

## THE PARTY OF GOD: TRANSFORMATION OF LEBANESE HIZBALLAH

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### RESUME

*At the beginning of the 80s Hizballah emerged as a small rag-tag militia, spurred into existence by Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon; nowadays it constitutes one of the key players not just in Lebanon, but perhaps the most influential non-state actor in the Middle East, combining patterns of political party, social welfare organization and military power. Although it is often viewed through the reductionist prism of merely terrorist organization, the situation is much more complex, for in the course of years Hizballah has succeeded in creating an impressive socio-political base for its support, engaged constructively with the Lebanese political system, meanwhile carrying on a protracted guerilla war against Israel. The article traces the evolution of Hizballah and analyses the role of outside regional players, foremost Iran and Syria, in its strengthening and establishing as a dominant player in Lebanon. It focuses on the transformation of the movement from its terrorist origins to social engagement and political participation along the lines of its "infatih" policy of opening up, a process commonly referred to as "lebanonization of Hizballah", looking into the terrorism versus resistance controversy surrounding Hizballah in the recent years of its existence.*

**Key words:** terrorism, Hizballah, Hizballah – Lebanonization, Islamic social activism

### RESUME

*Hizballáh na začiatku 80-tych rokov vznikol ako nepočtetné, slabo organizované milície, ktoré boli reakciou na izraelskú okupáciu južného Libanonu; v súčasnosti však predstavuje pravdepodobne najvplyvnejšieho neštátneho aktéra na Strednom Východe, ktorý v sebe kombinuje prvky politickej strany, organizácie poskytujúcej sociálne služby a vojenskej organizácie. Hoci je hnutie často vnímané výlučne cez zjednodušujúcu prizmu teroristickej skupiny, realita je oveľa komplexnejšie, pretože v priebehu svojho vývoja si Hizballáh dokázal vytvoriť pozoruhodnú sociálno-politickú základňu, konštruktívne sa začal angažovať v libanonskom politickom systéme a zároveň viedol dlhodobý gerilový boj proti Izraelu. Článok sleduje vývoj Hizballáhu a analyzuje rolu vonkajších regionálnych hráčov,*

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predovšetkým Iránu a Sýrie v jeho posilnení a získaní pozície dominantného hráča v Libanone. Upriamuje pozornosť na transformáciu hnutia od jeho teroristických začiatkov k sociálnemu angažovaniu sa a politickej participácii, ktoré prebiehali podľa línií politiky otvorenia sa – „infithah“ v procese, ktorý sa označuje tiež ako proces „libanonizácie Hizballáhu“.

**Kľúčové slová:** terorizmus, Hizballáh, Hizballáh – libanonizácia, islamský sociálny aktivizmus

We are often asked: Who are we, the Hizballah, and what is our identity? We are the sons of the *Umma* – the Party of God, the vanguard of which was made victorious by God in Iran. ... We do not constitute an organized and closed party in Lebanon, nor we a tight political cadre. We are an *Umma* linked to the Muslims of the whole world by the solid doctrinal and religious connection of Islam, whose message God wanted to be fulfilled by the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad. Our behavior is dictated to us by legal principles laid down by the light of an overall political conception defined by the leading jurist. ... No one can imagine the importance of our military potential as our military is not separate from our overall social fabric. Each of us is a fighting soldier.  
(An Open Letter: The Hizballah Program, 1985)

Hizballah<sup>1</sup> is often viewed through the reductionist prism of a terrorist organization. At first glance this seems to be more than natural; it features prominently on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations; its members have been placed on the “most wanted” terrorists list alongside the top al Qa’ida officials, and its actions and attitudes are infamous for their radicalism, hard stance towards the United States and the state of Israel, and the use of violence. Since its inception, Hizballah has positioned itself as an opponent to the U.S. policy in the Middle East, and declared an open-ended struggle against the usurper of Muslim holy lands – Israel, the most important U.S. ally in the region. During its early years, Hizballah has conducted several attacks against U.S. and Israeli targets, including the 1983 attack on the Marines barracks (in which more than 240 marines perished), kidnapping of U.S. citizens, hijacking of the planes, the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the text the transliteration Hizballah is adopted. However, it is not universally adopted transliteration; therefore in the text also other forms can be found, corresponding to the usage of various authors quoted in the text, which is upheld.

bombing of U.S. embassy in Beirut, and the 1985 kidnapping of TWA flight from Athens to Rome with 100 American passengers on board. Regarding Israel, Hizballah has never abandoned its goal of the destruction of Israel, and opposed ferociously not only Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, but also the Arab – Israeli peace process. Adding to its terrorist image are close ties to Iran, considered to be the most significant sponsor of terrorism, as well as to Syria. However, despite its radicalism and recourse to violent struggle, Hizballah should not be dismissed as a mere terrorist organization, for it ignores the fact that it has managed to build an extremely impressive social base in Lebanon, cutting across the confessional lines, and now it constitutes the most effective and efficient political party in Lebanon. (Norton, 1999)

What is then Hizballah, where did they come from, and how were they able to achieve such a prominent position?

## **Hizballah Rising**

To answer this question it is necessary to go back to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, when the area of today's Lebanon was given to France as its mandate territory. It had been already in that period when the sectarian problems of Lebanon began, since the French right from the beginning aimed at the creation of Christian-dominated state in the Middle East. Out of three main ethnic and confessional groups – Christian-Maronites, Sunni Muslims, and Shi'a Muslims – the Christian Maronites had been given more power, followed by the Sunni Muslims, at the expense of especially the Shi'a Muslims. Consequently, when Lebanon gained independence in 1943, the political power was divided along sectarian lines.<sup>2</sup> A gentleman's agreement between three major ethnic and confessional groups commonly referred to as

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<sup>2</sup> The allocation of power and the political system that emerged was based on 1932 census, in which Christians gained a small majority, making up a total of 55% of the entire population (Maronites, largest among the Christian sects accounted for 29% of the total population), and the Sunni Muslims were the second largest ethnic group. However, the figures were only estimates, and no official census has been carried out ever since, given the high sensitivity of this issue in the complicated confessional system of Lebanon. There remains little doubt about the fact that the ethnic composition of Lebanon has changed substantially over the decades, because Muslim, and especially Shi'a Muslim birth rates are continually higher than Christian birth rates; the latest unofficial estimates provided by the CIA conclude that approximately 57.9% of the Lebanese population are Muslims (Shi'a Muslims accounting for 35% and Sunni Muslims 25% of the total population), while 39% are Christians.

the 'National Pact', provided political guidelines to the division of power in the newly independent state. Each of the country's seventeen officially recognized sects were accorded political privilege, including the senior appointments in the bureaucracy, membership in parliament, and positions in high political office, roughly proportionate to the community's size.<sup>3</sup> (Norton, 1999, p. 11) The pact required that the presidency is accorded to a Christian Maronite, premiership to a Sunni Muslim, and the post of a Speaker of the Parliament to a Shi'a Muslim. However, there was a considerable imbalance of power among these three positions; the presidency carried preeminent prerogatives and powers, in which it was seconded by the premiership. Arguably the weakest position was the one of the Speaker of the Parliament. As for the seats in the parliament, they were determined on the presumed 6/5 ratio between Christians and Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of this agreement and unfeasibility of a redistribution of power based on a new census, the Shi'a community became largely marginalized within the system, yielding little political influence, and remaining impoverished and underdeveloped.<sup>5</sup> Historical grievances and mistrust between Sunnis and Shi'ites has further complicated the position of the Shi'a community in Lebanon.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The recognized sects were as follows: four Muslim sects (Sunni, Shi'a, 'Alawi, and Druze); twelve Christian sects (Assyrians, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Chaldeans, Maronites, "Rome" Catholics, Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, evangelicals, and smaller Christian sects, which are considered one group); and Jews. At the end of the civil war Copts became another recognized confession, bringing the total number to eighteen.

<sup>4</sup> The ratio has been eventually changed to 50-50 in the aftermath of the Ta'if Agreement.

<sup>5</sup> The Shi'a community has been marginalized not only politically, but also socially and economically. The political elite consisting of Christian Maronites and Sunni Muslims actively tried to preserve the existing *status quo* in the political system, strengthening their family and ethnic loyalties. These afflicted the social services provided by the Lebanese state, which were also organized along the sectarian lines, often circumventing the politically under-represented Shi'a community. Moreover, the center-oriented state economy favored allocation of the state investments and resources to the areas predominantly inhabited by Christians or Sunni Muslims, while the modernization of the areas densely inhabited by the Shi'a Muslims has considerably lagged behind.

<sup>6</sup> The rift between Sunnites and Shi'ites is deep and goes back to the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, AD, when the Muslim tribes divided into two opposing groups: the Sunnites – those who closely follow the Mohammed's sunnah, and constitute a majority within Islam; and Shi'ites (shiat Ali – the faction of Ali). The main contention between these two groups concerns the validity of the claim made by the faction of Ali, the husband of the Prophet's Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah, that he should succeed Muhammad upon his death. The members of both groups regard themselves as heretics, and the Shi'ites, in most societies a minority, were often object to persecution by the Sunni authorities.

