

HEZBOLLAH'S TRANSFORMATION: 34 YEARS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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Introduction

The present study examines Lebanon's Hezbollah (Party of God) movement through the analytical lenses of constructivism. Since its official establishment (1982) Hezbollah has undergone a series of metamorphoses. The central question of the analysis is that "*How could Hezbollah transform from an armed resistance movement to a complex and legitimate political force?*" In order to be able to provide a comprehensive assessment, which includes endogenous (local Lebanese), as well as exogenous (regional developments) factors, the study will examine the movement through the process of identity construction.

Identity in International Relations

International Relations theory often view states as having a singular identity. In this context states are self-interested utility maximizers in an anarchical system, where the primary interest of any actor is survival. However, the lack of closer attention to domestic political developments and interest groups – particularly in the classical/neoclassical realist literature – can result in incomprehensive analyses in which certain crucial identity formation elements are ignored. Indeed, different theoretical perspectives (realism, liberalism, constructivism) of International Relations place different degrees of importance on an actor's identity. This study argues that an actor's identity is integral, moreover crucial in understanding local, regional or global politics. Identity is relevant because it helps to shape and drive actors' interests as well as their interpretation and response to certain events.

Identity in this analysis is conceived in Wendt's terms as '*a property of intentional actors that generates motivational and behavioral dispositions (and which is) rooted in an actor's (subjective) self-understanding*' (Wendt 1999: 224). This "self-understanding" in other words is the subjective "self-narrative" or "biographical narrative"¹ of individuals, communities, and states. Biographical narrative is rooted in a particular group's history and their interpretation of their own history. Evidentially, this interpretation is also in constant flux. In case of state identity, political leaders have the necessary tools and opportunity to interpret and re-interpret history. The same statement is valid for groups and communities, such as Hezbollah, where the top decision-makers have sufficient amount of political power to influence power structures through various discourse related mechanisms. In order to successfully grasp the relevance of identity one has to define certain objective characteristics of this concept. Bill McSweeney argues (1999:73) that identity is not a mere fact of society, but a "*process of negotiation among people and interest groups*". Following this logic, the study of identity is also a continuous process and thereby the present assessment of

¹ For more on this topic, see: Brent J. Steele (2008): *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, Routledge

Hezbollah is rather a snapshot under contemporary circumstances. In other words, the today's identity may transform tomorrow. For instance, the choices by Hezbollah's leaders to moderate their objectives and to adapt a less aggressive rhetoric to achieve domestic political goals is a vivid illustration of the temporal characteristic of identity formation. Hezbollah is a flexible and pragmatic organization, because its political calculus can overwrite pure ideological considerations. Hezbollah leaders are respecting the status quo Lebanese confessional system by pursuing non-violent negotiations – despite having a strong military force –with ruling parties in exchange for recognition as a legitimate political party. By removing the goal to establish an Islamic Republic in Lebanon from its agenda. As such, the movement demonstrated its respect for Lebanon's religious diversity, and at the same time it also started to pursue long-term political goals.

From this example it became clear that identity presumes *multiplicity*. First, each of Hezbollah's different identities (Islamic resistance movement, terrorist group, legitimate political party) are related to a different set of practices and different interests; they might also be in conflict with each other. Secondly, identity exists in a *relationship*. That is to say, identity is a socio-political category which is closely related to the so-called "othering" phenomenon. Hezbollah is an appropriate case study for the analysis of identity-formation, as its very foundation rests on differences, or even enmity with various actors, particularly with the United States and Israel. In fact, Hezbollah defines itself in opposition to Israel and the United States. This implicitly means that Hezbollah advocates different cultural values, policy and practices than these states. This particular anti-U.S. and anti-Israel self-narrative then serves as a firm base to recruit like-minded minorities across the region. In short, during the emergence of Hezbollah, the bond that tied together its supporters and leaders was this distinct self-narrative, which became socially recognized and essential to its being.

Hezbollah today is a highly skilled local Lebanese resistance group, an international terrorist organization, a powerful political movement, and an extensive social service provider. All of these identities are intertwined and interconnected at the national level. These various identities are in constant flux and the organization displays a high degree of flexibility with which it is able to adapt to changing domestic as well as regional circumstances. Therefore, Hezbollah can be described as a *hybrid organization* that includes and successfully merges several identities.

