Israeli public. Similarily, any information available about its social service activities also serves that discourse. Another category can be found in the personality cult of the group's leaders (especially Nasrallah) and the celebration of its martyrs, most evident on the personal websites and accounts of the most prominent figures. The third category, rather essential to Hezbollah's survival, is its legitimization of terror strategies against its enemies, mainly Israel and the West, through the ideas of martyrdom, resistance, and jihad, and the simultaneous opposition to any peace process with Israel. This discourse serves Hezbollah's recruitment goals, as it not only helps to indoctrinate potential fighters, but justifies any actions they would perform in the group's name. It also goes hand in hand with the narrative of hate and incitement against Israel, the Jewish people in general, and the West, especially the United States. Yet another narrative category could be recognized in spreading Iranian Islamic Shi'ite idelogy based on the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini, which basically constitutes Hezbollah's main ideological principles. The final pillar of the propaganda themes would be the widespread promotion of Hezbollah's and Iran's political goals, focusing on both Middle East and foreign policy, with the special emphasis on the "resistance" narrative, including Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Palestinian organizations and visible also in Hezbollah's recent involvement in the Syrian civil war (Meir Amit, "Terrorism" 5).

4. The 34-Day War

4.1. Background

On July 12th, 2006 Hezbollah fighters broke through the border separating southern Lebanon from northern Israel and launched an attack on an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) patrol, resulting in the death of eight Israeli soldiers and the abduction of two others, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev. The raid almost immediately resulted in heavy retaliation from the Israeli side, and a full-blown armed conflict that lasted for over a month. The group's leader Hassan

Nasrallah had heavily miscalculated Israel's response, which he had admitted in numerous interviews (Erlich and Kahati 94). As was a pattern during the previous Israeli occupation of Lebanon from 1982 to 2000, especially around the area of the heavily disputed Sheba'a Farms,[1] similar abductions by Hezbollah would be met by a moderate response and a subsequent prisoner swap. That summer, however, the outcome was different and the war in Lebanon escalated rapidly. The conflict lasted 34 days, until August 14th, when a United Nations-negotiated ceasefire was signed, although it officially ended on September 8th, when the Israeli naval blockade of Lebanon was lifted (Smith). The result was inconclusive; although Lebanon suffered much heavier losses and a vast destruction of its infrastructure, the Israeli goals of reestablishing deterrence, ensuring the release of the captured soldiers (their bodies were returned only two years later, in exchange for five Lebanese prisoners), disarming Hezbollah and removing it permanently from the southern part of the country were not achieved at the time of the truce, making this a war with no winning side, at least strategically (Brennen 46). As became more evident only after the armed conflict was finished, the true importance of this war (especially for Nasrallah and his organization) seems to have laid not as much in the military triumph, as in winning the "battle for hearts and minds" (Erlich and Kahati 3), especially considering that Hezbollah's proclaimed goal was simply to survive the war.

Thus, Hezbollah was not only active on the ground, but extremely focused on propaganda and on deliberate framing of every small event happening during the conflict; and from the very beginning, that part was regarded by many to be a victory on the part of the group and Nasrallah's skillful navigation of the region's media battlefield.

4.2. Strategic Goals and Circumstances

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[1] Sheba'a Farms are a disputed strip of land at the border between Syria, Lebanon, and the Israeli Golan Heights. The disputes stem from Israel's annexation of the area in 1981 and the other actors' claim towards it.

The conflict itself was also different than previous wars between Israel and a neighboring state; it was an asymmetrical war, in which the former had been fighting a religious militant group that styled itself as a resistance movement and that is frequently regarded by numerous authors (e.g. Abdul-Hussain, Kindt, Patrikarakos) as a "state within a state" (Kalb and Saivetz 3). In regard to sheer military power, the belligerents were far from equal: one being a state actor with one of the world's strongest armies and nuclear power, the other, despite the support and arms supply it received from Iran and Syria, a small and relatively ill-equipped guerilla movement. And yet, as became evident during and after the conflict, it was not the "hard power" that truly mattered in this war, as the winner would not be determined based simply on its stronger military capabilities (Fontana 2). Rather, "in today's information age, it is often the party with the stronger story that wins" (qtd. in Fontana 2). This part of the paper will be aimed at demonstrating that in the 2006 Lebanon war, it was Hezbollah that managed to craft a better, more convincing story with its information strategy.

Hezbollah has long been known as a pioneer in both traditional media and online propaganda campaigning, receiving extensive funding from Iran for the improvement of its communication technology as far back as the 1980s and operating according to its motto that "if you haven't captured it on film, you haven't fought" (Clarke). Considering the group's long history in framing events to its advantage, the theme of disproportionality lent Hezbollah a means by which it could portray itself in direct opposition to Israel. The party ultimately crafted a narrative which presented its image as a force that defended innocent civilians from a foreign aggressor and that fought fiercely despite having much more limited resources than its opponent. Simultaneously, it was difficult for anyone to challenge that discourse, as Hezbollah's status as a non-state actor allowed it to tightly control the information that made it out of its territory (Kalb and Saivetz 5).

Nonetheless, the 2006 war has been pronounced as one of the first conflicts that marked what modern warfare of the Middle East and beyond would look like; playing itself out predominantly in the cyberspace, not just on the ground. Reports on the war, both from the two fighting sides and journalists, have broadcast live coverage from the battlefield, be it Israeli troops preparing for a tactical operation, homes being destroyed by airstrikes, or civilians evacuating into shelters (Kalb and Saivetz 4). Such reports, often focused on specific groups of people and including emotionally charged imagery, such as injured children clutching their dolls or civilians wandering through the debris and looking for their family members, can entirely shift the public opinion. In that landscape, a skillful and well-designed propaganda may often prove to be all that is required for one side to capture the sentiments of the audiences and ultimately tip the scale of the conflict, and a less prominent military power may even become an advantage in such a case. That war for the image of the most dedicated force and righteous standard-bearer is what ultimately led Hezbollah to be recognized as the *de facto* winner of that conflict by the vast majority of the international media community, even though Lebanon suffered at least 1109 estimated casualties ("Why They Died"), as compared to Israel's 163 ("The Second Lebanon War").

On the other hand, in order to maintain its *raison d'être* and support among the Lebanese community (especially the non-Shi'ites), just as previously mentioned, Hezbollah has to navigate a delicate territory. In the eyes of the Lebanese and Arab target audiences, it wants to be regarded as a fearsome resistance force, one that has extensive military capabilities and is able to ultimately defeat its enemies. Conversely, however, to the international (mostly Western) community, it portrays itself as popular resistance against a foreign oppressor, defending its people and working towards regaining control over their land and fundamental rights, which they have been denied. In that sense, it needs to maneuver its interest in risking the lives of Lebanese civilians, which serves the victimization, and the risk of losing its

credibility and domestic support. Therefore, it needs to appropriate its messages in such a manner that would showcase it both as a semi-state actor that is able to govern and provide for its people on numerous levels (social, educational, political etc.) and as a violent resistance group that battles the status quo of its region. Its main target audiences based on this division will therefore be fed varying narratives and can be divided into the Lebanese population, the general Arab audience, the Israeli public, and the international public, which in this conflict proved to be a significant factor (Brennen 65-66).

4.3. Controlling the Story

The abovementioned rhetoric of victimization became an especially decisive point in the 2006 conflict, too. According to Kalb and Saivetz's extensive research on the topic, one of the prevalent themes in the Lebanese and international reports during the 34-day war was the theme of disproportionality (10). The claim of a staggering majority of global news reports was that Israel had responded disproportionately to Hezbollah's provocation, even if it the group had killed eight IDF soldiers and captured two, essentially starting the conflict. The reasoning was that similar attacks have been conducted in the past and addressed with more restraint, and therefore it was expected that the U.N. or the U.S. would broker a ceasefire and a prisoner swap. Since this was not the case, Israel's response was dubbed as out of proportion.

It is important to note, however, that at the beginning of the war the attack and kidnapping executed by Hezbollah was condemned by numerous state actors, including the Lebanese government and other Arab countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Similarly, the U.S. and Great Britain initially voiced their support for Israel and strongly opposed the immediate ceasefire called for by Hezbollah at the start of the conflict, citing their condemnation of terrorist acts that lead to escalations in an already tense zone and to further violence. The two latter states also condemned Iran and Syria as actors directly supporting the militant group due to their political interests in the region and as such, responsible for the attack

(qtd. in Fontana 3). The initial media coverage at the beginning of the hostilities resonated this view, mostly focusing on Hezbollah as the side that started the aggression, Israel's response as a necessary form of deterrence, and the Lebanese casualties as an unfortunate, but inevitable consequence of it.

Later into the conflict, the narrative changed, and Hezbollah became widely regarded as the defensive side, which despite its limited resources was able to respond to the agressor. This tendency is extremely visible in statistics; according to the German media research organization Media Tenor, 94 percent of Al-Arabiya's stories on the conflict and 78 percent of Al-Jazeera's coverage of it listed Israel as the aggressor (qtd. in Kalb and Saivetz 12). While BBC, for instance, tried to be more balanced, out of its 117 stories on the subject 39 percent blamed Israel for the war, and only four percent blamed Hezbollah (Kalb and Saivetz 12). This rhetoric became prevalent even though it has long been suspected and finally proven, with photographs published in the Sunday Herald Sun in Australia on July 30, that Hezbollah was using Lebanese civilians as human shields, often firing rockets and preparing their strategic positions in residential areas in evident violation of international law, thus making it almost impossible for Israel to target them without inevitably hitting civilian targets (Crown Heights).