Wars of 1948 and 1967 had another important effect on the whole Lebanese society. During those years many Palestinian refugees came to Lebanon, settling predominantly in its southern territories, inhabited by the Shi'a Muslims. One consequence was that many Shi'ites moved to an overcrowded suburb of Beirut, also called *dahiya*, where their standard of living was considerably low and the assistance provided by the state virtually non-existent. The Palestinian refugees and the arrival of **Yasser Arafat's** Palestine Liberation Organization in the area of South Lebanon also stirred the radicalization of the Shi'a Muslims, who gradually became more pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli (while the Christian-Maronites remained more pro-Israeli) oriented. On the other hand, the Shi'a also strongly felt the negative impacts of Palestinian presence in Lebanon, since the growing militarization of the area often provoked Israeli retaliation, heavily impacting the already impoverished population. The civil war, raging during 1975 – 1990 further strengthened the pre-existing sectarian divides, and together with other tendencies created a hub for the growth of political radicalization and mobilization of the Shi'a community.

Apart from the Lebanese domestic context, the rise of Hizballah and like-minded groups was also happening as a part of a broader tendency of the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s. It was a reaction to the numerous crises that convulsed the Middle Eastern Muslim community in this period, and provoked the return to religion as the most viable, or perhaps the only possible option. As **Harik** points out, in addition to crisis of secularism, others were government misrule and corruption, economic mismanagement and the uneven manifestations of modernization. Another potent factor that increased the aggravation energizing this politico-religious backlash was the abject failure of Middle Eastern governments to eliminate Israel – the country considered the usurper of holy Muslim lands and the latest manifestation of western imperialism in the region. (Harik, 2005, p.9)

Of the external factors especially two exerted a considerable influence on the formation of Hizballah: the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the 1982 Israeli invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon all the way up to Beirut.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran is a complex event that shaped the political identity of the Shi'a in the region, as it proved they could successfully stand up for their rights and against the oppression and discrimination. Iran has been useful for Hizballah in two essential ways: it provided organizational assistance and training to the newly evolving terrorist group, and shaped it ideologically;

secondly, it provided (and still provides) the much needed financial support. However, Hizballah quickly transcended its ties to Iran and outgrew its “terrorist proxy” position, and evolved into indigenous Lebanese social and resistance movement.

The Israeli invasion was meant to uproot the Palestinian militants, foremost the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from the Lebanese territory; the aim in which it succeeded. However, the elimination of heavy military Palestinian presence has changed into the long-term occupation of roughly one third of Lebanon, including Beirut, quickly resented by all sections of the Lebanese society. As **Ranstorp** notes, although the Shi’a community initially welcomed Israel’s decision to eradicate the PLO presence [in Lebanon], any Shi’a euphoria soon developed into resentment and militancy following the realization that Israel would continue to occupy southern Lebanon. (Ranstorp, 1997, p. 30)

On the invaded territories the Lebanese state practically collapsed, creating a power vacuum that has been eagerly filled up by a newly formed resistance movement – Hizballah.

Officially founded in 1982, Hizballah (the Party of God)<sup>7</sup> went an impressive way from being a radical resistance movement using terrorist tactics, rejecting the confessional sectarian character of the Lebanese state, and calling for the establishment of a truly Islamic state based on the Shari’a law, to a moderate and pragmatic political party accepting the particularities of the Lebanese system, while trying to improve it from within. The primary reason for its foundation in 1982 was the occupation of southern Lebanon by Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) coupled with the fears of a “religiously motivated occupier.” (Pape, 2005, p.130, 136) Its origins can be traced to a militia group called “The Brigades of the Lebanese Resistance” (*Awfaj Al-Muqawama Al-Lubnaniyya*), commonly known by its acronym Amal, founded by Imam Musa al-Sadr.<sup>8</sup> Amal was created as a social and political movement trying to mobilize and represent the Shi’a of Lebanon; to resist the 1978 Israeli occupation, and to liberate southern Lebanon. However, in 1982 a major rift occurred between Amal’s moderates and radical Islamists within the movement, when Amal’s leader **Nabih Berri** decided to co-opt with the Lebanese government by joining

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<sup>7</sup> The name for the new movement has been coined by Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi, later Hizballah’s leader, and is based on the Qur’anic verse (5:56): “Whoever takes Allah, His Apostle and those who believe as friends [must know] that Allah’s party [Hizballah] is indeed the triumphant”.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on Imam Musa al-Sadr and the Amal movement, see Alagha, Norton

the National Salvation Committee<sup>9</sup> - a move regarded by some as un-Islamic. Those who believed this move was contrary to the rejectionist line toward the Lebanese confessional system shifted their allegiance<sup>10</sup>, joining their forces with some already existing Islamic Shi'a groups, such as Da'wa Party or The Lebanese Union of Muslim Students (*Itihad al-Lublani lil Talaba al-Muslimin*), establishing Hizballah as an Islamic *jihadi* movement against the Israeli occupation, with the material support of Iran and backing from Syria. (Alagha, 2006, p.33)

## A Deadly Triangle

Hizballah is often termed to be a “proxy” power for both Iran and Syria. This term implies the assumption that Hizballah is not more than an entity exerting Iranian and Syrian will, bowing to their wishes and playing by their standards. It is an undeniable fact that both Iran and Syria have been crucial in the process of Hizballah's rise from a small rag-tag militia into a formidable resistance movement it is now, but to characterize their mutual relations as an entirely client – proxy power ones is misleading and ignoring the evolution that Hizballah has underwent since its establishment in 1982.

According to U.S. Department of State's periodically published Country Reports on Terrorism, Iran remained the most active state sponsor of terrorism (Country Reports on Terrorism, 2008, p. 182) due to the strong ties it has developed and maintains with various terrorist groups, most prominently Hizballah, Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, but it provides its support also for Iraq-based militants and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan. (Country Reports on Terrorism, 2008) Beyond any doubt, sponsoring the “Party of God” is the most important “investment” Iran has ever made in using a proxy to pursue its foreign policy agenda. Its constant material, financial, and organizational support helped Hizballah to transform from an unimportant group of radicals into a formidable military organization and social movement that until the appearance of al Qa'ida figured at the top position in the U.S. list of terrorist organizations, and which has become the only Arab power able to inflict a

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<sup>9</sup> This committee was formed by the Lebanese president Elias Sarkis in mid-June to deal with the Israeli occupation and the besiegement of Beirut.

<sup>10</sup> For example Hassan Nasrallah – the current Secretary General of Hizballah – was Amal's *Biqa'* district leader before he turned to Hizballah.

serious damage, even defeat on Israel. Iran's spiritual and ideological guidance had an enormous impact on the beliefs and actions of Hizballah at the early stages of its existence<sup>11</sup>, and continues to be relevant until the present day.

After the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran's political orientation radically shifted away from secularism and modernization along the Western lines previously pursued by the overthrown Shah. The clerical regime in Tehran under the supreme leadership of the Ayatollah **Khomeini** started to emphasize its religious orientation and embarked upon spreading the values of Islam and Islamic governance to Iran's "corrupted" and secular neighboring governments. Indeed, shortly after taking the power, Ayatollah **Khomeini** declared: "*We should try hard to export our revolution to the world. ... [we] shall confront the world with our ideology.*" (Ehteshami, 1995, p. 131) However, the very nature and coming to power of the Ayatollah's regime precluded any maneuvering space in the international arena for Iran, and the regime resorted to terrorism as the last – and coincidentally most convenient – means of conducting its foreign policy and gaining leverage in regional, or indeed global, affairs.<sup>12</sup> For Iran it was vital to keep engaged in the Arab–Israeli peace process, because a comprehensive Arab– Israeli peace would further isolate the clerical regime.

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<sup>11</sup> In the early 1980's the declarations of Hizballah's and Iranian officials stated that "Iran and Lebanon are one people in one country... We do not say that we are part of Iran, we are Iran in Lebanon and Lebanon in Iran"; "We are going to support Lebanon politically and militarily as we buttress one of our own Iranian districts"; "We declare to the whole world that the Islamic Republic of Iran is our mother, religion, *ka'ba*, and our veins".

<sup>12</sup> From the very beginning the clerical regime supported a broad roster of terrorist groups, both religious and secular in their character, to advance its domestic or regional goals. The most compelling foreign policy goal in the period after the Islamic revolution was spreading this revolution to the neighboring countries, whose secular leaders, often having close ties with the United States, were regarded as an illegitimate impediment to the establishment of the rule of Islam in the Arab lands. Domestically, the support for various, mainly Shi'a groups, was seen as a way to gain and sustain the domestic support, since Tehran portrayed itself as an international safeguard and representative of the Shi'a Muslims. Soon also strategic concerns came to the fore and gained the main ground in Tehran's continued engagement in the sponsorship of terrorism. Since Iran lacked military capabilities to confront the neighboring states directly, it found it convenient and effective to try to destabilize them using various proxies able to inflict considerable damage, but without official links to Iran. This employment of terrorism on regional level resulted in a number of strategic rivalries, hostility and further isolation of Iran. Internationally, terrorism allowed Iran to project power beyond its actual military, economic or diplomatic capabilities. It became the tool for striking – indirectly and without a fear of direct retaliation – at its two Archenemies, Israel and the United States. Through the use of proxies, namely Hizballah, it also gained the influence in the Arab–Israeli peace process, which otherwise would not be possible.