Sources of identity: Resistance

A historical narrative of the emergence of Hezbollah can shed light on the various elements throughout decades of organizational development and transformation. The evolutionary character of the group means that it is capable of transformation and it acquired the sufficient amount of flexibility that is indeed a crucial factor for political survival.

Hezbollah emerged as a Shi'a military movement during Lebanon's Civil War between 1975 and 1990. Israel occupied the overwhelmingly Shiite populated southern part of Lebanon with the aim of destroying the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) which had its headquarters in Beirut since 1971, and to establish a pro-Israeli government in Lebanon. Hezbollah's original identity and its *raison d'être* was based on the notion of *resistance* to the Israeli occupation of Lebanese territories. It is important however to highlight that this resistance appeared simultaneously on two levels. Beside the resistance against various

external powers who were deemed as a serious threat to national sovereignty, Hezbollah protested against the weak and often corrupt domestic political apparatus of Lebanon as well.

In response to the Israeli occupation, the historically marginalized Shiite community in Lebanon split along fundamental lines. Leaders, who were supportive of a harsh military response distanced themselves from the *Amal* movement and subsequently established the *Al Amal al Islamiya* (or Islamic Amal) organization. (Casey et.al 2011:7). This internal split in the Shiite community signaled the beginning of the *resistance-identity* (*I*) formation phase of Hezbollah. According to Augustus Richard Norton (2007) and Joseph Alagha (2011), Amal and Hezbollah are the result of years of disenfranchisement within the Lebanese political spectrum. As Hezbollah expanded, it came into direct competition and eventually conflict with Amal. Moreover, Amal was more focused on the Palestinian militias than the Israeli occupation and probably more importantly it also chose to cooperate with the Maronite and Sunni factions from Northern Lebanon, while Hezbollah preferred to work independently from the existing political system.

Furthermore, whereas Amal received the majority of its funding from the Assad Regime in Syria, Hezbollah was financed by the Iranian IRGC and clashed with the Syrian backed Christian and Sunni groups from northern Lebanon. The direct material and the ideological support from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard enabled the movement to extend its influence across the country from its original stronghold in Bekaa Valley. By successfully conducting counter-attacks on the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and U.S. military and diplomatic installations, the group was able to portray itself as the leader of resistance to foreign invasion. This resistance identity was further consolidated after the 2006 conflict between Hezbollah and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), which according to Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah ended with a "divine and strategic victory" for Hezbollah.²

Hezbollah released its first manifesto in 1985, which can be considered as the primary source of Hezbollah's the self-narrative. The following aims were articulated in the Open Letter: Hezbollah's purpose is to destroy Israel, to expel Western influences from Lebanon and the wider Middle East, and to combat their enemies within Lebanon, particularly the Phalanges Party. It asserted that an Islamic state was the only legitimate option for the Lebanese government, and emphasized that it considered the international system and the 1985 Lebanese government subject to imperial influences and hostile to Islam. This "Open Letter" was the official strategic document of Hezbollah until 2009, when Nasrallah published a new manifesto.

The new document, which was finalized at Hezbollah's 7th Party Conference is a vivid illustration of 28 years of pragmatic development. Hezbollah in 2009, acting as a full fledged political party, urged the implementation of decentralization in order to promote development in Lebanon. According to Nasrallah, the Lebanese state must guarantee public liberties, ensure national unity and protect its sovereignty and independence with a strong and capable army.³ In sum, the resistance-identity will likely to remain integral part of Hezbollah's overall strategy, but currently it's effective participation in Lebanon's political life seems to be prioritized over military resistance.

² CNN: Hezbollah leader: *Militants won't surrender arms*, 22 September 2006

³ BBC news: *Lebanese Shia Group Hezbollah Announces New Manifesto*, 30 November 2009

Proxy identity: Hezbollah, as Iran's strategic arm

Another identity, probably the most widely recognized one on the international level is Hezbollah being *Iran's extended strategic arm* (2). Generally speaking, Hezbollah's complex and hierarchical organizational system is often reduced to a single proxy theory, which claims that the organization is just merely the local embodiment of Iran's and Syria's foreign policy. However, this reductionist approach is misleading as for today the movement operates with a high level of independence from its original supporters. In spite of being perceived as having a political-strategic partnership with Syria and a strategic-ideological alliance with Iran, Hezbollah is not a mere tool of policy in the hands of these countries.