Figure 1: Hezbollah militants preparing to fire rockets from Beirut's

civilian neighborhoods (Crown Heights).

Hezbollah, understanding the importance of information warfare, strongly focused on Lebanese victims, rather than mentioning its fallen fighters, and repeatedly accused Israel of disproportionate aggression (Kalb and Saivetz 22). According to Kalb and Saivetz, it is unclear „whether it was first the media focusing on this theme [of disproportionality] and then Hezbollah exploiting its propaganda value, or whether it was Hezbollah deliberately drawing journalists to this story day after day" (11), but the significant impact it had on the public's regard of this conflict and Hezbollah's skillful usage of it are evident. As Fontana puts it:

> With a narrative that transcended time and space, Hezbollah depicted itself as the vanguard of resistance against perceived Israeli and Western domination, melding elements of its own unique political culture of militancy and Shi'ism with the broader nostalgic themes of pan-Arabism. This allowed the group to gather support beyond its domestic constituency. (2)

It could be argued that in this narrative landscape, Israel's use of "hard power" essentially strengthened Hezbollah's "soft power"; the fact that the former relied so strongly on its military strategy while underestimating the importance of political discourse eventually led it to information defeat, allowing Hezbollah to exploit the situation. The results of this were disastrous to Israel's image both domestically and internationally and could still be seen months later, as was demonstrated by the comissioning and later discussion caused by the Winograd

Committee Report.[2] Nasrallah later used the report as a tool for criticizing Israel's actions and its government's (especially Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's) incompetence (Erlich and Kahati 105-106), claiming it only confirmed who emerged as the real victor of the conflict, even though he simultaneously praised it, saying that it is "worthy of respect . . . when the enemy entity acts honestly and sincerely" (qtd. in Haaretz).

One of the most effective tactics employed by Hezbollah in order to manipulate the story and push the abovementioned disproportionality narrative was its territorial control. It has been reported that the group frequently restricted foreign reporters' access only to certain areas of Beirut and Lebanon in general, as opposed to employees of Arab news outlets, that were more likely to report in a light that was favorable for the group. Several reporters have claimed that while being given a Hezbollah-controlled tour of a Southern suburb of Beirut, mostly inhabited by Shi'ites and heavily destroyed in the bombing, they were warned not to walk around on their own, only take pictures or videos of certain approved buildings and streets, and not to talk to any of the residents. It was also reported that at a certain point, apparently on cue, a number of ambulances loudly sounding their sirens passed by the group of reporters, providing a perfect opportunity for capturing footage (Kalb and Saivetz 16-17). According to Anderson Cooper, this was a clear attempt to control a story, although he also stated that apart from such occasions, it was very difficult to get access to interview any Hezbollah members, and that all of CNN's attempts (as of August 9, 2006) were denied (CNN). Reporters were also not welcome in south Lebanon, which was where most of the ground fighting was taking place, even though some "rogue" journalists managed to capture footage from the area and talk to Hezbollah fighters (e.g. Kevin Sites of *Yahoo!News*). In general, however, being caught in the

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[2] The report was commisioned by the government under the pressure of the public, and its aim was the analysis of military and strategic failures of Israel during the Second Lebanon War.

zone reporting alone and without permission posed a risk of equipment confiscation and indirect threats from Hezbollah about running into problems when returning to Beirut (Fontana 7).

On the other hand, those who covered the conflict for news outlets fully controlled by Hezbollah, such as Al-Manar TV or Al-Nur radio, were often the only ones who were given full access and therefore, were in exclusive possession of material that no one else was able to cover (Kalb and Saivetz 20). As a consequence, many videos or pictures that first aired on Al-Manar or its website, were the only publicly available footage from a specific event, forcing any other publication globally to re-use that material in order to cover the story. The problem with that, however, is that such outlets used footage from an obviously biased source, ultimately aiding to spread propaganda material directly from Hezbollah's own "pocket". The reporting of the organization's own channels was also the widest, firstly due to its unrestricted access, and consequently as it was often providing live coverage straight from the battlefield or bombed areas. Al-Manar was also the station that aired a video from the abduction of Israeli soldiers that started the conflict (Kais), underscoring its advantage in obtaining material and its strategic goals as being fully tied with those of Hezbollah. Being one of the leading TV channels in the Arab world, the station was one of the main strategic targets for the IDF already at the beginning of the conflict. But understanding its significance, Hezbollah was prepared well in advance; even though Al-Manar's headquarters were bombed in one of the earliest aerial attacks, Hezbollah prepared well in advance and the station resumed its broadcast from an alternative location after only two minutes of being off the air (Cordesman, Sullivan and Sullivan 136).

The information war did not play itself out only in the news sector. According to Kalb and Saivetz the Internet became the tool that made the 2006 hostilities the first "live" war in history (3). In no prior conflict have the raw events from the battlefield been transmitted in real time; in this case, the images of Israeli units advancing in Lebanon, the attacks on Beirut's districts and airport, the civilian struggle, evacuations, and bombings of Israeli cities were

accessible all around the world to everyone, not only to media networks (Fontana 4). Hezbollah also made use of this phenomenon and fueled it by releasing extensive additional materials, such as war songs with accompanying videos, Nasrallah's fiery speeches encouraging every supporter to fight against the enemy and using its online echo chamber to spread and translate the content over the Internet, making it much more widely accessible.

As mentioned previously, the group's advantage when it came to spreading controlled content may have laid in the fact that they are not a recognized government, which allowed them more freedom in supervising the flow of information and imagery out of Lebanon's affected areas (Kalb and Saivetz 4-5). Naturally, Israel also attempted to maintain a grip on the story and the intelligence that was coming from its territories, but due to a number of factors the outcome of the conflict and the general opinion of it, both domestically and internationally, only highlighted its shortcomings. The criticism for Israel's military and diplomatic strategy became the predominant opinion, and the government found it difficult to adequately justify its decisions. The Winograd report lists the following major tactical flaws: hasty and uninformed decision-making, lack of a comprehensive military plan, disproportionate reliance on aerial force and a deficient ground action, ambiguous presentation of goals and strategies, insufficient training and equipment for reserve units, and failure to seek alternative solutions in order to adapt to the reality on the ground and the shifting public opinion ("Press Release" 3-4). A separate U.S. congressional report, among other significant deficiencies, also lists "an inadequate presentation of the Israeli view to the international audiences; and harm to future Israeli deterrence" (Sharp et al. 11).

These last two points indicate that Israel greatly underestimated the significance of communication strategy and image in the Second Lebanon War, especially considering that this was one of the first conflicts with such vast online presence. The lack of balance between its usage of "hard" and "soft" power may have been one of the factors leading the media to

highlight the issue of disproportionality, and left it fully vulnerable to criticism. On the other hand, Israel's efforts to restrict the access of journalists to its northern regions and to avoid leaks were condemned and often unsuccessful; numerous politicians and members of the IDF (both high profile and regular soldiers) were giving direct interviews and reporters were often able to capture footage directly from the border, recording the movement of the troops in real time (Fontana 7). An example of such easy access to sensitive information was demonstrated by UNIFIL's regular reports: their updates detailing Israeli positions and advancement were posted online, essentially leaving data that would normally be considered as "actionable intelligence" openly visible to everyone, including Hezbollah. UNIFIL never posted anything regarding the movements of Hezbollah fighters, perhaps due to lack of information, or perhaps because of a biased agenda. While it is unclear whether the guerilla group made use of this specific data, those reports often coincided with violent clashes in the region and Hezbollah attacks on Israeli units (Kalb and Saivetz 15).

While Israel's democratic status is somewhat disputable, the state is based on democratic principles, and taking all the abovementioned points into consideration, it may be argued that in this information war the opennes of its society worked toward its detriment. While transparency is a crucial principle for democratic state-actors in such instances, Hezbollah's non-state status gave it the advantage of holding undisputable control over the story and spinning it in the most favorable manner.

4.4. Hezbollah's Main Narratives

The capability of Hezbollah's propaganda machine in redirecting a story to serve its interest was especially well showcased in its "divine victory" campaign, which was present not only during the Second Lebanon War, but perhaps especially after its end. The groups that support Hezbollah could be divided into local, national, and international, and that division can often be a source of tensions and challenges for the organization's rhetoric. Nasrallah seems to

understand that in order for Hezbollah to maximize its appeal, there needs to be a dialectic that finds common ground between those diverse groups. That rhetoric lies in representing his organization as "a protector of Lebanese territorial integrity, and of the region more generally, against imperialist aggression" (Higgins 44). The "divine victory" discourse serves as a perfect component of this thought.

In the spirit of the abovementioned branding, right after the 2006 conflict Hezbollah launched a full-blown media campaign in order to indoctrinate its varied target audiences. Its themes could be divided into three main categories: 1. "us vs. them" – framing itself in juxtaposition to the "evil" Israel and the U.S., 2. "the Arab victory" – citing sentiments of Arab nationalism in order to fuel Hezbollah's legitimacy as the leader of the Arab world, 3. "Hezbollah the protector" – painting a picture of the group as the only capable defender and caretaker of the Lebanese. Those themes will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

The masterful utilization of the "divine victory" discourse became Hezbollah's leverage in its political aspirations as well. Criticizing the Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora, the group managed to restructure the country's cabinet of ministers and secured one third of the seats for its own representatives, ultimately giving it veto power over the government. According to Ibrahim, the campaign also solidified Hezbollah's position as an Islamic resistance; she claims that it became the group's "newfound leverage and stunning success at turning what much of the world saw as a near-disaster for its cause into a source of Islamic pride and a rallying point for support."