Thanks to the Iran's organizational and material commitment, and generous financial help, Hizballah soon outpaced its secular rival, Amal,<sup>13</sup> and became the dominant Shi'a force in the area of South Lebanon, especially the Biqa' Valley, and on the suburbs of Beirut. In its first public statement<sup>14</sup>, Hizballah pledged its absolute loyalty to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah **Khomeini**. It also accepted **Khomeini's** disputed doctrine of the *wilayat al-faqih*, which means the merging of political and religious authority under the most learned cleric. One prominent Hizballah figure declared in 1985 that "[Hizballah's] relationship with the Islamic revolution is one of a junior to a senior ... of a soldier to his commander." (Kramer, 1990, pp. 131-157) Iran had also an important say in the major decisions adopted by Hizballah, such as its move to participate in 1992 parliamentary elections. When senior Hizballah leaders are deadlocked, Iran's Supreme Leader is asked to make the final decision. (Byman, 2005, p. 89) But Iranian support was also more tangible than proselytizing the words of radical Islam. Iran provided direct military aid, organized training camps (especially in the Biqa' Valley) for Hizballah recruits, helped with the organization, and poured in a large sums of money; members of the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps stationed in Lebanon together with intelligence officials helped to organize attacks on tactical level, and provided necessary intelligence services. An important share of Iran's support is articulated in the form of direct financial aid. This amounts approximately to \$100-200 million per year, and might have even increased after the 2006 Israel–Hizballah war.<sup>15</sup> Financial support is crucial for Hizballah, as it helps it to

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<sup>13</sup> When contemplating the possibilities of using a proxy power, Iran decided to create a brand new Shi'a organization despite the fact, that the existing Shi'a Amal organization was already in place and enjoyed a considerable support. It was because Amal was a secular movement cooperating with the Israel. Iran and later also Syria made a considerable efforts to diminish the popularity and outreach of Amal, which did not suit their interest. However, Syria has carefully tried to calibrate the power of the two groups and in order to prevent that Hizballah might become a pre-eminent power on the Lebanese political scene (for example in 1992 and 1996 parliamentary elections Hizballah bowed to Syria and formed joint electoral lists with its rival Amal.)

<sup>14</sup> The 1985 "Open Letter from Hizballah to the Oppressed in Lebanon and the World".

<sup>15</sup> his support is channeled mainly through the Qods Force, a branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (known also as Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps). According to the Country Reports on Terrorism 2007, the Qods Force has a long history of supporting Hizballah, providing it with guidance, funding, weapons, intelligence, and logistical support. The Qods Force operates training camps for Hizballah in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and has reportedly trained more than 3,000 Hizballah fighters at IRGC training facilities in Iran. The Qods Force provides roughly \$100 to \$200 million in funding a year to Hizballah and has assisted Hizballah in rearming in violation of UN Security Council

maintain and expand its vast network of social services which constitutes one of two essential pillars of the movement.<sup>16</sup>

But it was not only Tehran who invested its stakes in Hizballah; Syria is the third partner in this complex relationship. After losing the Golan Heights to Israel it became a matter of national pride and prestige for Syria to regain them (besides the national pride it had also very pragmatic reasons to regain these lands, since they represent the most important reservoir of water resources in the area), and it also hoped to defy isolation and reclaim its role as a pivotal power in the region. (El-Hokayem, 2007, p.35) When Syria started to lose its position in Lebanon as a result of Israeli invasion followed by stationing of U.S. and European multinational forces, it looked for a local ally to regain and cement its upper hand in Lebanon. Hizballah was an ideal ally, since it was willing to spearhead the anti-Israeli resistance, while it simultaneously rejected the multinational force (UNIFIL), and its main objectives therefore intersected with those of Syria. What proved to be even a bigger advantage, using Hizballah allowed Syria not to alienate the West completely, while carrying out its own political agenda and in the clout of Hizballah's responsibility deny whatsoever part in the Hizballah's actions.<sup>17</sup> During the period when it exercised a considerable influence over the group, Damascus used Hizballah to serve its interests in the negotiations with Israel, and depending on the current state of relations between these two states it allowed or prohibited Hizballah to undertake major operations against Israeli targets. This tactics, however, proved to be also counterproductive; while it constantly reminded Israel of Syrian requests, it also enhanced the hostility toward Syria and the isolation of **Assad's** regime.

As for Hizballah, in its 1996 elections program it stated as a priority the preservation of good, brotherly Lebanese-Syrian relations as a practical application of Lebanon's Arab heritage, identity, belonging, and cultural authenticity, and while it acknowledged that Syria has benefited from their

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Resolution 1701. It is also considered by the United States to be the Iranian regime's primary instrument for providing lethal support to the Taliban. On October 25, the United States designated the IRGC-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) under Executive Order 13224 for its support to terrorist organizations.

<sup>16</sup> For more on Iran – Hizballah relationship see Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections*, and Graham E. Fuller: "The Hizballah-Iran Connection: Model for Sunni Resistance."

<sup>17</sup> Especially illustrating case of this behavior was the Western Hostage Crisis. For more information see Magnus Ranstorp, *Hezbollah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

mutual relationship, it vehemently denied that Syria used Hizbullah as a tool of policy in order to further its strategic interest of recovering the Golan Heights, or to pressure Israel and the U.S. by urging Hizbullah to enflame the northern front with Israel. (Alagha, 2006, p.173)

Despite these substantial changes in Hizbullah's nature Syria retains its interest to keep its ties with the movement, if not anymore on client – proxy level, at least it wants to retain Hizbullah as a cooperating partner in the region. It continues to exercise some leverage on the group, since [it] serves as a conduit for Iranian military supplies. (Byman, 2003, p.65) Syria also provides an excellent intelligence service on Lebanon, thus facilitating the group's conduct of activities. However, Hizbullah has evolved into more autonomous movement having its own interests in the region, which are not always matching those of Syria.

Despite the benefits offered by Iran and Syria, Hizbullah ultimately distanced itself more from its sponsors. Its performance against the Israeli forces, the effectively constructed image as a defender of Lebanon, and its formidable social network bolstered the group's prestige, but also helped it to actually embed in the Lebanese political, social, and confessional environment. The result is a growing awareness of, and responsiveness to, Lebanon's political and geostrategic realities. (Byman, 2005, p.99) As the movement itself emphasized on several occasions, it sees itself as a Lebanese political party that derives legitimacy from its struggle for the liberation of Lebanese occupied land by Israel, and from the support of Lebanese people and government (domestically), and that it is buttressed by two strong regional players, namely, Iran and Syria (regionally). (Alagha, 2005, p.172) Certainly, Hizbullah acknowledges the existence of strong ties, interests, and sometimes limits imposed by Iran and Syria; however, in the course of years it has gained a considerable independence through the process commonly referred to as the "lebanonization of Hizbullah".

## **Legitimacy and Power**

In 1995 Shaykh **Fadlallah** defined the process of lebanonization of Hizbullah as "examin[ing] the prevailing circumstances in Lebanon and formulat[ing] its strategy within that framework, making allowances for Lebanon's particular circumstances, its confessional sensitivities, its perception of its environment." (Fadlallah, 1995) This position was reaffirmed also by the

Secretary General Shaykh **Hassan Nasrallah**, who indicated that if Iran's interests and Lebanon's interests came into conflict, Hizballah would favor those of Lebanon. (Byman, 2005, p.105)

Since its foundation in 1982, Hizballah went an impressive way of transformation from a terrorist group deliberately attacking civilian targets to the efficient and superbly-organized guerilla group, which successfully entered the Lebanese political arena as a legitimate political force. As **Ranstorp** notes, despite Hizballah's belligerence in physical violence as well as in bellicose rhetoric, refusing to accept the Israel's existence and calling for the 'liberation of Jerusalem', the movement has shown a remarkable degree of pragmatism, flexibility and sophisticated awareness of the requirements of the internal Lebanese as well as regional environment. (Ranstorp, 1993, p.505)

As Shaykh **Hassan Nasrallah**, the spiritual guide of Hizballah, affirmed, *"We are not only a military movement, we have popular roots everywhere. No one will be able to uproot us, no matter what happens."* (AFP, 24 February, 1994) This statement gives a correct view of what the Party of God has become over time. Contrary to the label "terrorist group", which is commonly used in the Western rhetoric when addressing the problem of Hizballah, on the ground in Lebanon and other Muslim countries it is referred to as a legitimate resistance movement, and praised for its anti-Israeli campaign and assistance which it provides to large portions of Lebanese society (especially a range of social welfare services to politically marginalized and economically disadvantaged – mainly, but not exclusively, from the Lebanese Shi'a community).