The role of Iran in general, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution in particular played a decisive role in the foundation and the subsequent evolution of Hezbollah. Iran's strategic goal at the end of 1970's was to export its ideology to Arab nations and especially to their Shia minority populations. In fact, the Islamic revolution not only provided the necessary ideological and religious background, but it also contributed materially to the establishment of the Hezbollah. Since Hezbollah's inception, Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) have played a decisive role in training, supplying, and funding the Islamic movement. The IRGC has trained thousands of Hezbollah militants and continues to provide it with supplies as evidenced by the 2009 Israeli seizure of a navy ship carrying 400-500 tons of weapons destined for Hezbollah from Iran.⁴ While analysts agree that Iran is a key source of funding for the organization, estimates of its annual financial support to Hezbollah vary wildly, from \$60,000 per year to \$200 million per year.⁵

From an ideological point of view, Hezbollah supported and embraced Iran's revolutionary agenda, clerical rule and it articulated similar critics toward the Lebanon political regime as Iranians did during their revolution. As it is stated in the 1985 manifesto of Hezbollah "*We obey the orders of one leader, wise and just ... Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini. God save him!*" The widely held assumption that Iran supports Hezbollah is certainly verifiable, but it is important to understand what the nature of this support today is, and the extent to which Iran is able to influence the actions of this Shia Lebanese group. In short, Hezbollah has now taken on a life of its own. It is relevant to note that the funding of Hezbollah is not exclusively dependent on Iran anymore, but the bulk of support is coming from private religious foundations. It is therefore crucial to emphasize that even though Hezbollah and Iran still have a close working relationship and shared ideological commitments, Hezbollah for today has achieved its independence by becoming as much a social welfare and political organization, as an Iranian supported militant resistance organization.

International perspective: Hezbollah as a terrorist organization

The statement, "*Hezbollah made war and war made Hezbollah*" (Byman, Saab 2014: 4) vividly captures the importance of „othering“ in the identity construction process of the movement. Israel's existence and its military expansion served the *casus belli* of Hezbollah. No wonder then that Israel remained a core element of Hezbollah's identity until today

⁴ New York Times: *Israel Says It Seized Ship in Red Sea With Load of Iranian Rockets Headed to Gaza*, March 5 2014

⁵ Stanford University (2016): *Mapping Militant Organizations*, Hezbollah

evidenced by the most recent statements of Hassan Nasrallah, who described Israel as a „cancerous entity” of „ultimate evil” (Camera: 2006).

Hezbollah’s military identity however has undergone considerable changes during its history. Hezbollah’s military units and reserves are part of the Lebanese Resistance Brigades and according to the estimates may have up to 8,000-10,000 trained members, including 2,000-4,000 with expertise in guerrilla warfare and advanced weaponry. (Piotrowski: 2015) During the Israeli occupation, the movement mainly used asymmetric warfare and guerilla tactics, such as suicide bombings, hit-and-run attacks. An important psychological element was that Hezbollah forces were the first Arab forces that successfully defeated Israel. After the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, Hezbollah refused to disarm and between 2000 and 2008 it had considerably enhanced its military capabilities. In this period, Iran and Syria upgraded Hezbollah’s military capabilities by providing the organization with rockets. More recently, as participating in the war in Syria the group has received significant amount of high tech military equipment and weaponry from Russia and Iran, and gained valuable tactical and strategic experience.

The Western world in general, and Israel in particular designates Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. The group has been involved in numerous anti-US terrorist attacks, including the suicide truck bombings of the US Embassy in Beirut in April 1983, the US Marine barracks in Beirut in October 1983, and the US Embassy annex in Beirut in September 1984, as well as the hijacking of TWA 847 in 1985 and the Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia in 1996. These attacks claimed hundreds of lives. Hezbollah conducted its last attack in April, 2016, when Hezbollah and Syrian Government forces clashed with Al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and the Free Syrian Army outside of Aleppo. (Stanford University: Mapping Militant Organizations). Israel has banned Hezbollah as a terrorist organization since June 1989, whereas the United States State Department designated Hezbollah a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in October 1997. The United Kingdom, Canada, Holland, Australia and New Zealand similarly have labeled Hezbollah a terrorist group. In 2013, the European Union (EU) decided to classify Hezbollah's “military wing” as a terrorist organization. Most recently, in March 2016, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) also formally categorized Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Notably, Russia does not classify Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