This rhetoric was promoted in Hezbollah's electronic and print publications, and often repeated by its domestic and international audiences (Erlich and Kahati 105). It also gained widespread support in Lebanon, not only among the Shi'ites, but even the general population. The Lebanese saw Israel's attacks destroy many neighborhoods, infrastructure, and landscape, and saw Hezbollah fighters as defenders of their country (Kalb and Saivetz 8|). Lebanon was

full of roadsigns and posters in numerous languages praising the "divine victory" and depicting

Hassan Nasrallah, and many homes and public buildings were decorated with both Lebanese

and Hezbollah flags.

Figure 2: The Lebanese crowds gather in southern Beirut to listen to Hassan

Nasrallah's speech declaring the "Divine Victory" (Addario).

Interestingly, the campaign made clever use of wordplay; "divine victory" in Arabic

(*nasr min allah)*, apart from its religious and military allusions, sounds very similar to

Nasrallah, and thus simultaneously serves as praise for the group's leader (Erlich and Kahati

105). Hezbollah even erected an exhibition near its headquarters in Beirut commemorating the

war on its first anniversary, including a showcase of its *Special Force 2* video game, in which

players can impersonate the group's fighters and carry out missions aimed at Israeli forces,

simulating the conflict (Watson). The discourse was often celebrated in Al Manar TV and Al

Nur radio, with materials such as speeches, interviews, and songs praising the militant groups

for its alleged triumph (Erlich and Kahati 105).

Figure 3: A promotional image for the *Special Force 2* video game (Gamex).

In order to present the groups's three main themes of propaganda during the 34-Day War, namely "us vs. them", "the Arab Victory" , and Hezbollah as a protector of its people, the following part of the paper will be focused on analysing three specific pieces from their media campaign: Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah's speech from the "Divine Victory" Celebration in Baalbek on September 22 (while all Nasrallah's speeches showcase the process of his rhetoric's development, this speech is a perfect example of encompassing them all), a cartoon published on a Hezbollah-associated website, and a victory song and video shown on Al-Manar TV after the war.

4.4.1. Us Versus Them

One of the main challenges for Hezbollah and Nasrallah at the very onset of the conflict to sway the Lebanese (and more generally, Arab) population to support their cause, especially considering that members of the Arab League, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, publicly condemned the group's attack on the Israeli border (Fattah). The main manner in which this could be achieved was a carefully crafted propaganda, and mainly Nasrallah's speeches. In fact, apart from its rockets, speeches were arguably the only other offensive weapon used by the

group; being aware of Israel's advantage in ground combat, the rest of its strategy was mostly defensive (Harel). A narrative that appeared to fit perfectly with the group's goal in this case and to bolster solidarity among its target audiences was the "us vs. them" model.

This rhetoric has been used numerous times in the past, and is a well-known tool for encouraging the public to rally behind a leader in times of conflict. This framework is not based on pragmatic assumptions, but rather on the question of identity in the Manichean battle of "good vs. evil", "democracy vs. totalitarianism", "civilisation vs. chaos", juxtaposing the two sides as inherently different from each other. The rhetorical mode, also called epideictic, is used to explain the social world and in this case does so by identifying the culprit of the wrongdoing, the evil villain, and portrays them as the target of all action (Krebs and Lobasz 433). Therefore, rather than seek rational solutions and credible information, the public focuses on "coming together" to fight that villain. As a result, the dominant framework becomes "a prose of solidarity rather than a prose of information" (qtd. in Krebs and Lobasz 434).

In Hezbollah's narratives, the "us" encompassed different groups, depending on the audience: at times it was only the Lebanese, at other times also the Palestinians, or if needed, the general Arab population. On the other hand, the "them" was used predominantly in reference to Israel, and sometimes to Israel and the United States.

In his "Divine Victory" speech, Nasrallah underscored the evil of Israel and framed the enemy as weak and frightened against his group's fighters:

How could a few thousand only stand and fight in such difficult circumstances, drive the naval warships out of our territorial waters (incidentally the army together with the resistance are capable of protecting our territorial waters against the desecrating Zionist), destroy the pride of the Israeli industry - the Merkava tanks, disrupt the Israeli helicopters in the day and later at night as well, and on (sic) their elite brigades. I do not exaggerate, just see the Israeli media. They were turned to panicking and frightened

mice by your sons. (Nasrallah, "Divine Victory")

Similarly, he blamed Israel for starting the offensive, and the United States for aiding it, in what he called the "New Middle East Project", allegedly aimed at controlling the region (Abu-Lughod and Warkentin 34). Referring to that, he said:

Today, we must emphasize that this war was American by decision, arms, planning, will and by giving the Zionists successive time extensions: one week, two weeks, three, four... What halted the war was the Zionists' failure . . . The American interfered and accepted even the drafts, he accepted in order to stop the war. They stopped the war not for the sake of Lebanon, nor for the sake of the children of Lebanon, nor the blood of the women in Lebanon or for the beauty of Lebanon, rather for "Israel". (Nasrallah, "Divine Victory")

This point of the United States, or the West in general, only caring about the interests of the Israel, rather than the wellbeing of the Lebanese and Arab public, is central to this narrative. Nasrallah implies that they have long ago been abandoned by the forces that could have come to their aid in establishing security and sovereignty, which perfectly serves his claim that they should take matters into their own hands by joining the armed resistance. This point also highlights the "us vs. them" narrative, by underscoring the conflict between the population of Lebanon and the Israeli-American bloc.

To further emphasize the importance of supporting Hezbollah, he mentions the hardships the fighters went through, standing "in the open ground for 33 days exposed to the open skies without air cover in front of the strongest air force in the Middle East" (Nasrallah, "Divine Victory"), and praises them for nonetheless being victorious in their battle. Similarly, he calls the crowd of his supporters "a great people, a steadfast people, proud people, loyal and brave people" (Nasrallah, "Divine Victory"). These superlatives are aimed at standing in direct contrast to the manner in which he refers to his enemies.

Nasrallah's convincing narrative was given a fuller meaning through his skillful usage of developing a martyr figure as a symbol of glory and recruitment tool. The one that was perhaps utilized the most was Imad Mugniyeh, a Hezbollah fighter assasinated in 2008 by the Mossad, allegedly with American assistance. Even though Hezbollah distanced itself from Mugniyeh while he was still alive, due to his often heinous acts, it used his image later to demonstrate to their audiences that the ideals they may strive for are attainable under the group's command. Nasrallah often mentioned Mugniyeh's loyalty and courage, and highlighted his role in discovering Israel's plans for bombing several of Hezbollah's rocket-launching sites, which were then moved elsewhere (Higgins 48-49). The martyr's figure in this case was a perfect tool for Nasrallah; highlighting his bravery and dedication gave him a universal appeal, and thus, put him in juxtaposition to what the Hezbollah leader wanted his audience to believe about the Israelis.

One of the other main components of the "us vs. them" rhetoric that Nasrallah used often was contrasting Israel's military power with Hezbollah's own fihgting abilities, which were considerably smaller. While this matter will be further explained in the following paragraph, Hezbollah's alleged "divine victory" against the mightier Israeli force also underscores the triumph of the downtrodden and oppressed in a battle with the great force of evil, serving to strenghtem the epideictic theme.

4.4.2. The Victory of Arabs

Throughout the war, one of Nasrallah's main goals was utilizing the situation in order to establish himself as a legitimate leader not only for the Lebanese population, but the wider Arab world. While the group's early purpose was mostly focused on the Shi'ite minority in Lebanon, it eventually started evolving in order to maintain support, and in the rhetoric that surrounded the conflict Nasrallah deliberately abstained from using sectarian references, focusing instead on creating the feeling of unity in the fight against the aggressor. He often

underscored that solidarity was the only potentially successful weapon to defeat Israel:

> We feel that we won and that Lebanon won, that Palestine triumphed and so has the Arab nation as a whole, that all the vulnerable, oppressed, deprived and victims in this world have triumphed. . . .
>
> The Arab armies and peoples are not only able to liberate Gaza, the West Bank and East al-Quds (Jerusalem), but simply, and with a little decision coupled with some will, they are able to regain Palestine from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean. (Nasrallah, "Divine Victory")

In a similar fashion, and further underscoring the Arab unity, Nasrallah often repeated his support for the Palestininan cause, and referred to the Lebanese and Palestinians as brothers facing similar challenges, being the victims of imperialistic oppression. The calls for the liberation of Palestine are a central tenet in the Arab mindset (Higgins 42), and by expressing his solidarity with the cause he not only may have garnered more widespread support, but further cement his legitimacy. In his September 22 speech, Nasrallah also took a moment to mention the Palestinian issue:

> On this divine Victory Day, before addressing internal affairs, and as I did on July 12, I will re-emphasize two recommendations: our hearts, feelings and grief today go to Palestine, to Gaza, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, and al-Quds (Jerusalem) too, to every town, village and Palestinian camp that are bombed everyday, to the young people killed everyday, to the Palestinian homes that are demolished everyday, while the whole world remains silent, the Arab world before the rest. (Nasrallah, "Divine Victory")

This rhetoric was crafted in a manner that would successfully resonate with a number of Arab target audiences, and for a number of reasons. Hezbollah's propaganda placed it in association with the colonized and downtrodden in a struggle again imperialistic powers, such as Israel and the United States. In that context, Nasrallah made sure to present the 2006 victory

as a triumph of the victims against the oppressors. Simultaneously, Hezbollah built its campaign upon another narrative deeply embedded in the Arab communities, namely regaining the dignity lost during past conflicts. The general belief following the defeats of Arab armies in 1948 and 1967 was that Israel was a force that could not be militarily countered and therefore needed to be dealt with only through negotiations and peaceful resolutions (Higgins 61). However, Nasrallah claimed in his speeches that accepting any conditions from Israel and the West would be a humiliation, and that dignity is the one thing that can never be taken away from the Arabs (Hopkins 39). Moreover, due to the numerous past conflicts and influences, Israel and the United States are widely despised in much of the region, lending such a narrative even more power. Hezbollah's success in withstanding Israel's attacks and eventually forcing the conflict to end with a ceasefire overturned the abovementioned belief of the Jewish state's undistuped superiority and gave the group the most powerful tool to utilize in their rhetoric: victory. It also established Hezbollah as the only actor in the Middle East to have proven its ability to defeat Israel. According to Kalb and Saivetz, this conflict was not only a means for Hezbollah to challenge its main enemy, but had a much greater significance for its propagation of Arab nationalism (5).