In establishing itself as a dominant local political player in Lebanon, Hizballah drew on three advantages it had in comparison to its rivals. Initially, its military performance and hard stance toward the then-occupying forces – Israel and the United States – assured it the unbreakable aura of the force capable to defeat and deter well-trained and well-equipped Israeli forces. Secondly, Hizballah's firm opposition to the Lebanese government and its known non-corrupted practices gained admiration from the large segments of the society; and finally, its status as a provider of social welfare and protection to the residents of southern Lebanon against continued Israeli raids and occupation. Hizballah creates and upholds social nets where the Lebanese government performs inadequately or its intervention is non-existent. Its services to the Umma range from the garbage collection; water supplies; providing health services and building hospitals; building and running schools; building mosques;

running rural services and development programs to repairing war-damaged houses. These activities are constantly expanding and designed to aid not only the Shi'a community, but all needy segments of the society. In fact, the latter has become means to boost its position within the Lebanon, as Hizballah uses a non-discriminatory approach in providing services to gain the support of the different ethnic and confessional groups. It does so for several reasons; first, it needs to gain the loyalty of a majority of the Shi'a community; secondly, it needs to be accepted as a legitimate and responsible political party by the broader Lebanese polity; and third, Hizballah attempts to position itself as the party representing the economically disadvantaged, regardless of communal identity. (Shanahan, 2007, p. 502)

Stepping into the political arena – the *infatih* (opening up, or dialogue) – has not been easy for Hizballah, because it implied also the shifts in Hizballah's identity and its self-projection. This process was necessary on three levels: first and perhaps most importantly, in relation to the internal cadres of the movement; secondly towards the domestic audience in Lebanon (especially the non-Muslim segments of the society); and finally, internationally, towards the Western countries.

When Hizballah made its first steps in Lebanon its behavior manifested almost exclusively traits of radical Islamic movement, profoundly inspired by the 1979 Islamic revolution<sup>18</sup>, and determined to replicate Iranian success on the ground in Lebanon. It openly subscribed to Ayatollah **Khomeini's** vision of the Islamic state and called for its establishment in Lebanon.<sup>19</sup> However, given the peculiar composition and traditions of the Lebanese society, the movement right from the beginning opted for gentler approach, which has further moderated over time. In its 1985 Open Letter, Hizballah proclaimed that it is convinced of Islam as an ideology, doctrine, political order, and a mode of governance. We call all the populace to be conversant with it and its religious

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<sup>18</sup> The 1985 Open Letter states: We, the son's of Hizbullah's *umma*, whose vanguard God has given victory in Iran and which has established the nucleus of the world's central Islamic state, abide by the orders of a single wise and just command represented by the guardianship of the jurisprudent (*waliyy al-faqih*), currently embodied in the supreme Ayatullah Ruhallah al-Musawi al-Khumayni [Khomeini] who has detonated the Muslim's revolution, and who is bringing about the glorious Islamic renaissance.

<sup>19</sup> We call upon all of them [the people of Lebanon] to pick the option of Islamic state, which alone, is capable of guaranteeing justice and liberty for all. Only an Islamic state can stop any further tentative attempts of imperialistic infiltration into our country.

imperatives/injunctions. We also call upon the populace to adhere to its teachings at the individual, political, and social levels. If our populace could freely choose the system of government in Lebanon, then they would definitely opt for Islam. From this perspective, we call for the implementation of an Islamic order on the basis of direct and free choice as exercised by the populace, and not on the basis of force, as others might entertain. (Hizballah, Open Letter, 1985) Even as it firmly believed in Islam as the only viable and just option for Lebanon, the call for the Islamic state can be also read through the prism of the refusal of the sectarian political system in vigor, as well as the refusal of various Western attempts to implement the elements of the Western liberal democracy (the Open Letter further stated: "We don't want to impose Islam upon anybody, as much as we don't want others to impose upon us their convictions and their political systems. We don't want Islam to reign in Lebanon by force, as is the case with political Maronism today.")

The 1985 Open Letter, however, does not represent Hizballah's political program; it might be considered its predecessor in the sense that with the Open Letter Hizballah outlined its political ideology and identity, and the principles it adhered to. In the core of Hizballah's political ideology were two premises: first, that the sectarian political system of Lebanon "is the product of arrogance so unjust that no reform or modification can remedy it" and "it should be changed radically"; and secondly, its opposition to "World Imperialism that is hostile to Islam." (Hizballah, Open Letter, 1985) Hizballah therefore refused the Lebanese political system as a whole and voluntarily remained disengaged from all political activity within the system.<sup>20</sup> However, it did not prohibit it to engage extensively in the social activism, nor had it stop its resistance activities.

Changes in Hizballah's identity and behavior started to take place in the period of 1989-90, and were closely connected with the signing into force of the

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<sup>20</sup> "We consider that all opposition in Lebanon voiced in the name of reform can only profit, ultimately, the present system. All such opposition, which operates within the framework of the conservation and safeguarding of the present constitution without demanding changes at the level of the very foundation of the regime, is hence, an opposition of pure formality, which cannot satisfy the interests of the oppressed masses. Likewise, any opposition, which confronts the present regime but within the limits fixed by it, is an illusory opposition, which renders a great service to the Jumayyel system. Moreover, we cannot be concerned by any proposition of political reform, which accepts the rotten [Lebanese political] system actually in effect. We could not care less about the creation of this or that governmental coalition or about the participation of this or that political personality in some ministerial post, which is but a part of this unjust regime." (Hizballah's Open Letter, 1985)

Ta'if Agreement<sup>21</sup>, that had ended the Lebanese civil war. In terms of the self-construction of Hizballah's identity, the pre-Ta'if period has been characteristic by the prominence of Hizballah's religious ideology; however, in the post-Ta'if environment the religious ideology has gradually lost its position as a central and unalterable pillar of Hizballah's actions, and it became an ideological platform and underpinning of much more pragmatic political ideology. Undoubtedly, religious views and prescriptions continued to be an important constitutive element of Hizballah's identity, but rather being solutions *in se*, they represented a starting point from which Hizballah's political program – in its essence pragmatic, moderate, and negotiable – has been articulated. While Pre-Ta'if period has been marked by strong anti-Israeli and anti-U.S. rhetoric, violent action, as well as the rejection of the Lebanese political system. After the Ta'if, the movement started to gradually engage with the Lebanese political system, to soften its rhetoric, and cultivate its image – both domestically and internationally – as a legitimate and indigenous resistance movement.

In the aftermath of the Ta'if Agreement, and after the actual end of the Lebanese civil war in October 1990, Hizballah has faced a serious challenge regarding its future existence. The security part of the agreement provided for the dissolution of all militias operating during the civil war, and required them to surrender the arms to the Lebanese Army, and to close their military installments and training camps. Hizballah, although it proclaimed it has never took an active party in the civil war on the behalf of any side of the conflict, now faced the possibility of being disbanded, despite being a prominent representative of the Lebanese resistance to the Israeli occupation. As a response to these Ta'if provisions, Hizballah launched a public relations campaign, issuing political declarations and programs in an attempt to position

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<sup>21</sup> The Ta'if Agreement is a common denomination of the "Document of National Accord," negotiated by 58 members of the Lebanese parliament in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia, between the September, 30 and the October, 22, 1989. The main goal of the Agreement was to serve as a "road map" for national reconciliation, and to reform the sectarian political system so that it provided more equitable power-sharing for all confessional groups. It changed the Christian-Muslim ratio in the parliament from 6/5 to 50-50 to – at least to a minimum degree – reflect the demographic changes in the society, and it also increased the number of the seats in the parliament from 99 to 108. (In 1992 the number of seats has been increased again – from 108 to 128.) It officially marked the end of the civil war, outlined the procedures ending the state of war, and dealt with the problem of dissolving the militias and integrating them into the society, foremost in the Lebanese Army. All militias were also required to surrender their weapons to the Lebanese state; nevertheless, the militias were allowed to transform themselves into political parties.

itself not only as a militia, but actually as a deeply rooted resistance movement, articulating a political program that transcends the end of the civil war and proving that its existence is founded also under the new circumstances. As a result of its successful campaign, Hizballah's military wing – the Islamic Resistance – was granted the status of a legitimate national resistance movement, acting on the behalf of the Lebanese state in the continuing struggle against the Israeli occupation, and it retained the right to keep its weapons and military facilities. In turn, this brought to the fore the necessity of adjusting Hizballah's identity to its new functions and its new role in the post-civil war environment. On the one hand, Hizballah continued its struggle against Israeli occupation in the South, but being recognized as a resistance movement it had to operate and become responsive to the evolving post-civil war environment of the domestic Lebanese public sphere, and to formulate its opinions and political programs in more general terms, regarding not only the issue of the Israeli occupation, but also broader domestic, or indeed regional, issues.

