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Abstract

When it engaged in the Syrian war to prevent the Syrian government from collapsing and to assist the Syrian Arab Army recapture territories from the Syrian military opposition and other classified terrorist organisations, Hezbollah faced media and political campaigns from Arab countries, mainly Saudi Arabia and Qatar. For example, Hezbollah's depiction by the Qatari Al-Jazeera satellite channel has changed from a resistance movement against Israel to a military ally of the Syrian state. Similar to Al-Jazeera is the Saudi Al-Arabiya satellite channel, which mirrors the Saudi view of Hezbollah. Their discourses present sectarian accusations against Hezbollah and its role in the Syrian war.

This paper aims to review the reasons for Hezbollah's engagement in the Syrian war. In this context, it points to the key players in the conflict over Syria and the future of the Syrian government. The paper argues that Hezbollah is a key player in the conflict over Syria and that it seeks, with the Iranians, to secure the current Syrian government. For this Islamic party, Hezbollah, the Syrian secular state is the nerve-centre of the Axis of Resistance in the Middle East against colonialism and occupation. From this perspective, it becomes clear why Hezbollah prefers a secular (Ba'ath) regime and stands against an alternative (Islamic) regime which could represent a threat to the Resistance and its project in the Middle East.

Keywords: Hezbollah; Resistance; Syrian War

Introduction

In contextualising the topic, it is crucial to point to the key players in the Syrian conflict. Drawing on their political positions - and their roles - in this conflict, it can be argued that the key players can be categorised into anti and pro-Syrian government. Under the anti-Syrian government category, there are the international powers, mainly the USA, the UK and France, and there are the regional powers, mainly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Israel, and there are the militant organisations which include the militant Syrian oppositions, ISIS and similar terrorist factions. On the other hand, under the pro-Syrian category, there are the international powers, mainly Russia and China¹, and there are the regional powers, mainly Iran, and there are the militant organisations, mainly Hezbollah (Anderson, 2016).

Notably, Egypt can be categorised as a significant regional player in the Syrian crisis (Kessler, 2017). Both the Egyptian and the Syrian Arab armies had close historical ties when these two countries were nominally united for nearly three years under the name the United Arab Republic between 1958 and 1961 (Jankowski, 2002). Historically, the security of Syria has been considered important to Egyptian national security (Al-Labbad, 2013). Despite these

¹ The clear evidence of the Chinese support in the Syrian crisis is the use of veto many times by Beijing alongside with Moscow in the Security Council of the United Nations to prevent the pass of any resolution that is not in favour of the Syrian government.

facts, Egypt needs time to regain its regional role due to domestic upheavals and its need for foreign aid (Dunne, 2015; Young, 2015). If Egypt regains its regional role, it will have an impact on the future of the conflict.

In this contextualisation, this paper focuses on the reasons that led Hezbollah, an ideological Shiite party, to ally with an Arab nationalist-secular-socialist regime. The overall aim of the paper is to investigate why Hezbollah entered the Syrian war in support of the government. It seeks to answer the following question: What is the *raison d'être* that led Hezbollah, to engage in the Syrian war to support a secular – Ba'athist - government?

To achieve its aim, this paper reviews the literature related to Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war with reference to the ideology and policy of this party.

Historical Relations between Hezbollah and the Syrian Government

The relation between Hezbollah and the Syrian government began in 1982, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when Syrian troops then in Lebanon allowed this new Islamic party to obtain Iranian military aid that crossed the Syrian border to Hezbollah's training camps in the Beqa valley (See: Alagha, 2006; Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002).

During this period, Lebanon was in a political and military turmoil as it was engulfed in a civil war and its capital Beirut was occupied by the Israeli army. The Syrian Arab Army deployed soldiers to Lebanon. These were the practical arm that secured Damascus' interests in a neighbouring country that was overwhelmed by geopolitical fragmentation and sectarianism. As Beirut was occupied by Israeli forces, the country lacked centralised political decision (Osoegawa, 2013).

As time went by, particularly in 1990s, Hezbollah confirmed its military superiority and its social success (Alagha, 2006; Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002). The military success translated to an unconditional Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, which reached its peak of withdrawal in May 2000 (Harb, 2011). In this vein, when it turned into the most powerful political player in Lebanon since the Taif Accord in 1989 that ended the Lebanese civil war, Syria backed Hezbollah and worked with the Lebanese government to consider this party a 'resistance movement' and not as a militia that should be disarmed (Alagha, 2006). One of the episodes that confirm Syrian support for Hezbollah was the Israel's 16-day-war (named by the Israeli army 'Grapes of Wrath') against Hezbollah in 1996. This war was ended with the April Agreement that aimed to protect the civilians in both Lebanon and Israel. The articles of this agreement was supervised, reviewed and revised by the then-Syrian President, Hafiz Al-Assad (Qassem, 2005).