Those themes of dignity and solidarity are strongly present in one of Hezbollah-produced songs published on Al Manar TV after the 2006 war, titled *Nasr al-Arab*, "The Victory of Arabs". Even the tile itself implies that the triumph in this conflict was not a party victory, nor one of a specific religious denomination, but rather a triumph encompassing all of the Arab world. Similarly, the lyrics are mostly focused on ideas of steadfastness, revenge against the oppressors, and the undefeated spirit of the greater Arab population. The often repeated chorus states: "Arab victory is the sword of rage, this is the call of dignified paths, the blood spilled on the grounds will become the mausoleum of sacrifices and the target of annihilation of our enemies" (Nasr al-Arab). The video accompanying the song is colorful and

joyful, with images of children and adults alike wielding flags of Hezbollah and Lebanon, standing in line and singing triumphantly. This imagery is intertwined with footage of Hezbollah fighters in combat, explosions, wrecks of Israeli warplanes and tanks, and ruins of Beirut. The two themes have a clear meaning; contrasting the destruction and rage with the ultimate joy of victory and the dawn of a new, proud generation. One of the most repeated phrases throughout the song is "This is the Arab victory, the victory of Arabs" (Nasr al-Arab), underscoring once again that while the song celebrates Lebanon's rebirth, it is also a salute to Arab solidarity and the goal of a unified Arab nation existing in the Middle East.

Figure 4: A screenshot of the video for Hezbollah's *Nasr-al-Arab* victory song (ShiaTV).

4.4.3. **Hezbollah the Protector**

The 34-day war's political success for Hezbollah lies in yet another one of its core aspects; the group registered itself in the collective understanding of many Lebanese as the only group capable of effectively defending their land against perceived imperialist aggression. Nasrallah and his organization were also wery well aware of that fact and did not hesitate to use the framework to their political benefit – considering that the essence of its existence is its position as the protector of the nation – and to justify its often dubious actions. The rhetoric gave Nasrallah much needed leverage in explaining why he would not leave the fate of the country solely in the hands of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and why he refused to disarm Hezbollah, against the decisions of the UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which established the ceasefire between the belligerents (Hopkins 34).

 Even those Lebanese who have disagreed with Hezbollah's ideology and rhetoric, may have been compelled to support the group, seeing it as the only force safeguarding Lebanon in the face of Israeli aggression and ensuring its independence.

The idea of the group as Lebanon's protector is directly connected with its efforts to showcase their great military power, while simultaneously downplaying Israel's achievements. This is somewhat paradoxical, as on the one hand, Nasrallah sometimes framed his fighters as the representatives of the weak and oppressed, while at other times he boasted of his group's vast weapons storage and strategic successes. It also relates to the aforementioned belief about Israel's vast military superiority, as Hezbollah, a non-state partisan militia, managed to meet the well-trained and equipped Israeli soldiers in open warfare and, according to its claims, defeat them. After the conflict ended, the Winograd Committee Report and generally the internal Israeli debate became Nasrallah's tool for supporting the claim of victory, as mentioned in his speech:

It is enough for you to read what goes on in occupied Palestine and what the Zionists

are saying about what is going on between Israeli generals and leaders. . .

An opinion poll conducted by Yediot Aharonot newspaper says: who do you see as most

appropriate person for prime minister in "Israel", Olmert received 7%, the hero Minister

of War (Defense) 1%! This is the shaken "Israel" inside its usurper political entity,

shaken within its military establishment and defeated in its intelligence apparatus; its

image today is changed. (Nasrallah, "Divine Victory")

In fact, as claimed by Ronen, Nasrallah's speeches had a big impact not only on the

Lebanese public opinion, but perhaps even more on the Israeli one. While such an assesment

may have served Hezbollah leader's rhetoric, his methods were certainly aimed at intimidating

the Iraelis. He often underscored his group's military prowess and range, and the fearmongering

was fueled by real-time footage on Al Manar TV showing Hezbollah attacks, such as rockets

falling on Haifa or the Naval ship INS Hanit being struck off Beirut coast. In his speech,

Nasrallah also did not forget to highlight his group's weapon inventory:

What we exhibited in the war is but a small fraction of our capabilities. When I stood in

Bint Jbeil and said that we have more than 12 thousand rockets, and later clarified that

more than 12 thousand does not necessarily mean 13 thousand but may be much higher.

Today, I say to all those who want to close the sea, the sky, the deserts and the borders;

to tell the enemy that the resistance has more than twenty thousand rockets. (Nasrallah,

"Divine Victory")

Nasrallah even managed to translate Hezbollah's defeats into victories, framing the

confrontations as newly acquired experience and training from the battlefield, which would

ultimately make the group even stronger. His intimidation tactic proved successful at least in

the political sense, considering that at the onset of the war almost 78% of the Israeli public were

satisfied with Prime Minister Olmert's performance and decision-making, while after the UN

Security Council Resolution 1701 was adopted, the number dropped to 48% (Ben Meir 91-94),

with many of those questioned believing the war was senseless and its costs far exceeded the benefits.

The manner in which Hezbollah ridiculed Israel and underscored its own military power is well showcased in one of the cartoons published on a website associated with the group. The image depicts an Israeli warship Sa'ar, a Merkava tank and an Apache helicopter, heavily damaged, in a waiting room of a Center for Plastic Surgery, as made apparent by a sign over the door (Erlich and Kahati 107).

Figure 5: Hezbollah's propaganda picture described above (Erlich and Kahati 107).

Such sarcastic imagery often appeared in Hezbollah-associated media, sometimes aimed at ridiculing Israeli politicians and their claims of success, other times at simply glorifying Hezbollah and underminigh Israeli strength, and ultimately aiding the rhetoric of demonization and disregard for the enemy.

Nevertheless, with Hezbollah making an effort to appear as the strongest protective force in Lebanon, it made sure that its propaganda does not appear to distance it from the Lebanese Armed Forces. On the contrary, Nasrallah underscored its allegiance with the LAF, claiming that "the army and the resistance are two inseparable and dear brothers" (Nasrallah,

"Divine Victory"), even though he believed his group was militarily superior; and he may have been right in this claim, as Hezbollah indeed possesed better arms and training (Hopkins 35). His group managed to make it impossible for Israel to proceed with the conflict and to reach many of its strategic goals, lending legitimacy to his assesment of Hezbollah of the only capable protector of Lebanon. He expressed doubt that the LAF was ready to provide further security for the country, but pledged that Hezbollah would aid the army in reaching this goal. Utilizing the situation to once again promote the group's political interests, he called for a national unity government, citing solidarity and cooperation as the only way to prevent foreign forces from invading again:

> As long as there is political division there are serious challenges. In the face of these challenges the ruling group in Lebanon is not able to continue and work in government. The natural way is through forming a national unity government . . . let us together protect Lebanon, defend, build, reconstruct, preserve and unite Lebanon. (Nasrallah, "Divine Victory")

Hezbollah's leader additionally expressed his opinion about the expanded UNIFIL force stationed in Lebanon after the war, claiming that it is welcome in the country, as long as its mission is supporting the border security and the Lebanese, rather than spying on Hezbollah and protecting Israel's interests.

The rhetoric of Hezbollah serving as the only capable and independent protective force standing between Lebanon and its enemies allowed Nasrallah to continuously justify the attack that started the conflict, claiming that his group needed to ensure the release of Lebanese prisoners from Israel and defend against their alleged provocations. This was done despite the fact that the raid was the direct cause of the destruction in Lebanon.

In general, such claims of preserving the country's security gave Nasrallah one more important advantage; citing an ongoing threat to his people and the lack of resolution in

territorial matters (mainly the issue of Sheba'a Farms), he declined to disarm his militia as per UN Security Council Resolution 1701. With the crafted image of Hezbollah as the resistance and main defender of the country, he argued that disarmament was not an option until the situation was resolved, which could very well mean indefinitely According to Hopkins, with this move Nasrallah essentially declined to recognize the authority of the Security council, and preserved Hezbollah's autonomy and identity as a resistance movement and defender (36).