Although Hizballah did not accept the Ta'if Agreement in its total, and voiced several concerns about the “cosmetic” political reforms it introduced – because according to the movement the Lebanese sectarian system remained in its essence unaltered – it accepted and abided by the security part of the agreement, precisely because it made distinctions between “militia” and “resistance” categories. However, as **Alagha** contends, this arrangement outraged the leaders of the Christian militias since, after all, Hizballah was allowed to keep its arms and military structure. Also, this move angered secular and leftist militias since it virtually granted Hizballah a total monopoly in resisting the Israeli forces. (Alagha, 2006, p. 41)

The transformation of Hizballah continued despite certain dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the Ta'if Agreement. In 1991, Hizballah officially started its *infatih* policy of dialogue, trying to open up to other groups, especially the Christians, to embed Hizballah more firmly in the Lebanese society and to allow it to portray itself as a movement cutting across the confessional lines. In 1991, **Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi**, Hizballah's second Secretary General,<sup>22</sup> elaborated his four-point political program that marked the beginning of the *infatih* policy, and was addressed to all the Lebanese, Muslims as well as Christians. This

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<sup>22</sup> Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi has been elected to his Secretary General position during the Hizballah's second conclave in May, 1991. He has been killed, together with his wife and his son, by an Israeli helicopter on February 16, 1992. He has been succeeded by Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah.

program called for (1) the continuation and reinvigoration of the Resistance against the Israeli occupation; (2) ending all the repercussions of internal discords that were prevalent at that time in various Lebanese areas, and constructively dealing with their consequences through serious public debate that permits open discussion of political and social issues, not only with allies, but also with former enemies; (3) initiating a “Lebanonization” (*Labnana*) process or *infithah* “opening-up”, aimed specially towards the Christians, through the launching of a unprecedented and far-reaching public and political relations campaign directed at fostering ties, in spite of the ideological differences, with all the social and political powers; and (4) allocation of greater importance and devotion to a constructive effort towards alleviating socio-economic and communal issues that touch upon all walks of life, especially the strata inhabiting the deprived areas. In fact, he presented a program designed to mobilize Hizballah’s institutions to improve their services to the oppressed grassroots and cater to their needs without hampering the continuation of the Resistance. (Alagha, 2006)

Hizballah’s main objectives were to foster a dialogue and cooperation with all segments of the Lebanese society, to cement the national unity on the issue of resisting the occupation (but not exclusively on this issue), and to present a proper political program that would guide its political activity. With this move, Hizballah also tried to project itself pluralistic and inclusive in orientation. Consequently, and as a result of growing responsiveness to the Lebanese reality, it acknowledged that the confessional and ethnic composition of the Lebanon is complicated, but quite stable, and has to be respected, since every change of the status quo might potentially lead to a violent conflict. Hizballah also recognized that not even the whole Shi’a community, especially its more secular parts, was completely attuned to its call for an Islamic state, and worked to moderate its positions and overall image to further enlarge its base of supporters. Later Hizballah officially renounced its aim to establish an Islamic Republic (Islamization in the narrow sense); however, it did not renounce its conviction that it is desirable to introduce the elements of Islamic law and governance in the society by peaceful means and while respecting democratic procedures, and to support the Islamic institutions, education and traditions (Islamization in the broader sense).

In 1992 Hizballah decided to participate in the parliamentary elections<sup>23</sup> – a move that initially threatened to split up the movement. Hard-liners led by Shaykh **Subhi al-Tufayli**, the movement's first Secretary General, strongly opposed this move as un-Islamic and contrary to the movement's identity. This opposition resulted in independently staged attacks against Israelis by **al-Tufayli** and his supporters, in an effort to undermine the position of Shaykh **Hassan Nasrallah**, then-Secretary General of Hizballah (**Nasrallah** retains his position until present days).<sup>24</sup> Since the movement remained deadlocked and strongly polarized on the issue, in accordance with the *wilayat al-faqih* doctrine, they asked the Iranian Supreme leader, **Khamene'i**<sup>25</sup>, to determine the legitimacy of such move. **Khamene'i** eventually upheld **Nasrallah's** position in favor of participation, and on July, 3, the movement publicly announced its participation and issued a comprehensive political program.<sup>26</sup> It eventually won Hizballah twelve seats in the Parliament – all of the seats on its election list.<sup>27</sup>

On the domestic level, Hizballah's *infatih* policy has been successful, as it was proved by the aftermath of the Israeli Operation Grapes of Wrath. In April 1996, Israel launched its "Grapes of Wrath" operation aimed at curtailing Hizballah's resistance activities. Israel's operation started in southern Lebanon, killing more than 150 civilians (including 102 civilians killed in the UN headquarters in Qana, a move that earned a worldwide condemnation for Israel, including the April 25 UN General Assembly condemnation) and displacing

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<sup>23</sup> The 1992 parliamentary elections were first after twenty years of the civil war, during which the elections have not been held. The post-Ta'if Lebanese electoral system has been based on a system of absolute majority of votes received by a candidate who belongs to a certain sect and represents a certain electoral district. The list system reigns where each voter has to choose candidates across the confessional divide according to a rigid sectarian quota system that allocates a certain number of seats to each sect depending on the size of the population in the election district and its confessional make up.

<sup>24</sup> As a result of his activity, al-Tufayli has been downgraded to a position of an ordinary member of the movement, and in 1998 he has been officially expelled from Hizballah by a political decision.

<sup>25</sup> Khamene'i replaced Khomeini in the post of the Supreme Leader after his death in 1989.

<sup>26</sup> The program was articulated around several key pillars: (1) Lebanon's liberation from the Zionist occupation and from the oppressors' influence, and loyalty to the Resistance; (2) the abolishment of political sectarianism; (3) amendment of the electoral law so that it will be more representative of the populace; (4) guaranteeing political and media freedoms; (5) enactment of a modern naturalization law based on meritocracy; (6) securing the comprehensive return of all the displaced; and (7) administrative, social, and educational reforms.

<sup>27</sup> Eight of them were reserved for Hizballah members, and four for its affiliates; two for Sunnis, and two for Christians (one Greek Catholic and one Christian Maronite).

approximately half a million others. Israel also launched heavy bombing of the Lebanese infrastructure, deliberately hitting two electricity transformers in the Christian suburb of Beirut, trying to stir up the public to oppose Hizballah and the government's toleration of its military activities. However, the operation proved to be a heavy Israeli miscalculation, since it provoked outrage in Lebanon and rallied the public in an unprecedented move of national solidarity and unity that swept the country behind Hizballah. In the summer 1996 parliamentary elections this resulted in nine seats gain for Hizballah, of which seven were accorded to party members, one to a Sunni Muslim and one to a Christian Maronite non-party member affiliates.

On the international level, the result of Hizballah's transformation has been mixed. As an integral part of its *infitah* policy, Hizballah has tried to cultivate its ties with the West as well, with the only exception of the state of Israel. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, first after the departure of the Syrian forces from Lebanon, and following the turmoil that ensued after the assassination of the Prime Minister **Rafiq Hariri** in 2005, Hizballah has gained an important victory, gaining two more seats compared to its 1992 and 2000 gains, making it up to fourteen seats in the parliament, organized in the "Loyalty to the Resistance" bloc. As **Alagha** stresses, Hizballah interpreted its performance in the parliamentary elections as national-political referendum, which constitutes a 'slap in the face' of the international pressure to disarm it led by US and France, and presented a great disappointment to Israel. (Alagha, 2006, p. 42) Also, in an unprecedented move, Hizballah's affiliate sympathizer **Trad Hamadé** has been accorded the service Ministry of Labor and Agriculture. Although not an official party member, **Hamadé** took part in the Lebanese cabinet as an official Hizballah representative for the first time since Hizballah gained seats in the Lebanese parliament.

However, the process of Hizballah's opening to other religious communities and participation in the Lebanese political system did not impede the Bush Administration to continue to depict Hizballah as the most prominent and powerful terrorist group in Lebanon (Country Reports on Terrorism, 2007, p. 187) that endangers the Middle East Peace Process and poses a threat to the United States and its allies, namely Israel. The Country Reports on Terrorism 2007 states that Hizballah, supported by Iran and Syria, continued to undermine the elected Government of Lebanon and remained a serious security threat (Country Reports on Terrorism, 2007, p. 9), while "the Lebanese government

continued to recognize Hizballah, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, as a legitimate 'resistance group' and political party."<sup>28</sup> (Country Reports on Terrorism, 2007, p. 187)

While acknowledging to a certain degree the positive steps taken by Hizballah in its *infithah* process, the international community led by the United States tried to pressurize Hizballah to abandon its armed resistance against Israel and to become more Western-like type of a regular political party. In conformity with this pressure, on September 2, 2004, the UN Security Council issued Resolution 1559 criticizing the Syrian interventions in Lebanese affairs and both Syria and Lebanon for proposed constitutional amendment that would allow the then-President of Lebanon **Lahud** to stay in office for another three-year term.<sup>29</sup> The resolution called for respect for the sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon, and the end of foreign interference in Lebanon (referring to approximately 13,000 Syrian troops stationed in Lebanon). More importantly for Hizballah, it called for disbanding and disarming of all the Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias – a direct reference to the movement which remained the only Lebanese political actor still having its military wing and bearing arms.