After the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon, with the exception of the Shebaa Farms, the Israeli army started using a tactic to respond to Hezbollah's military operations against its troops. The Israeli air force targeted Syrian garrisons in Lebanon. As a result, Hezbollah's military arm started responding promptly to these assaults by attacking Israeli barracks in occupied Shebaa Farms (Zisser, 2010). When the Syrian government decided to withdraw its troops from Lebanon shortly after the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, Hezbollah organised in Beirut on 8 March 2005 one of the biggest rallies in the modern history of Lebanon. This was to thank Syria and its army for their massive sacrifice for the sake of Lebanon, as Hezbollah's Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrullah noted in his speech at the end of the rally (Knio, 2008). When the July War of 2006 erupted

between the Israeli army and Hezbollah, Syria was ready for military intervention in case Israeli troops entered Lebanon and approached the Syrian border² (Arkin, 2011).

Hezbollah and the Arab Uprisings

In reviewing literature related to Hezbollah's standpoint from the supposed 'Arab Spring' that began to dismantle the political landscape in parts of the Arab World by the end of 2010, it is clear that Hezbollah endorsed and encouraged the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain (Alagha, 2011, 2014). Hezbollah issued statements of support to these uprisings, and in one of these statements states that Hezbollah is "blessing [...] the Arab masses in general, for their drive for 'freedom and dignity'" (Alagha, 2014, pp. 193 & 194). However, while it accepts that there is a domestic political opposition in Syria, Hezbollah considers that there is a conspiracy against Syria and its government (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2011).

At the early stages of the Syrian uprising and before the emergence of the terrorists groups in Syria, Saad-Ghorayeb (2011) summarised Hezbollah's pretexts of supporting the Syrian government, "first, this regime's relationship with and position towards the American-Israeli project in the region" and second, the potential for reforms" (p. 3). Although there are unconfirmed reports that Hezbollah started sending fighters to Syria in 2011 (Sullivan, 2014), Hezbollah declared officially its engagement in the war in Syria, to fight the terrorist groups, in May 2013 (Johansen, 2016).

It is crucial to identify the depiction of Hezbollah by two major satellite television stations in the Middle East, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. This allows for the understanding on how Hezbollah is portrayed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar through their respective media 'mouthpieces'.

The Image of Hezbollah in the Arab Media: Case of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya

The Arab media, particularly the influential satellite television stations, generally reflect mostly on their governments' standpoints (Darwish, 2009). In this regard, I point to two Arab satellite televisions: Al-Jazeera that reflects Qatar's view and Al-Arabiya that reflects the Saudi view. In the past, Al-Jazeera described Hezbollah as a resistance movement during the war between Hezbollah's military wing and the Israeli army in July 2006. Al-Jazeera was the first satellite channel that was able to interview Sayyed Hassan Nasrullah, Hezbollah's leader (Arkin, 2011). Shortly after the end of the 2006 war, the then-Emir of Qatar visited Hezbollah's stronghold area in south Beirut to witness the destruction. He received a warm welcome from Hezbollah's officials and the civilians. As a result of its support, Hezbollah's media raised a slogan: "Thank you Qatar" (Sanromà, 2015). When Hezbollah engaged in the Syrian war to support the Syrian government Qatar, which supported the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world including Syria, used the rhetoric that Hezbollah had turned from a Resistance movement to a supporter of a "brutal regime" (e.g. Hu, 2016).

Unlike with Qatar, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah was always unstable. After the first day of the July War in 2006, an official Saudi statement published by Saudi Press Agency described Hezbollah's capture of two Israeli soldiers as an "uncalculated adventure" and highlighted that, "The Kingdom sees that it is time for these elements to single-handedly shoulder full responsibility for this irresponsible behaviour, and that the

² The July War of 2006 (12 July 2006 - 15 August 2006) erupted after Hezbollah's military arm captured two Israeli soldiers under a pretext of swapping them with Lebanese prisoners in the Israeli jails (El Zein, 2015).

burden of ending the crisis it has created falls on them [Hezbollah] alone" (Korani & Fattah, 2008, p. 374).