4.5. Conclusion

As has been presented in this chapter, the result of the Second Lebanon War was not necessarily decided on the battlefield, but rather in the media. While the conflict ended with a ceasefire negotiated by the UN Security Council and summarised in its Resolution 1701, the discourse surrounding the war quickly evolved into a less balanced one. Hezbollah made smart use of the weaknesses of its enemy and its own, reforging them into rhetorical strengths. While in Israel an internal dispute ensued and the government lost most of its support due to the perceived poor performance during the conflict, the Lebanese militia was quick to announce a "divine victory" and built on the media campaign it has laid the groundwork for already when the hostilities were underway. With a skilled usage of themes resonating with the collective sentiments of its constituents, Hezbollah strenghtened its legitimacy and widened its support for the next few years.

5. Syrian Civil War Involvement

5.1. Background

The Syrian Civil War, an ongoing conflict started in 2011, has undoubtedly become a defining event of the last decade, having a long-lasting worldwide impact and throwing a significant part of the Middle East into chaos. From the early days, the war's main basis was an effort of oppositionist Sunni rebels to overthrow the brutal regime of Syria's president Bashar

al-Assad, but since then the hostilities have transformed into much more, bringing about a widespread sectarian conflict, power struggles of numerous terrorist groups, an international refugee and humanitarian crisis, and a spillover into neighboring countries. While the main rebellion against Assad is essentially over, the country remains divided into three practically independent territories: one controlled by the president's regime with the support of Russia, the second, eastern part controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces backed by the U.S., France and other Western states, and the third being the Idlib province, controlled by Turkey and the remaining Sunni rebels. The parts comprise respectively around sixty, thirty, and ten percent of Syria (Spyer). The fact that the regime managed to stay in power over the majority of the country's territory, considering that its chances of survival seemed slim at times, has been in no small part due to a foreign key player: Hezbollah.

The Lebanese militia's involvement in the conflict had been the subject of rumours since its early stages in 2011, but Hezbollah consistently denied those claims. It was not until May 25, 2013 that the group's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah publicly acknowledged that his fighters are indeed deployed in Syria in support of Assad's forces (Blanford). While determining the exact number of fighters sent to the warzone by Hezbollah is impossible, it has been reported that as of 2018 between 7,000 to 10,000 of them have been rotated on the battlefield (Jones), and the number has likely grown since then. Syria, along with Iran, has long been one of the major strategic allies of Hezbollah and the Shi'ite group's religious solidarity with Assad's regime plays a vital role in their alliance.[3] Hezbollah's involvement has allowed the regime to regain hold over rebel-held areas of Syria and improved the capabilities of its troops, as became evident during perhaps the most defining battle for this alliance. In early April 2013 the group led the ground offensive of al-Qusayr, a mainly Sunni town near the

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[3] Assad and the Syrian ruling community are members of the Alawite sect – an offshoot of the Shi'ite ideology believed to have been founded in the 9th century. Hezbollah, as a Shi'ite group, shares religious identity with the Alawites.

Lebanese border. This battle shifted Hezbollah's involvement in the war, as it increased the number of fighters present on the front, planned, and commanded the operation. While the offensive marked a significant reverse in the course of the conflict and was a major loss for the rebel forces, it also underscored Hezbollah's significance in ensuring Assad's success, being later followed with similar missions to regain territory in Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus (Sullivan 4), and to protect the grave of Sayyida Zaynab, a holy site for the Shi'ites (Meir Amit, „Hezbollah" 14).

Figure 6: A map of Al-Qusayr offensive (Sullivan 15).
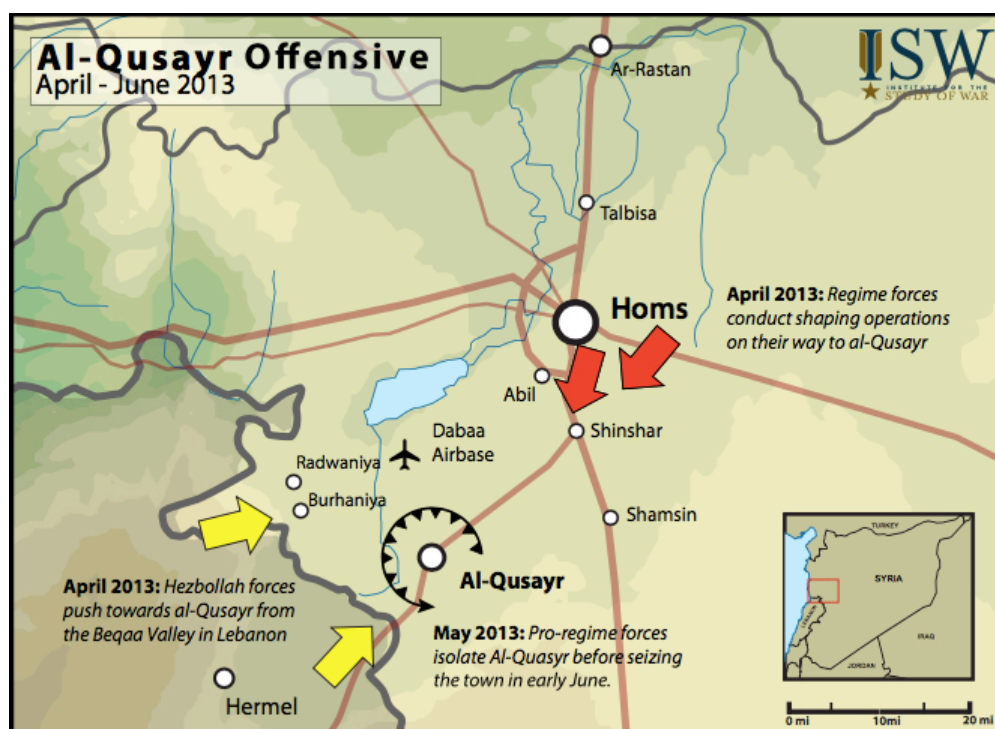
The group proved to be an asset to the Syrian Army in a broader manner than just by providing it with greater numbers, however. Hezbollah, along with the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary al-Quds Forces, assists with training Assad's military and special units in battlefield skills that they have no prior experience in, but that Hezbollah fighters have been acquiring since the 2006 Lebanon War. Those skills include guerilla and urban warfare, sabotage, light infantry, reconaissance, or sniper fire (Sullivan 4; Meir Amit, „Hezbollah" 16).

Futhermore, the group offers valuable intelligence and command from its battle-hardened high-ranking officers, some of whom have been killed in Syria. Hezbollah has also acted to secure the Syrian-Lebanese border, the protection of which was previously relatively weak; the group controls logistic routes between the two countries and prevents the influx of weapons and forces to the rebels, while simultaneously carrying out operations in the Bekaa Valley and other Lebanese areas near the border, some aimed at protecting Lebanese Shi'ia villages on both sides (Meir Amit, „Hezbollah" 16). Finally, the group attempts to prevent any Lebanese support for the Syrian opposition through „harassment, threats, detentions and handing wanted Syrians over to Syrian regime" (Meir Amit, „Hezbollah" 17), sometimes even attacking Sunni villages known as rebel support hubs, such as Arsal (Sullivan 25).

However, throughout the Syrian War, Hezbollah's heavy involvement has had significant consequences on its position in Lebanon and on the country's security. As both domestic and international critics saw it, the militia's focus had shifted strongly from its resistance against Israel and its previous rhetoric of sectarian inclusion had lost its footing, as the group had engaged in fighting and killing fellow Muslims on both Syrian and Lebanese soil. While some of Hezbollah's Shi'ia support base continued to back the organization, especially those in the heavily affected Bekaa Valley, many had taken to decry the group's actions as a "betrayal", especially among the Sunnis and Christians. In June 2013, a protest ouside the Iranian embassy in Beirut was organized by a group of Shi'ites opposing Hezbollah's stance in the conflict, but fighting soon broke out and one of the demonstrators was shot to death by suspected Hezbollah members (Blanford). With growing casualties and the group being regarded as fighting someone else's war, its support had continued to decrease as the war progressed.

Hezbollah's actions were condemned in political circles, too. While the Lebanese government maintained its policy of neutrality toward the Syrian war, the March 14 coalition,

which has long been opposed to Hezbollah and its rival March 8 alliance, strongly criticised the party's involvement in the conflict as an "abandonment of the dissassociation policy decided by its cabinet" (qtd. in Now). Similarly, Lebanon's then president, Michel Sulieman, urged the group to withraw its fighters from Syria and the state to neutralize Hezbollah's ability to operate militarily (Blanford). The sectarian nature of the tensions also reportedly fueled support for extremist rebel groups, such as the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, and the relationship between Hezbollah and Hamas, two groups with strong ties over their fight against Israel, became strained (Sullivan 25).

The escalating sectarian conflict stemming out of Hezbollah's role in the war was domestically decried by numerous political commentators as not only undermining the fragile peace in Lebanon, but also the country's immediate stability and security (Middle East Policy Council). Since the group had openly acknowledged its role in Syria, a number of attacks have happened throughout Lebanon, many in direct retaliation for Hezbollah's activity in Syria. The attacks included car bombs and rockets, targeting mostly the Hezbollah-controlled southern part of Beirut, but also the Iranian embassy, the group's strongholds, and numerous villages along the border, some of which have been targeted by rebel forces (Sullivan 24). The tensions have also led to some Sunni clerics demonizing Shi'ites for Hezbollah's activity and calling for their followers to join the fight in Syria on the side of the rebels. In June 2013, a cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi condemned Bashar al-Assad's Alawite sect as "more infidel than Christians and Jews" and proclaimed Hezbollah the party of the devil (qtd. in Abdo).[4]

Yet despite the escalations and problems Hezbollah experienced throughout the war, as of 2019 it appears to have been strengthened both as a military and political body. Even though Hezbollah lost around 10 percent of its fighters in Syria, including senior commanders, the group has gained vast combat experience and increased its weapon supplies, mainly thanks to

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[4] It is a play on words – Hezbollah's name translates in "Party of God" in Arabic.