As a response to the 1559 UN Resolution a demonstration took place in Lebanon, once again proving the success which Hizballah achieved with its *infithah* policy on the domestic level. Approximately 250,000 Lebanese people gathered to protest against the 1559, including not only Hizballah-affiliated clergymen, but also secular leftist and rightist political representatives, and the representatives of the civil society organizations. The demonstration has not been Hizballah-sponsored or Hizballah-led; the only two features that pointed out to Hizballah were the chanting of "death to Israel" and "death to America", and the Hizballahi veiled women who took part in the demonstration. There were no special Hizballahi flags, banners, or slogans; there were rather calls for "Unity in Lebanon so that we can defend our country" and "We do not want democracy American style." (Alagha, 2006)

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<sup>28</sup> Country Report on Terrorism 2009, issued in April 2009 and summing up the developments in 2008, contain the very same rhetorics and evaluation of Hizballah as the previous one.

<sup>29</sup> Despite the international pressure and the UN Security Council Resolution, the Lebanese parliament amended the constitution on September 3, 2004, thus allowing Lahud to extend his office until November, 2007.

However, despite the various manifestations of anti-Americanism and the anti-Western stance in general, xenophobia or antipathy to the West is according to **Alagha** not rooted in Hizballah's political ideology, and the movement has ultimately pressed for direct contact with the West, including the United States.<sup>30</sup> As **Alagha** contends, Hizballah's attitude to the West could be viewed from the stance of Westoxification since Hizballah's anti-imperialism is directed mainly against the political and partially also cultural hegemony of the "Great Satan" (U.S.) and the "Small Satan" (Israel). As such, Hizballah's political ideology conveys that its animosity is towards the U.S. Administration, not the U.S. people, while in Israel's case Hizballah's animosity is both towards the Israeli Administration and the Israeli citizens (Alagha, 2006, p. 195)

Indeed, perhaps the only unchanged feature of Hizballah's interaction with the West is its stance towards Israel. Hizballah still maintains that it will never recognize the Israel's right to existence and will continue its struggle against the "Zionist entity". Shaykh **Na'im Qasim**, Hizballah's Deputy Secretary General since 1992, affirmed that Hizballah's animosity towards the Israel stems from an immutable, doctrinal perspective: "Since many positions have changed, we need to be flexible and change ours too... But the resistance against Israel has been the core of our belief and that has never changed" since "the struggle against Israel remains the central rationale of Hizballah's existence". (Alagha, 2006, p. 53)

Therefore, while Hizballah decided to apply his *infatih* policy also to the international relations and to open up to the West, this move has not been directed towards all Western countries with the same intensity. Hizballah opened up for a dialogue particularly with the international organizations and the European countries, most notably France and Great Britain. As for the United States, Hizballah maintains its dual approach: it considers the Government of the United States to be its enemy, representative of a "Great Satan", but repeatedly affirms its animosity is not directed toward the U.S. population. But as the recent official or unofficial contacts with the U.S.

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<sup>30</sup> For example, in his capacity as a member of the Lebanese cabinet representing Hizballah Hamadé met, with Hizballah's blessings, senior members of the US Administration, including Elizabeth Dibble, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs. A lot of unofficial meetings also took place between the two parties in Beirut, Amsterdam, Rabat, Geneva, and Oman. Graham Fuller, a former intelligence officer at the CIA, has conducted dialogue sessions with Hizballah officials, most notably in March 2005 with Nawwaf al-Musawi.

representatives suggest, Hizballah is slowly trying to open up to the contacts with the U.S. administration as well. However, the stance toward Israel remains unchanged, and the animosity is applied to both the Israeli ruling elites as well as to the whole population.

## **Serving the Umma**

As we have mentioned before, socio-economic activism has alongside the resistance activities played a crucial role in the rise of Hizballah to a position it enjoys nowadays. The social activism has been one of the key pillars of the movement since its inception as an Israeli occupation resistance movement. The leaders of Hizballah rightfully realized that their ability to fight the Israelis depended on a positive relationship and support of the population that would grant them the shield of legitimacy, help them to replenish their ranks, and rally the public behind the common cause, with Hizballah as the spearhead and the unifying factor. Yet, unlike any of the other Islamic movements in the Middle East, the Party of God uses its good works as a means of underlining and enhancing its legitimacy as a bona fide Lebanese political party rather than as a means of challenging Lebanon's pluralist system. (Harik, 2006, p. 81)

The hardship of the Shi'a community and its under-representation in the political life of the country was the starting point of the "speaking for the abandoned" approach that Hizballah started to cultivate. Adding to the deprivation of the Shi'a community, the protracted civil war further deteriorated its living conditions, thus creating ideal conditions for social and political expansion of Hizballah, and prerequisites for gaining the grassroots support among the Shi'a community. But it was not exclusively the Shi'a community which has been severely befallen by the ongoing conflict. The years of fierce fighting during the civil war created the administrative and social services gaps previously to a greater or lesser degree provided by the Lebanese state, as well as areas of political power vacuum, which were run and administered by various militias operating on Lebanese territory during the civil war. They have often created a sort of mini-administrations in the areas under their control where they provided essential necessities for the population, such as electricity, infrastructure repairs, health services, and so forth. Hizballah arose in this atmosphere when these groups tried to take an advantage of the social and economical deprivation of the population and build the support by supplanting the state's role on the social field; however, Hizballah differed substantially from

those militias in two aspects. First, its social services were at the beginning destined to support the needs of the movement's fighters, fighting the Israelis in the South, and their families, and only with time these services expanded to cover the needs of the populations living in the areas under the Hizballah's control. Second, it is important to note that unlike any other militia groups, Hizballah had much more capabilities to fund and run its social nets for population. Various Christian, Druze, or Shi'ite militias (for example Amal) which were establishing and running their own social nets, were exploiting the resources of the Lebanese state and had virtually no other important source of external support. On the other hand, Hizballah has been heavily subsidized and supported by the Iranian Islamic Republic and various Iranian charitable institutions, which funneled "free money" to Hizballah to built and upkeep its social nets.

Hizballah's "free money" which did not originate from the Lebanese state helped the group to create the image of a movement not trying to dismantle the already poorly functioning and disintegrating Lebanese state (charges voiced against its secular rival Amal, as well as other militias and political parties). It capitalized also on the fact that the majority of the Shi'a population heavily felt and despised the corrupted practices of the ruling elite composed of the Christian – Maronites and the Sunnis. Hizballah successfully created an image of a non-corrupted, disciplined and efficient entity providing the social services to all needy segments of the society (initially primarily the Shi'a community), and quickly outpaced its rivals in this arena.

The impact of Hizballah's social services have been also more tangible in the areas with the majority of the Shi'a population – in the Biqa' Valley and in the South – which were systematically neglected over years, and the infrastructure, health care, educational institutions were either non-existent or disintegrating. Deterioration of the existing infrastructure in the course of civil war, the population growth in these areas, and constant Israeli raids further worsened the situation, making Hizballah a very welcomed guest in these areas.

Although Hizballah started to provide the social services soon after it was created (even well before its official founding), it was especially under Shaykh **Nasrallah** when it skillfully expanded its social services sector in several steps in order to extend its political and social powerbase, especially through increased lobbying in parliament on behalf of the Shi'a community and by

Iranian infusion of humanitarian aid to the movement. Hizballah's role as a provider to the often poor and illiterate Shi'a population in the midst of the civil war who continue[d] to be neglected by Lebanese authorities has been an essential ingredient to its social and political popularity and entrench[e]d as well as extend[ed] its position as a social protest movement. (Trendle, 1993, p. 12-13)

The progressive salience of the socio-economic issues in the Hizballah's political program can be well traced by looking at its political programs since 1992 until present days. In the 1992 parliamentary elections program, Hizballah's social and economic programs were only complementary to the main aim of protecting and reinvigorating the Islamic Resistance, which was the cornerstone of all its activity. In its political program Hizballah only outlined certain policy measures and presented general, not detailed opinions dealing with "the need to fix and reform the infrastructure of the country in the administrative, educational, social, and developmental domains." (Hizballah Parliamentary Elections Program, 1992) In the successive parliamentary elections in 1996, Hizballah again listed only basic ideas regarding the social and economic development, but presented no clear policy lines or measures it would adopt to improve the situation.