Characterizing Hezbollah as a *terrorist organization* (3) thus, is more a matter of perspective and the result of complex strategic calculations. The inherent contradiction (in Lebanon Hezbollah is a legitimate political force, while in the Western world it is labeled as a terrorist organization) stems from the fact that Hezbollah argues that it needs to maintain its military force to deter any future Israeli attacks. Having a political party with larger military capabilities than the national army is a completely unknown phenomenon in the contemporary western world. In addition, western states fear Hezbollah in part because the group has built up a global network of supporters, with enough operatives to pose a worldwide threat. Hezbollah view its terrorist group identity as a mere propaganda tool in the hands of its adversaries. At the same time it is important to note that the movement considers its military force as the legitimate means of resistance.

Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc: Hezbollah, as a legitimate political party

It must be acknowledged that Hezbollah's decision to participate in Lebanon's political system has not undermined its resistance activities, but it resulted in shifting priorities. Without question, the art of political maneuvering is a decisive factor in Hezbollah's ongoing success. Hezbollah is active in Lebanese politics as a political party called Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc, but it entered to the political sphere earlier by being a *social service provider* (4) as early as 1983. The ultimate goal of the provision of public goods is to strengthen the social contract between Hezbollah and its followers. The building of schools, the supply of healthcare, water distribution, electricity and garbage removal were extremely effective and popular moves, as they were executed in those parts of Lebanon, which were historically neglected by the central government (Wiegand 2009: 673).

The Lebanese population is highly diverse in religious terms. Various Christian sects, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Alawites and Druze minorities are living in the same territory. In order to establish a delicate political balance between these groups, Lebanese leaders have attempted to manage sectarian differences through a power-sharing-based democratic system, the so-called "confessional" democracy (Balnchard 2014:1) established in 1943 by the National Pact. The agreement mandated that the President to be Maronite, the Prime Minister a Sunni and the Speaker of the House to be a Shiite. As such, political power in Lebanon was divided on the basis of religious lines. As a consequence, Maronite Christians at the time gained the majority of the seats in the parliament and they had the strongest influence within the government.

Hezbollah moved to the political sphere after the 1989 Taif Agreement, which ended the Lebanese Civil War. This agreement resulted in the institutionalization of Hezbollah's program in the Lebanese political system. Although all the participating militias were required to disarm after the civil war, Hezbollah managed to retain its military equipment and thus it was able to continue and further enhance its military wing, while it simultaneously entered to the political sphere. The underlying reasons for this opportunity were Hezbollah's close relationship with Syria and that Israel at that time was still occupying roughly 10 % of Lebanon's territory, so maintaining an armed resistance was politically acceptable and gained high level of local support. In 1992, Hezbollah candidates participated in parliamentary elections for the first time and captured 12 seats from the 128 seats in the Parliament. (Qassem: 2005)

This striking political success is still undefeated until today. The UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon found Hezbollah guilty of former prime minister's, Rafiq Hariri's assassination in 2005. This assassination reshaped Lebanese political dynamics and led to the emergence of two rival coalitions. These are the March 8 and the March 14 coalition. The March 8 alliance includes the Maronite Christian Free Patriotic Movement, the Shiite Muslim Amal Movement, Hezbollah and other parties. The March 14 coalition includes over a dozen Independents, as well as members of the Christian Lebanese Forces and Phalange Party. The coalition is led by Hariri's Sunni Future Movement.

Another milestone in Hezbollah's *political identity* (5) formation was completed under the 2008 Doha Agreement, in which Hezbollah was effectively granted veto power in Lebanon's cabinet. This significant shift of power in favor of the militant Shiite group signed the end of an 18 month-long political deadlock. The agreement was brokered by Arab mediators in Doha, Qatar with the participation of major regional powers such as Syria, Iran and Saudi

Arabia. The Doha agreement provides 16 cabinet seats for the governing majority, 11 for the opposition and 3 to be nominated by the new president.