Iran. Reportedly, it now holds around 130,000 rockets and missiles, while during the 2006 war it only had 15,000. Despite the financial difficulties that Hezbollah now faces due to the cost of the war and sanctions imposed on Iran (its main benefactor), it also gained additional personnel, allies in the militias it trained in Syria, and further recruitment possibilities (Phillips). While the support among its usual Lebanese base may have been hurt, the party nonetheless achieved a political win when it secured control of three ministries in Lebanon's new unity government, and together with its allies gained more than half of the cabinet's seats in early 2019 (Perry and Bassam). With Hezbollah emerging strengthened from a conflict that threatened to undermine its domestic and international support and almost led it to become the leading cause for a sectarian civil war, a questions arises: how did the party manage to maintain its regional power in both popular and political terms? The answer, at least partially, may be found in its masterful propaganda.

5.2. Overview of Hezbollah's Propaganda during the Syrian Civil War

Hezbollah's goals in Syria were closely tied with Iran's hunger for a broader regional influence. Ever since Hezbollah was created, Iran had not only been its main financial benefactor, but also trained and supplied its proxy, ensuring its strategic loyalty and dependence. This fits with Iran's national security objectives, as it seeks to broaden its regional interests in areas such as economy, culture, and religious power, while simultaneously maintaining its domestic hold. While its leaders are busy at home, the regime makes good use of its allies to support its struggle for regional supremacy, Hezbollah being the main instrument toward that goal (Jones). Such an arrangement allowed Iran to be less directly involved, sending only limited support and a smaller number of its own forces to Syria,[5] while Hezbollah was doing its "dirty work" (Hubbard).

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[5] Considering Iran's economic crisis and the sanctions put on it at the time, it would be hard pressed by its citizens to explain why it spends its budget on funding someone else's war.

Certain oppositionist voices in Lebanon emphasized this arrangement when Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian War became publicly known. For instance, Walid Jumblatt, the leader of Lebanon's Progressive Socialist Party, claimed that "Hezbollah is fighting inside Syria with orders from Iran" (Jumblatt). Such a political climate posed a challenge for Hezbollah from the very beginning of the conflict, and it had a strong need of discourses that would rally the Lebanese public behind its cause.

On the other hand, Hezbollah naturally also had crucial strategic objectives in Syria. First and foremost, maintaining Syria's current Alawite regime was crucial for Hezbollah's survival. The group receives its funding, arms, and any sort of support from both Iran and Syria, and the main transport routes for any supplies run through Syria. With a government opposing Hezbollah in charge of the neighboring country, those routes would most likely be cut off, and so would the militia' lifeline. Assad's Syria holds importance to Hezbollah in more manners, however. Firstly, the regime allowed it to establish training camps and weapons storage on its soil, making it the group's military and strategic hub outside of Lebanon (Sullivan 4). It is also one of the three most important allies in the Shi'ite influence group in the region, which in itself has several consequences. Together with Iran, it provides Hezbollah not only with material power, but also with political and military legitimacy. If Assad's regime were to be overthrown and a Sunni one, possibly with a more docile approach toward the West and Israel, were to be put in its place, the "resistance camp" would be left heavily destabilised and weakened, with Iran and Hezbollah struggling to maintain their hold on the region. Secondly, the sectarian solidarity with Syria's Shi'ites (ca. 400,000-450,000) and the Alawite regime certainly holds significance, too. Hezbollah has aided Assad in protecting holy Shi'ite sites in Syria (e.g. the grave of Sayyida Zaynab) and the sect's members against attacks, especially in the light of an intensified emergence of Sunni extremist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, who see Shi'ites as "fake Muslims". Yet another possible advantage for Hezbollah could be gaining a foothold in

the Syrian Golan Heights, in order to turn it into another front for its aggression toward Israel (Meit Amir 2).

However, highlighting its own strategic interests in the region may not have gained Hezbollah the sympathy of the Lebanese population, as the group has always defined itself as an anti-Israeli resistance and during the Syrian conflict it instead became engaged in open combat against fellow Muslims. Hezbollah's leaders were evidently aware of this issue, and made great efforts at refocusing its PR on the struggle against Israel and justifying its decisions to join the confrontation in Syria (Ginsburg). While its target audience during the conflict was mostly the Lebanese population, its messages were also aimed at the Syrian Shi'ite population, Palestinians, and, in the case of threats, Israel. It disseminated the propaganda through its usual channels, such as the group's own media (Al-Manar TV, Al-Nur radio, newspapers, such as *Al-Akhbar*, affiliated websites) and other Lebanese and Arab media (Meir Amit, "Hezbollah" 17). Just like in the case of the 2006 war propaganda, Hezbollah's discourse during the Syrian could be distilled into three main themes: 1. "the Axis of Resistance" – highlighting the importance of preserving the alliance between Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria against an alleged foreign conspiracy of Israel, the West, and pro-Western Sunni groups for gaining regional control, 2. "focus on Israel" – reassuring the public of Hezbollah's focus on Israel as the primary foe and of the group's readiness for another war against the Jewish state, 3. "Hezbollah the protector" – repeating the rhetoric of the previous war in the much more difficult context of the growing sectarian tensions in order to maintain regional legitimacy.

Those themes will be showcased below through an analysis of the following examples of the group's propaganda: excerpts from Hassan Nasrallah's speech delivered on May 25, 2013 in Mashghara, an article in a Hezbollah-affiliated newspaper praising the group's military infrastructure, a video threatening Israel with a military intervention, and a Hezbollah-produced video game.

5.2.1. The Axis of Resistance

Ever since Hezbollah's establishment, it has been part of an Iran-led alliance of state and non-state actors aimed at opposing the interests of the West in the Middle East, principally those of the U.S. and Israel. Traditionally, apart from Hezbollah and Iran, this coalition also included Assad's Syria, and more recently Iraqi Shi'ite fighters have joined its ranks (Sullivan 9). As mentioned above, Hezbollah's survival and legitimacy strongly depends on the support of this alliance and resistance against Israel has been its *raison d'etre* throughout the three decades of its existence.

Preserving the stability of the Axis of Resistance has also been one of the main parts of Hezbollah's rhetoric and justification for their involvement in the Syrian war. Underscoring Syria's importance to the cause, he said the following during his May 25, 2013 speech:

. . . I frankly say that Syria is the backbone of the resistance, and the support of the resistance. The resistance cannot sit with hands crossed while its backbone is held vulnerable and its support is being broken or else we will be stupid. Stupid is he who stands motionless while watching death, the siege and conspiracy crawling towards him. (Nasrallah, "Hezbollah Leader")

Another one of the main points in Nasrallah and Hezbollah's discourse was framing the whole conflict as a foreign conspiracy to establish hegemony in the region plotted by the West (mainly the U.S.), Israel, Western-friendly Arab states, and Takfiris,[6] rather than an opposition's stand against an autocratic regime:

. . . Syria is not anymore the battlefield for a popular revolution against a political regime. It is rather a square for imposing political projects led by America, the west and their representatives in the region. Well, we all know that the US project in the region

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[6] The term Takfiri refers to Islamic extremists who consider all other Muslims infidels, and therefore call for them to be killed.

is an absolutely Israeli project . . .

Let no one convince us that these tens of thousands of fighters from the various Takfiri and extremists groups – who refuse everything but themselves – came stealthily to Syria. They were given visas and offered facilities. (Nasrallah, "Hezbollah Leader")

This rhetoric is also depicted in the propaganda picture below, originally published on Hezbollah's *al-Intiqad* website and representing "the Syrian opposition . . . [burying] its head in the US dollar" (qtd. in Meir Amit, "Hebzollah" 18):

Figure 7: Hezbollah's propaganda picture described above (Meir Amir, "Hezbollah" 18)

In order to instill fear and a sense of urgency in their Lebanese base and consequentlyrally more supporters behind Hezbollah, the group's discourse also underscored that the conflict is in fact an existential struggle not only for their members, but also Lebanon and the region as a whole:

Should Syria fall in the hand of the Americans, the Israelis, the Takfiri groups and America's representatives in the region which call themselves regional states, the resistance will be besieged and Israel would reenter Lebanon, impose its conditions on Lebanon, and renew its greed and projects in it . . . If Syria falls, so will Palestine, the resistance in Palestine, the West Bank, Gaza, and Holy Al Qods [Jerusalem]. If Syria

falls . . . the peoples of our region and the countries in our region will head towards a dark and tough era. (Nasrallah, "Hezbollah Leader")

The mention of the Palestinian cause is another central tenet of the resistance rhetoric. The basis of the anti-Israeli resistance stance is support for Palestine's autonomy, and while Hezbollah's alliance with Iran and Syria rests on much more practical and strategic grounds, such as funding, military and ideological cooperation, and regional interests, the Palestinian issue is a sentiment among a major part of the group's base, and highlighting it lends Hezbollah the image of its standardbearer. Thus, Nasrallah demonstrates sound knowledge of its audience and an understanding of the questions that need to be incorporated into his discourse in order to maximize its persuasive power.