The situation has changed in 2000 parliamentary elections, and this change was contingent on the Israeli withdrawal into the "Security Zone". The withdrawal stirred the movement towards reevaluation of its main goals and objectives, as well as the strategies to achieve them. The major part of Hizballah's 2000 parliamentary elections program has been articulated around the social and economic issues, which replaced the Resistance as the core preoccupation of the movement.

The 2000 program called on the Lebanese government to elaborate and put into practice the "developmental-service oriented socio-economic program", and to "work on the reconstruction and development of human resources, the economic cycle." (Hizballah Parliamentary Elections Program, 2000) Hizballah emphasized that a comprehensive plan of reform in socio-economic areas is needed to improve the poor living standards of the majority of the population. Unlike the 1992 and 1996 election programs, the 2000 program has not only outlined movement's core political ideas, but presented more detailed and coherent program for the development in social, economic, political, cultural, educational, health care, and environmental issues. Hizballah stressed the

necessity to enact political reforms, including: the abolishment of political sectarianism; strengthening the role of the women and promoting their participation in public life; promoting the political participation; accomplishing administrative and political reform aiming at decentralization; and fighting the corruption and nepotism. In the socio-economic area it called for stamping out the inefficiency and waste; austerity in expenditures; reducing the public debt and decreasing the budget deficit; homogeneous fiscal, monetary, and economic policies, which aim at developing economic growth, increasing employment, and encouraging investment; and protect local production while trying to increase its ability to compete on foreign markets. It called on the Lebanese state to try to improve not only material, but also human resources; to improve the educational system and make it available to all strata of the society; to encourage the specialized scientific studies and to improve the educational system in general. The program had also its environmental issues section, which dealt with the problems of water quality; consumer protection measures; disposal of chemical waste; garbage; protection of the forestry; and fighting pollution.

Hizballah's 2005 parliamentary elections program, although being much less detailed in its total compared to the previous 2000 elections program, consistently with the previous program stressed the need for establishing a comprehensive socio-economic program aimed at stamping out poverty by boosting productive sectors such as agriculture, industry, and trade that are conducive to rendering basic services to the Lebanese citizens. (Hizballah Parliamentary Elections Program, 2005)

Hizballah leaders stress that Hizballah is providing its social and humanitarian services to all segments of the society, and does not confine its activities exclusively to Shi'a or Muslim communities. They purport that Hizballah's NGOs offer their services to the populace at large belonging to all denominations and political parties without aspiring for any remuneration or pressure to elect its representatives. (Alagha, 2006) Hizballah's political program considers it a religious duty to serve the populace, safeguard their rights, uphold their interest, and to adopt measures that would improve their social and economic standing. It aims at social justice that would manifest itself in the equal opportunities of material and human development to all citizens, regardless their communal affiliation. This "humanitarian duty" Hizballah feels invoked to carry out is based and legitimized by a Qu'ranic verse "But seek,

thanks to what Allah gave you, the Hereafter, and do not forget your portion of the here below [the present world]. Be charitable, as Allah has been charitable to you, and do not seek corruption in the land; for Allah does not like the seekers of corruption.” (Qu’ran, 28:77) Therefore, the social activism is firmly embedded in the Hizballah’s identity, and is complementary to its resistance identity.

## **Terrorism versus Resistance Controversy**

The 2008 U.S. Country Reports on Terrorism states that Hizballah remains the most technically capable terrorist group in the world. It has strong influence on Lebanon’s Shi’a community, which comprises about one-third of Lebanon’s population. The Lebanese government and the majority of the Arab world, still recognize Hizballah as a legitimate “resistance group” and political party. (Country Reports on Terrorism, 2008, p. 300) However, applying the terrorist label to Hizballah is contrary to what the majority of Muslims and Muslim governments believe it to be – a legitimate resistance movement. With an internationally accepted definition of terrorism still lacking, it is no surprise that such substantial divergence occurs.

During its first meeting after the 9/11 in Malaysia, the Organization of the Islamic Conference<sup>31</sup> called for the signing of a convention to ‘distinguish between terrorism and the legitimate struggle for the right to self-determination of people living under occupation of foreign domination’. (AFP, 17 October 2003)

Here the terrorism – resistance controversy enters the scene. While in Western societies terrorism is unanimously condemned as an illegitimate tactics regardless of the goal pursued, in the Muslim societies the notion of “legitimate terrorism” is fairly rooted.<sup>32</sup> And there is no doubt that Hizballah’s struggle seems legitimate enough for great portions of Lebanese society, Lebanese government, other Arab governments and millions of Muslims all over the world.

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<sup>31</sup> Organization of Islamic Conference is the association of 57 Islamic countries representing approximately 1.3 billion Muslims. The Conference was held on October 11 – 18, 2003, in Putrajaya, Malaysia.

<sup>32</sup> In this connection, Shaykh Yusuf al-Qarada’wi said that “If jihad for the liberation of occupied nations is considered ‘terrorism’, then God raise me as a terrorist, and martyr me as a terrorist.” From the point of international law, Shafiq Masri, a Lebanese authority on the subject contends that the use of violence in the national liberation struggle is sanctioned by the international law in two cases: self-determination, and resistance to occupation.

Hizballah's successful building of the image of resistance movement is due to three factors: its successful resistance to Israeli forces; its authority it exercises among the population through the dense social networks; and its ability to differentiate its position to suit its local, regional, and international interests, respectively.

Hizballah's performance on the local basis is strictly limited to counter the Israeli forces originally occupying the portions of southern Lebanon, later stationed in the "Security Zone", and after their forced departure<sup>33</sup> remaining in the small strategic area of Shiba' farms.<sup>34</sup> As **Byman** emphasizes, in Hezbollah's struggle to expel Israel from Lebanon in 1990s, much of its activity vis-à-vis Israel was best characterized as guerilla warfare rather than terrorism. The vast majority of Hezbollah's actions were focused on Israeli military personnel on Lebanese soil and intended to drive Israel out of the country. (Byman, 2003)

On the local level, Hizballah prefers to further build its credentials as a provider of social services and a legitimate political force. It does not engage in attacks against civilians, but targets Israeli military forces and capabilities, and continues to stick to the guerilla tactics, and not the acts of terrorism. It is important to note, however, how Hizballah and its leaders perceive the population of Israel. Shaykh **Nasrallah** affirms that *"in Israel there are no civilians: they are all conquerors, occupiers, rapists of the land; they are all taking part in the crime and the massacre ... they are all Zionists and must be killed. Killing them is a religious obligation, and the persons who do it are*

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<sup>33</sup> It was the Hizballah's resistance and the high number of casualties it was able to inflict upon Israelis that eventually forced them to withdraw to the ten kilometers wide Security Zone along the borders. Continuing Hizballah's resistance led them to withdraw completely in May 2000, and even Israeli based sources seem to acknowledge the fact that Hizballah was the main force to provoke their departure. As Matthew A. Levitt puts it, "Following the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from south Lebanon in May 2000 (for which it rightly claimed credit), Hezbollah was obliged to scale back its guerilla warfare against Israeli forces."

<sup>34</sup> Shiba' Farms region is a 25 kilometers long and 8 kilometers wide water-rich territory which has not been evacuated by the Israelis. It is situated in the border area between Lebanon, Israel and Syria. Hizballah claims that Israel has to evacuate all Arab lands, including the Shiba' Farms region, and after the departure of Israeli forces from the Security Zone concentrates on waging the resistance activities in this area.

*regarded as martyrs.*<sup>35</sup> (Nasrallah, 2001)

Despite this affirmation Hizballah generally avoids to target the civilian population of Israel, recognizing the counter-productivity of such behavior that would raise a tide of world-wide condemnation, and might provoke a direct Israeli retaliation; consequently alienating also the supporting population of Lebanon, which would suffer the consequences of such a strike.

In the regional context the situation is quite different. The soft and understanding gestures exercised on the local level give way to ferocious, radical, and concrete support for the Palestinian Intifada. Hizballah clearly advocates the resort to terrorism by armed Palestinian groups (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002) and provides them with material, logistical, and organizational help. Hizballah reportedly provides training, bomb-building training, material, and also ideological support for Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other anti-Israeli groups. Although Hizballah does not currently employ suicide attacks as a part of its struggle, it justifies the suicide attacks carried out by the Palestinians on the Occupied Territories.<sup>36</sup>

Internationally, Hizballah tries to project itself as moderate and legitimate resistance movement, representing various segments of the Lebanese society. As previously mentioned, Hizballah abandoned its involvement in acts of international terrorism against Israeli and U.S. targets. It still maintains a network of its supporters and affiliates around the globe, but they are rather providing the group with information and carrying out the important task of fund-raising; not engaging actively in acts of international terrorism. In the process of its transformation and evolution, Hizballah has clearly elevated its local goals above the pan-Islamic ones; in fact, it became a representative of nationalistic resistance against the “oppressive regional hegemon”– Israel. (Byman, 2003)

The success of this process is illustrated on the reaction of the Lebanese government to the American demands to freeze Hizballah's assets after their declaration of the war on terror. President **Emile Lahud** declared that “Hizballah is a local Lebanese organization that has no foreign branches or ties with any

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<sup>35</sup> Nasrallah's speech in the commemoration of “The Jerusalem (Quds) Day”, Beirut, 14 December 2001. Nasrallah also concedes: “I know that this talk has its heavy price from the perspective of the overall shar'i, moral, and jihadi responsibilities.”