Although this statement did not name Hezbollah directly, it was known that it was targeting the resistance group. The term of an "uncalculated adventure" was subject for scathing analysis by Darwish (2006, 2009). On 14 July 2006, one day after that statement was made, Nasrullah responded harshly to Saudi Arabia and the Arab countries that were in the same line of criticising Hezbollah, stating:

Yes, we are adventurers [...]. However, we are adventurers since 1982. We did not bring to our country anything, except for victory, freedom, liberation, honour, dignity and pride [...]. This is our adventure. In 1982, you and the world called us madmen. However, we have confirmed that we are wise [...]. I tell them [the Arab leaders] gamble on your minds and we will gamble on our adventure [...]. We have never gambled on you before. Instead, we have gambled on Allah, our people, our passions, our strengths and our sons. Today, we have the same gamble, and the victory will come if it is Allah's will ("Sayyed Nasrullah," 2006) [my translation].

Although the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah was restored after the July War, the gap of trust has not been bridged, because the two have polar agendas. Saudi Arabia considers Hezbollah a Shiite movement loyal to Iran believing in Wilayat al-Faqih (Korani & Fattah, 2008). On the other hand, Hezbollah considers Saudi Arabia liable for the emergence of extremist and terrorist organisations which consider Shiites to be non-Muslims and cause bloodshed. Also, Hezbollah accuses Saudi Arabia of supporting the Bahraini regime to oppress its citizens and of killing the Yemenis through airstrikes and siege ("Sayyed Nasrullah," 2015). Nasrullah highlighted the Saudi role in Yemen and Bahrain to provide evidence that the Saudi regime does not believe in democracy and human rights, and it aims to impose its political agendas on other Arab countries.

Al-Arabiya satellite television campaigns are not only against Hezbollah's engagement in the Syrian war, but also highlights Hezbollah losses (e.g. Omari, 2015). This coverage reflects the Saudi propaganda and how it depicts Hezbollah.

As a result of Saudi efforts, and because Hezbollah supports the Syrian government, the Arab League labelled this party in March 2016 a terrorist group ("Arab League," 2016). Notably, the Arab League suspended Syria from its league on 12 November 2011 (Maddy-Weitzman, 2012).

Geopolitics and Ideology

Syria is considered the vital vein for Hezbollah because it supported this party to build its military capabilities and arsenal to face the Israeli army (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002). During the July War of 2006, thousands of Lebanese civilians, particularly the Shiites Muslims, fled their towns to Syria. Syria has been considered Hezbollah's safe haven, and thus its previous military commander, Imad Mughniyeh, was assassinated in Syria by a car bomb in Damascus on 12 February 2008 and hence Hezbollah accuses Israel of Mughniyeh's assassination (El Zein, 2015).

Without Syria, it could be difficult for Hezbollah to build and maintain its military arsenal because Damascus and Tehran equip this party with sophisticated weapons that cross the

Syrian border towards Lebanon (Sullivan, 2014). This military supply strengthens Hezbollah and allows its military wing to shock the Israeli army if a war erupted between two sides. As Tel Aviv is worried about the balance of power between its army and Hezbollah, the Israeli air raids on Syria between 31 January 2013 to 17 March 2017 under the pretext of attacking military convoys related to Hezbollah were 18 (Bdair, 2017).

Geopolitically, Hezbollah considers Syria and Iran as crucial. "Hezbollah has repeatedly stated that it would not interfere in any military attack targeting Syria and Iran, unless there is an existential danger facing the two regimes" (Alagha, 2014, p. 194). In 2004, the King of Jordan warned of a 'Shiite Crescent' that comprised of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon (Colombo, 2013). It might be not fair to call it a Shiite crescent since Syria is a secular Ba'athist state and its regime is not a Shiite one, this crescent can be interpreted as the Axis of Resistance. Considering the massive Syrian support for Hezbollah and its alliance with Iran, the Syrian state is considered as the nerve-centre of the Axis of Resistance and thus Hezbollah engaged in the Syrian conflict to support the regime since Hezbollah in its 2009 political charter highlighted the significance of Resistance instead of Islamic Resistance which is the name of its military wing. This suggests that Hezbollah believes that there are other nationalists and secularists, such as Ba'ath regime in Syria and other parties in Lebanon, who are considered part of Resistance and its culture (El Zein, 2015). In this context, Resistance, which does not have only a military face, is "a quest for political autonomy and dignity" (Strindberg and Wörn, 2011, p. 125).