An equally effective strategy that is worth mentioning is one that has been interwoven with the group's rhetoric since its early days, namely the idea of martyrdom. While not a direct part of the resistance discourse, martyrdom has been a concept that Hezbollah actively espoused with that of resistance in its attempts to generate an influx of recruits with the promise of long-lasting glory awarded for fighting the group's battles. Throughout the Syrian conflict Hezbollah desperately needed a persuasive rhetoric, as a growing number of casualties were causing an outcry among its constituents, discontent with the fact that their compatriots were fighting a war they did not see as their own. As Bianchi wrote in her article on the topic (Bianchi 20), in order to strengthen the power of the martyrdom concept the group involved the symbolic figure of a mother as its spokesperson. Drawing on the Shi'ite religious figure of Sayyida Zaynab[7] and the position of mothers as those who "shape the minds of the next generation" (Bianchi 20), Hezbollah-affiliated online media (e.g. *Arabipress* website, Al-Manar TV's website) repeatedly circulated materials such as mothers' letters to their martyred sons, personal stories,

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[7] Sayyida Zaynab is one of the most important Shi'ite religious figures, and is known for having sacrificed her brother and other members of her family to martyrdom during the battle of Karbala. She remains a symbol of strength and sacrifice to the Shi'ites.

video and voice recordings, or interviews with fighters sending their mothers their last messages before martyrdom. According to Bianchi, the celebration of martyrdom starts before death, and Hezbollah promotes that idea with content that portrays mothers encouraging their sons to give their life for the resistance (21). An example of such representation could be a screenshot that appeared in an article on Arabipress published in 2015, showing a conversation between a mother and her son who was fighting in Syria. The man expressed his shock at still being alive, while his friend and fellow militant died in the fighting. According to Hezbollah material, his mother responded: "Maybe Mahdi was ready for martyrdom before you … my dear, remain on your path, and stay strong like I taught you … May God not deny you martyrdom" (qtd. in Bianchi 21). The aim of spreading those materials was to emotionally stir the public by showing the families' (and especially mothers') commitment to the cause of resistance and the pride they feel for their sons' sacrifice, thus encouraging young men to join Hezbollah's ranks in the Syrian battlefield.

5.2.2. Focus on Israel

The abovementioned rhetoric of resistance is strongly connected to Hezbollah's attempts in the later stage of the war (after the group publicly acknowledged its participation in the Syrian conflict) to reassure its public that the decisions taken by the group's command were always focused on Israel, first and foremost. Among the criticism of an unnecessary involvement in a devastating war, Hezbollah made conscious efforts to underscore its willingness and reaadiness to engage in another war with the Jewish state, if need be. This tactic was likely also aimed at redirecting the public's focus from the group's killing of fellow Muslims, which was certainly a controversial topic. In his speech, Nasrallah does so by opening with a reminder to his listeners of the events of 1948, dubbed *Nakba* in the Arab world,[8]

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[8] Nakba, translating as catastrophe from Arabic, refers to 1948 forced Palestinian exodus during the establishment of Israel. By most Arabs it is regarded as an ethnic cleansing and day symbolising the oppression, thus the name conveys this sentiment.

establishing the tone of his discourse as that of a continuous anti-Israeli resistance. He also reassures his audience that Israel remains the most important target for Hezbollah:

> This year we mark this day while we as Lebanese and as peoples of the region confront a group of threats, challenges, and dangers . . . The first danger is that which has been existing and continuous since the Nakba: It is Israel and its intentions, greed, and schemes. This is the first danger. (Nasrallah, "Hezbollah Leader")

In another aspect of this strategy, Hezbollah also blamed Israel for the spillover of sectarian violence into Lebanon. After a car bombing tore through a predominantly Shi'ite neighborhood of southern Beirut on July 9, 2013, an attack widely attributed to Lebanese or Syrian backers of the Sunni-led rebellion in Syria, Hezbollah directly blamed Israel and claimed it was part of a plot to udermine the group's alliance with Assad's regime. Even though the Jewish state's Defense Minister, Moshe Yaalon, denied   any involvement on Israel's part, Hezbollah's supporters were quick to echo its rhetoric (Barnard).

Furthermore, just as was the case in the propaganda surrounding the previous war, Hezbollah's leaders made an active effort to translate the casualties, expenses, and challenges of the Syrian conflict into military experience of its fighters. Being forced to adapt to a new type of warfare, the milita's ranks undeniably acquired new skills: advanced urban warfare, fighting in an unfamiliar territory dominated by enemy forces, operating with aerial support, commanding and collaborating with units of other groups and state militaries (i.e. Syrian and Russian army troops) (Phillips). Additionally, the group greatly expanded and upgraded its arms: with the help of Iran, Hezbollah has reportedly amassed a significant number of new guided missiles, unmanned armed drones, short-range ballistic missiles, anti-tank missiles, and chemical weapons (Jones). Nasrallah and his party have certainly not shied away from showcasing those newly acquired capabilities, as they launched a media campaign promoting Hezbollah's formidable strength in an effort to intimidate Israel and boost the morale of its own

base. For instance, a series of articles published in May 2015 in the Hezbollah-affiliated As-Safir newspaper praised the group's military force and infrastructure, and described in detail a network of "underground … tunnels, bunkers and surveillance outposts along the border with Israel, which it is manning at peak readiness for battle" (Sharon). Similarly, in November 2018 Hezbollah issued a video in which it explicitly warned Israel that any aggression will have grave consequences. The clip, captioned with Hebrew subtitles, was clearly meant at intimidating the enemy, and featured scenes of Hezbollah fighters launching rockets, a warning by Hassan Nasrallah, and satellite images of several strategic sites in Israel with specific coordinates, marked as targets. The sites included the IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv, a number of air force bases, a petroleum refinery, and the country's nuclear reactor in Dimona. The video ended with the words: "Attack and you will regret it" (Staff, "Hezbollah Issues").

Figure 8: A still from the video described above, depicting satellite imagery of an Israeli airbase with as a target (Staff, "Hezbollah Issues").

Such messages in Hezbollah's discourse have allowed it to maintain its legitimacy as the primary anti-Israel force in the region and to redirect its audience's attention away from its involvement in *de facto* sectarian violence.

5.2.3. Hezbollah the Protector

The Party of God has always heavily relied on its self-presentation as the defender of Lebanon in conflict situations, as it is a rhetoric that allows it to transcend sectarian divisions and potentially appeal to all of the Lebanese audience. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this theme was also strongly present in the propaganda surrounding the 2006 war with Israel, but it may be claimed that never was it as important and, simultaneously, as troublesome for Hezbollah as during the Syrian war. Important, because the escalating sectarian tension and criticism toward the group for engaging in a conflict against Sunni Muslims threatened to undermine its credibility as an inclusive "protector". Troublesome, because ironically Hezbollah's objectives in Syria were directly aligned with Shi'ite interests and an open denial of this fact would threaten its legitimacy among its primary base of supporters. Besides, the group was indeed fighting against an enemy comprised entirely of Sunnis, an actuality that was widely known and undisputable. Therefore, Hezbollah had to navigate a difficult terrain in choosing a "bulletproof" discourse that would justify its actions from all angles.

In order to do so, the group's leadership chose to deny all claims of sectarian violence and instead rebrand all of its enemies into mindless extremist groups that could not be reasoned with and that posed a significant threat to Lebanon's security. This rhetoric is evident in Nasrallah's speech:

> This mentality does not accept dialogue . . . [t]hey have nothing called priorities. They have nothing called common points. They have nothing other than labeling others unbelievers for the most trivial reasons . . . Put the factional and the sectarian issue aside. This is a grave danger. (Nasrallah, "Hezbollah's Leader")

In an attempt at further showcasing his group's lack of sectarian bias, Nasrallah expanded on his view of the danger posed by the enemy forces. He underscored that the situation does not only concern Shi'ites, but also members of other religions and sects, primarily Sunnis:

In case these groups took over the provinces bordering Lebanon, they will pose threat to the Lebanese whether Muslims or Christians. When I talk about Muslims, I mean Sunnites, Druze, Shiites, and Alawis. So I do not mean the Shiites only. I mean the Sunnites first.

I say that this Takfiri mentality killed in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Somalia - in these four countries only – Sunnites much more than other Muslims, Christians, non Muslims, and non Christians. (Nasrallah, "Hezbollah's Leader")

In the face of those threats, Hezbollah once again put itself in the position of the only force capable of defending the country. Nasrallah emphasized Israel's efforts since 2006 at improving its border security, establishing new bomb shelters, regularly testings its infrastructure and arming communities near the border for the eventuality of another war with its neighbor. In contrast, he bashed the Lebanese government for not regarding such preparations as crucial and instead insisting that the Jewish state is no longer a threat "What have (sic) the state done so far? . . . Well, at times we hear no answer or mere excuses only . . . There is not a responsible state. There is a problem which is that the Lebanese state in its construction does not deal with Israel as an enemy" (Nasrallah, "Hezbollah's Leader").

Nasrallah further claimed that Hezbollah was the only group acting realistically by assuming the responsibility of strengthening the country's defenses and successfully positioning itself as a force equal (or even more formidable) to that of Israel:

. . . [S]ome in Lebanon prepared to confront any Israeli threat in the future and any Israeli aggression in the future. This was made by a part of the Lebanese people – namely the resistance . . . When the Israelis look at Lebanon, they fear this. (Nasrallah, "Hezbollah's Leader")

In underscoring his group's readiness for a fight against its declared enemy, Nasrallah once again attempted to gain the trust of the Lebanese in Hezbollah's position as a *de facto*

primary state army, regardless of their religious affiliation. However, the reality on the ground often disproved his assertions, and the group's actions proved that its main focus was on the Shi'ite community. This was evident in Hezbollah's support for occasional attacks on Lebanese Sunni settlements that previously attacked Shi'ite villages, its condemnation of the Syrian rebel forces who gained many supporters among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and its rhetoric that challenged anyone who opposed the group's ideology to come and fight in Syria (Nasrallah, "Hezbollah's Leader").