<sup>36</sup> It would be however mistaken to believe that Hizballah provides any kind of “leadership” to Hamas or other Palestinian groups. Shaykh Nasrallah believes that “The Palestinians do not need anyone to fight on their behalf. They are capable of fighting on their own using their rifles, bombs, and the bodies of their martyrs in order to rapture the Zionist disgrace and humiliation and defeat the Zionist entity.”

terrorist organization operating outside Lebanon.” (Alagha, 2007, p.554) He also added that Hizballah and the Resistance are a “continuation” of the Lebanese state, and since the request to freeze Hizballah’s assets was not internationally binding, refused to do so.<sup>37</sup> It is interesting to observe that there seemed to be unanimous consensus between all the segments of the Lebanese society about the resistance character of Hizballah, including all political and confessional factions. Thus, the Lebanese mosaic conveys not only a consensus on this issue, but it turns out also to be a fundamental “pillar” of national unity and solidarity, as such a “shared public sphere”.(Alagha, 2007, p.555)

## Final Words

In the course of the last two decades, the Lebanese Shi’ite resistance movement Hizballah has undergone an impressive way of transformation from radical terrorist group aiming at the creation of Islamic Iran-like state in Lebanon, to a moderate and pragmatic political party with the resistance wing, operating within the Lebanese political system. This process has not been easy for Hizballah, an in the period preceding its participation in the parliamentary election has openly threatened to split the movement. However, Hizballah has been capable to adjust its identity and to adapt to the Lebanese reality, become the mainstream political party and one of the most important actor on the Lebanese political scene.

During its existence the movement has been gradually developing through three main stages: stage one, lasting since its inception in 1978 thought its official establishment in 1982, until approximately 1984/85; stage two in the period of 1984/85 until 1991; and stage three, from 1991 onwards. The progress can be seen foremost in five areas that were essential to determination of Hizballah’s identity: (1) relations to Iran and **Khomeini’s** doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*; (2) perception of the Lebanese political system; (3) Islamic state; (4) oppressors and oppressed; and (5) Resistance.

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<sup>37</sup> After the attacks of 9/11, the UN Security Council issued UN Resolution 1373 calling upon all members to file within 90 days written report on their progress and activities undertaken to curb the terrorist activities on their territory. The United States, in turn, issued four terrorism lists; two were binding, as they were issued through the United Nations, other two were Presidential decrees, not internationally binding. The latter included various Hizballah’s members, and also asked the Lebanese government to freeze Hizballah’s assets.

The first stage of Hizballah's evolution has been characterized by the prominence of its religious ideology based upon the ideals of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Hizballah has openly subscribed to the Ayatollah **Khomeini's** spiritual leading in the form of *wilayat al-faqih* doctrine, and tried to replicate the Islamic Revolution in Lebanon. The religion has been a constitutive element of Hizballah's ideology, and has been regarded as immutable and taking precedence over all other considerations. Hizballah viewed the establishment of the Islamic state in Lebanon as the only just option to be followed, and argued that the Islamic order should be imposed by force if necessary. Consequently, it refused whatsoever interaction with the Lebanese unjust and un-Islamic sectarian political system. Therefore, Hizballah opted for the voluntary isolation from the Lebanese political scene, and the preference for military, as well as terrorist activity. The resistance against Israel was the reason why the movement has been created, and was the main pillar around which its activities have been articulated. In this stage Hizballah has been heavily influenced by Iran and by Syria, and has often functioned as their proxy power, carrying out terrorist attacks on their behalf. Its rhetoric toward the "Great Satan" – the United States – and the "Small Satan" – the State of Israel – has been violent, radical, and followed by similarly violent actions. However, not only these two states has been regarded as oppressors by Hizballah; its view of the oppressors and the oppressed has been based on the division between Western countries (most prominently the United States, Israel and France) and their representatives in Lebanon – the ruling elite of the Christian Maronites –, and the oppressed – all third world countries. As for the terrorist attacks, Hizballah has been carrying them out mainly during the first stage of its existence, reflecting thus Iranian ideological influence, as well as its own religious and ideological beliefs.

Stage two, marked by the publication of Hizballah's Open Letter witnessed a gradual shift from purely religious ideology to a broader political program articulated around the essential elements of Hizballah's religious beliefs. During this period Hizballah has continued its armed struggle against Israel, including suicide terrorist attacks, but these were now aimed almost exclusively at Israeli targets, which were never regarded by Hizballah as civilian ones. However, even if the resistance struggle against Israel remained one of the key pillars of the movement, it paid still more attention to the establishment of the social welfare services system for the deprived segments of the society, constituting

itself as a representative not only for the deprived and marginalized Shi'a community, but still to a greater degree as a representative of all "abandoned" and needy people of Lebanon, regardless of their communal affiliation. As a result of growing responsiveness to the Lebanese political and social reality, the movement has slightly distanced itself from its main sponsor Iran – a move that could be seen in its position toward the *wilayat al-faqih* doctrine. While during the first stage Ayatollah **Khomeini** has been the ultimate authority providing the overall religious and political guidance for the movement which has been accepted without further considerations, in the period after 1984/85 Hizballah struggled to create and eventually created its own maneuvering space to act independently on certain issues, even if it still maintained close ties to Iranian leader as its ultimate authority. As for the attempts to replicate the Iranian successful revolution in Lebanon, Hizballah conceded that the establishment of the Islamic rule is desirable, but should not be accomplished forcefully. It claimed that the Islamic state should be created and based upon the will of the Lebanese population, and expressed the belief that the people of Lebanon would democratically choose the Islamic rule had they been given the opportunity to do so. However, it refused to engage as a political actor in the Lebanese political arena to foster its goal by constitutionally accepted terms, and still opted for disassociation from the Lebanese state. Its view of the oppressors and the oppressed has not changed as well.

The third stage is characteristic by the decision to actively engage with the previously rejected (on the religious and ideological grounds) Lebanese political system and the articulation of a political program, which has gradually become more detailed and pragmatic. In its relations to Iran and its *faqih* – Ayatollah **Khamene'i** - a substantial shift occurred when Hizballah argued that it does not consider the regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran to be the juriconsult of all the Muslims, and, in consequence, not all Islamic movements have to abide by the orders and directives of the *faqih* of the regime. (Nasrallah, 2002) Consequently, Hizballah's leaders have gained not only more independence from Iran, but also genuine legitimacy on political and doctrinal issues. 1991 witnessed a groundbreaking moment of opening up to other confessional groups in Lebanon, foremost to Christians, which resulted in the *infitah* – opening up policy cutting across the confessional lines and changing the Hizballah's character from exclusive to more inclusive one. In 1992, after consultations with **Khamene'i**, Hizballah decided to participate in parliamentary elections – a

move which marked the gradual and lasting engagement of the movement with the Lebanese political system. The national resistance has been gradually losing its importance to be replaced by the social and political activities of the movement. Hizballah's previously purely religious identity has become intertwined with its socio-political identity, thus creating an identity resembling a religious-based political party rather than radical religious movement. At the moment, the military resistance activity is being confined to a small area of Shiba' Farms, but Hizballah retains its military capabilities and is able and ready to continue the armed struggle against Israel, as the 2006 Israel-Hizballah War proved. However, the movement realized the counter-productivity of such developments, since it alienates its grassroots support. Therefore, the movement concentrates on its social and political role within Lebanon, while he keeps reminding Israel of its existence and operational capabilities by buttressing the radical Palestinian groups in their struggle against their common foe. It is because despite its evolution into a mainstream political party, Hizballah continues to regard the world as divided between the oppressors and the oppressed, even if not with the same intensity as in the stages one and two. While it continues to regard Israel as an anathema and calls for its annihilation, it has softened its stance towards the United States and seeks to have direct contacts with the U.S. representatives. The most tangible progress of opening up can be seen in its stance towards the European countries, foremost France and Great Britain, as well as towards the international NGOs.

However, we shall not forget that the movement has not abandoned its violent activities altogether. Although it is not actively engaging in the overt acts of terrorism or suicide terrorism, it provides material, operational, ideological, and financial support to radical Palestinian terrorist groups, most prominently Hamas and it also engages in criminal activity ranging from counterfeiting money to drug trafficking. But it cannot be denied that in the course of years Hizballah has evolved into a strong and widely accepted Lebanese political party *and* resistance movement, capable of dialogue and cooperation with all segments of the Lebanese society. In sum, Hizballah succeeded in crossing the line between radicalism and pragmatism, but this came at the expense of partially compromising its main ideological objectives.

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