Although Hezbollah has mutual political and military interests with the Syrian government, it also has religious interests because there are important Shiite shrines in Syria, mainly in Damascus, especially Lady Zainab Mosque. As the Syrian uprisings in 2011 turned violent, Hezbollah backed the Syrian state and sent troops in 2012 to protect these shrines in Damascus from destructions by *Takfiris* and engaged with the Syrian Arab Army since 2013 to recapture territories from the rebel, extremist and terrorist groups (Johansen, 2016). Hezbollah is aware in the danger of these terrorist groups such as ISIS, and labels them as *Takfiris*. *Takfiris* are those "who accuse others of apostasy [...] many Sunni and Shiite Muslims [use this term to] refer to members and supporters of Al Qaeda and similar groups" (Blanchard, 2009, p. 2).

Hezbollah's military arm also faced ISIS and other groups who created strongholds along the Lebanese territories in the district of northern Beqa and launched missiles against Lebanese towns. In justifying the actions of Hezbollah against these groups, Nasrullah, said in a speech on 25 May 2013:

We consider that the takeover of these groups of Syria - or of Syrian provinces, especially those bordering Lebanon - poses a great danger to Lebanon and every Lebanese, not only Hezbollah and the Shiites in Lebanon. It poses a danger to Lebanon, the Lebanese, the Lebanese state, the Lebanese resistance, and coexistence in Lebanon. I have evidence. I am not accusing these groups without grounds. If these groups were to succeed in taking over provinces - particularly those bordering Lebanon - then they would *pose a threat to the Lebanese*, whether Muslims or Christians (Nasrullah cited in Johansen, 2016, p. 44) [original emphasis].

As a result, Hezbollah's engagement in the Syrian war, mainly against ISIS and other similar groups, turned into a war against terrorism and securing the Lebanese territories, particularly the Lebanese village along the border with Syria in Northern Beqa. After ISIS attacked the

southern district of Beirut, Borj el Barajneh, with a twin suicide attacks killing nearly 43 civilians and injured 239, on 12 November 2015, (Mckirdy et al., 2015), Nasrullah declared war on ISIS, saying, "After this attack we shall go and search for open fronts with Daesh [the Arabic acronym of ISIS], and we must go to where the administration and leadership [exists], and to the closest place to this administration and leadership which sends these groups and these networks to perpetrate their terrorist attacks in Lebanon" ("Sayyed Hassan," 2015) [my translation].

The geopolitics and ideology are intertwined for Hezbollah because the success of the *Takfiris* has both negative ideological and geopolitical consequences. The success of anti-Hezbollah groups in Syria has the same negative impact (Anderson, 2016). Thus, it can be argued that Hezbollah considers its military engagement in Syria as a preventive step to secure its back and hence to preserve the Axis of Resistance.

Conclusion

This paper has pointed to the reasons that led Hezbollah to engage in the Syrian conflict. It has been contextualised by pointing to the major players in the Syrian conflict. It has also pointed to the image of Hezbollah from the eyes of two Arab Satellite television stations Al-Jazeera (of Qatar) and Al-Arabiya (of Saudi Arabia).

This paper has reviewed the relevant literature to find that there are four interconnected reasons. Firstly, it found that Hezbollah has a moral obligation to support the Syrian government which has historically supported Hezbollah; secondly, the Syrian state is Hezbollah's strategic ally that is considered the nerve-centre of the Resistance and hence Hezbollah cannot accept changing this secular regime by an opposing one, even if it is an Islamic regime; thirdly, the holy Shiite shrines in Damascus are sacred and symbolic to Shiite Muslims; and finally, Hezbollah attacks ISIS and similar groups in Syria to prevent them from spreading towards Lebanon.

Drawing on the findings of this paper, it can be argued that Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war to support the government is a matter of life and death for this party, and it is a moral commitment to support the backbone of Resistance (Sullivan, 2014). The geopolitical facts suggest that Hezbollah needs Syria for a long-term survival. It needs the support of Syria politically, and it needs the Syrian territories to receive weapons and financial support from Iran. This explains why Hezbollah focused to secure a part of the Lebanese-Syrian border mainly the border between Northern Beqa valley in Lebanon and Syria. Thus, the fall of Syrian government will be in favour of Israel because Hezbollah, which is considered the strongest military organisation that faces Israel, will be sieged whether directly or indirectly, and hence its military superiority will be waned. As Nasrullah noted, Syria is the backbone of Hezbollah (Sullivan, 2014), and Israel monitors the ongoing war in Syria and it treats wounded terrorist fighters because they are the enemies of Israel's enemy - Hezbollah (Simons, 2015). As a result, the fall of the Syrian government would be a win to Israel and a win for its direct and indirect allies; and a fall would mean a defeat for Hezbollah and the whole Axis of Resistance.

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