No matter how much Hezbollah tried to assert its public that it protects everyone in Lebanon, occasionally its actions and rhetoric revealed that it was in fact acting as a protector of the Shi'ites, and this image became cemented in the minds of many Lebanese. An example of that rhetoric was showcased in a video game Hezbollah released in February 2013, called *Holy Defense.* It allowed the players to assume the roles of Hezbollah fighters in simulated operations aimed at defending Shi'ite holy sites, such as the grave of Sayyida Zaynab, against the militants of the Islamic State (Jones).

Figure 9: An image for the *Holy Defense* video game (Jones).

It appears, therefore, that while the group fights to establish its image of inclusivity through its discourse, it remains a Shi'ite organization at its core.

5.3. Conclusion

Hezbollah has been actively engaged in Syria for several years, and the conflict cost the

group a significant part of its fighting forces, financial resources, and arms. One of the greatest challenges, however, was the threat to its legitimacy and widespread criticism among its constituents in Lebanon for fighting a war of which many did not approve. However, as this chapter has presented, Hezbollah employed its propaganda machine to counter critical narratives and sway the public opinion to its side. In an attempt to reestablish its regional legitimacy and respected position, the group needed to draw upon both new concepts, and a rebranding of old sentiments. While Hezbollah's evolving international agenda is increasingly moving further away from its past self-presentation as solely an anti-Israel resistance, its skillful navigation of the media landscape allowed the party to emerge strengthened from the conflict and reestablish itself in Lebanon's political scene.

6. Hezbollah in an Existential Crisis

Ever since its establishment in 1982, Hezbollah's religio-ideological principles have been concerned with opposing the marginalization of the Shi'ites in Lebanon and the resistence against Israeli occupation, and those concepts became the central foundation for the group's identity. In its early days as a militia the means it used to reach its professed goals were straightforward and accordant with its agenda. Then, the civil war in Lebanon ended and the Taif accord was signed in 1989,[9] changing the country's political system and ensuring a more balanced sectarian representation in the government. That was when Hezbollah first made a decision to participate in elections in 1992, marking the first change in its identity as an anti-regime rebel group; it now wanted to become part of the government it previously denounced. Soon after, in 2000, Israel withdrew from Lebanon, leaving yet another one of Hezbollah's central existential goals without a steady foundation. The anti-Israeli and anti-establishment Shi'ite milita was left for the first time with the challenge of redefining its identity if it wanted

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[9] The Taif Accords were an agreement reached at the end of Lebanon's civil war in order to reconstruct the political system and create a unity government, including all Lebanese sects. It was meant as a basis for the return to a political balance.

to survive, and it would not be the last time.

Hezbollah's existential crisis is directly tied to its identity and begins at the very core of its professed ideology. On the one hand, the group relies on its portrayal as a military resistance against colonialist interests, and maintaining that status requires is to be rejected by its opponnents as a legitimate political body. International acceptance of its pursuits within Lebanon's government would undermine that rejectionist stance. On the other hand, Hezbollah wants to be recognized on that level domestically, as it relies on the popular support of its base constituency. Furthermore, the group's religious and ideological basis and its dependance on foreign resources position it in an alliane with Iran and Syria, which often dictate the objectives Hezbollah pursues. Thus, depending on the circumstances, the party's principles do not always align with its current goals, posing perhaps its greatest dilemma: choosing between popular legitimacy and strategic interests.

In its propaganda materials, Hezbollah attempts to solve this dilemma by framing the discourses in a manner that would fit the its objectives, rather than acting accordingly to its own ideological principles. It is, however, a difficult position; as the group's discourses often change, it becomes essentially impossible for it not to eventually succumb to hypocrisy and for the audience to remain oblivious indefinitely.

This is especially visible in times of conflict, as it is then that even the smallest actions of Hezbollah become the most significant to its constituents. The analysis of the group's discourses in two different conflict situations in the previous chapters of this paper has served to provide context for this point. The 34-Day War and the Syrian Civil War are primary examples of moments that respectively strengthened and weakened Hezbollah's local and regional position, and the manner in which the group framed those events reinforces the observation that it finds itself in an existential and identity crisis. That is because in order to maintain its legitimacy, in moments like this the group needs to shift between varied target

audiences and influences. During the 2006 war Hezbollah succeeded in establishing itself as the victor and protector of Lebanon despite the fact that it initiated the violence, mostly because its discourse was aligned with the sentiments of all of its target audiences. It became the champion of the oppressed, the only capable resistance against the agression of a foreign state, and the representative of the wider Arab world. In contrast, during its involvement in Syria, the party quickly lost most of its support, because its interests were contradictory with those of the Lebanese. Despite its previous support for popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring, in the Syrian war it sided with a regime that fought against its own people. Instead of defending its country against a foreign agressor, it became the foreign force intervening in a neighboring country and killed fellow Muslims. Rather than protect the interests of its people, it contributed to the escalation of sectarian tensions and exposed those people to attacks and instability. Suddenly the group was forced to frame its discourse in a manner that would justify those choices, even if it went against its central ideological principles.

Simply put, Hezbollah's agenda can never be too Lebanese, too Syrian, nor too Iranian, it cannot be too oppressive, nor too oppressed; rather, it needs to find a discursive balance where no balance exists, and that is the core of its existential crisis. If the group advocates one side's interests too much, it risks losing support, just as it did during the Syrian war. However, if it remains too neutral, it may be dubbed as indecisive and weak, and thus lose its claim as a capable resistance force. Hezbollah's changing discourses led to a deconstruction of its identity and have therefore proven, especially in times of conflict, to have a great influence on its credibility and hold on power, domestically, regionally, and internationally. While so far the group's skillful solving of those problems and masterful propaganda have allowed it to maintain legitimacy, it is a difficult landscape to navigate indefinitely, and the effects of this issue in the foreseeable future remain to be seen.

7. **Conclusion**

The aim of this thesis was examining and constructing an understanding of the manner in which Hezbollah's conflict discourse relates to its dilemma of choosing between its strategic interests and popular legitimacy. Specifically, the question in focus was how the changing narratives, stemming out of this dilemma, reinforce its existential and identity crisis as a militant group, political party, and social movement. This research was conducted on the basis of examining dominant mass media and propaganda theories as markers of relevant narratives from the group's published content surrounding the chosen conflict situations, and the subsequent analysis of those narratives in contrast to the realities of events, the group's actions, and its popular standing following the conflicts. It has been showcased that during the 34-Day War Hezbollah's discourse was in accordance with its central ideological principles, namely the resistance against Israel and the challenging of Western interests in the Middle East. Since those fundamental anti-imperialist slogans strongly resonated with the sentiments of the Lebanese, Arab, and even international public, Hezbollah garnered widespread support and its narratives were echoes in numerous channels and communities. Following the conflict and the group's declaration of victory, it enjoyed a peak of popularity and solidified its legitimacy as a regional actor, proving that in the correct circumstances its propaganda was highly effective.

However, as the conflict moved to Syria – a significant member in the alliance with Iran and Hezbollah – and the political implications of choosing a side became much more complicated, the group's regional interests were not anymore aligned with the opinions of its audience. Assad's Syria, a country ruled by an autocratic regime, whose stance on the Israeli issue was radical mostly on paper, was an important ally to Hezbollah, but not necessarily regarded as such by the supporters who agreed with the group's rhetoric of popular resistance and anti-imperialism. Furthermore, Hezbollah's backing of the regime and dismissal of the Syrian rebels as *takfiris* fueled sectarian tensions both domestically and regionally, and undermined its previous non-sectarian discourse. The party's prioritization of its pro-Iranian

and pro-Syrian interests led it to lose a significant part of its popular support, even if just temporarily, due to its framing attempts' disconnect from the reality of the events and frequent contradictory statements. Therefore, those fluctuations underscored that Hezbollah's unstable identity can be a direct cause of either the strengthening or weakening of the group's legitimacy.

The analysis of the events and discourses presented in this thesis has served to uphold the argument that the changing narratives of the "Party of God" portray its existential crisis as a consequence of its dependence on external factors. Hezbollah is relying equally on foreign support and funding, as it is on popular support, and when those two factors are not aligned it quickly loses its footing, as becomes evident in its propaganda discourse. While this research clearly illustrates the weakness in the relation of propaganda discourse of non-state actors and their pragmatic goals, it also raises the question of how this conclusion can further be applied to improve the understanding of militant content and the ability to tackle state security issues, especially in the Middle East. Such potential connections may be subject to further research, in order to better understand the implications of these results.

In conclusion, the role of a powerfully crafted discourse in establishing a credible image of a movement or organization shall never be underestimated. While the power of the word may be used to drive positive changes, it is equally effective in popularizing radical and detrimental ideas, and if overlooked can have grave consequences. As Hezbollah's case has portrayed, constructing an ideological narrative is not without risks for both its producers and the greater community. However, ultimately the responsibility of recognizing discourse aimed specifically at persuasion and, most importantly, counterbalancing its implications rests entirely on those who grant it its power: the audience.

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