In the 2009 new Hezbollah Manifesto, the group demonstrated that it is capable of realizing the changing circumstances and for today it became more than a simple armed resistance group. (Krista 2009: 677) It is relevant to note that Hezbollah is more effective than the Lebanese army, and the government is completely aware of this fact, therefore using violence as a coercion strategy – as it has happened in 2006 – is always an option for Hezbollah until there is no agreement on disarmament. As a consequence, a political compromise born, where the Lebanese government has given Hezbollah the ability to have a stronger voice in the government.

Though Hezbollah continues to maintain its military identity, the political identity evolved into the decisive and more significant feature of the movement, which is evidenced by its sophisticated institutional structure that includes an information office, social service divisions and alliances with other political parties. Whether the constantly changing local and regional circumstances would result in the prevalence of the military identity again is still to be determined.

Outlook: The role of media and communication in identity formation

Since its inception Hezbollah has developed a centralized communication and media apparatus. This is certainly a distinguishing and effective tool in the hands of the movement to build up its international image, to spread its message and to recruit new followers. Having a quick look at the media apparatus also helps to point out the various identities, as these are the official mediums through which self-narratives are the most clearly articulated. Utilizing various media channels enabled the group to further strengthen its previously mentioned identities and to display its resistance on various forums. According to Olfa Lamloum, Hezbollah's media structure is "the most organized and wide-ranging of any Islamist grouping in the Arab world". (Lamloum 2009: 355). Hezbollah's media machine has a domestic and a foreign dimension as well. Domestically, the main goal is to further strengthen and mobilize its supporters, while on the international level, its central aim is to reach the Lebanese diaspora and potential foreign sympathizers.

As early as 1984, the organization launched its first weekly newspaper, *al-Ahed* (The promise), which was renamed in 2001 to *al-Intiqad* (The Critique) and it is still the official paper of Hezbollah. The first radio station was established in 1988 under the name of *al-Nour*. This media outlet was the first effective communication channel through which Hezbollah could reach a mass audience. In 1991, Hezbollah further expanded its propaganda apparatus and launched the *al-Manar* (The Beacon) television station, which is broadcasted internationally via satellite transmission (Khatib 2012). For today, the station became one of the most popular channels in the Middle East and it covers a wide-array of topics, such as game-shows, talk-shows, and music-videos.

The reach of the Hezbollah media apparatus has grown with its utilization of various internet-based platform, thus the group further cultivated Hezbollah's image as being the vanguard of resistance against Israeli and Western domination. The robust media presence gives Hezbollah a unique opportunity to pursue its strategic regional goals and to politicize certain questions. Hezbollah is constantly working on shaping the domestic and international

perceptions about its conflict with Israel. Without question, the myriad of media outlets and the cyberspace is of great importance for Hezbollah as an effective soft-power tool in the battle for hearts and minds.

Conclusion

Hezbollah has become a major political player in the Middle Eastern political arena. There is a shared belief among most of the Lebanese that Hezbollah is neither a political party in the traditional sense, nor a terrorist organization, but rather a local resistance movement. Once reduced to pursuing merely military goals and fighting against Israel, Hezbollah for today has considerably expanded its *modus operandi* to become a regional power⁶ and a legitimate political party in Lebanon. This study examined the process of identity-construction and the relevance of collective identity in the success of the Lebanese Shiite militant organization. Being founded as an Islamic jihadi movement of political and social protest by local Lebanese Shiite clerics and with the ideological backing of Iran, for today the movement became a full-fledged social movement, with its own distinct institutions, regional outlook and eventually it was able to transform to a legitimate political party supported by a vast media empire.

As it became clear through the analysis, Hezbollah has to navigate a complicated position in Lebanon. The study argued that constructivism is an appropriate analytical tool to examine Hezbollah, because it recognizes the importance of *identity, interests, culture, intra- and interstate relationships* and as such this approach opens up the “black-box” of states. More than a decade after Hezbollah decided to become a political party, it appears that the group will continue to transform and eventually become more embedded in the Lebanese political system and maintain a significant local and regional support regardless of its international image as a terrorist organization.

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⁶ Hezbollah is engaged in violent conflicts beyond its traditional areas of interest and operation, most recently it is involved in the Syrian civil-war as a pro-Assad force.

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