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Lebanon's Hizbullah

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ATEF ALSHAER, MAR 24 2015

Since its emergence in Lebanon in 1982, Hizbullah has operated within a sectarian and contradictory political structure that accommodates competing political narratives and interests. Meanwhile, it has maintained close ties to external countries and ideologies that have often been oppositional to the interests of the Lebanese State itself or some other socio-political groups within Lebanon. The recent clashes between Hizbullah and Israel, which saw Hizbullah avenging the Israeli assassination of five of its active personnel, shows again Hizbullah's multiple fronts of engagement. These extend from its direct military intervention on the side of the Syrian regime to its engagement against Israeli targets in the south. Hizbullah is acting on its independent calculations as well as in cahoots with its alliances with the Iranian and the Syrian regimes. This is while the Lebanese State seems like an irrelevant bystander, not short of prey to Hizbullah's military adventures. Yet, this political scene should not obscure the fact that can be referred to as Hizbullah's major crisis of identity, which is not related to its resistance against Israel, but to its involvement in Syria.

From the outset, Hizbullah's identity was premised on its opposition to Israel as an occupying power controlling Lebanese, Palestinian and Arab territories, with all these sides and what they stand for being part of the narrative that defines Hizbullah's *raison d'être* (Khatib, Matar & Alshaer, 2014). Hizbullah was applauded throughout the Arab world for its resistance against Israel, particularly in 2000 when it forced Israel from its 18 year old occupation to south Lebanon, and in 2006 when it resisted Israel's onslaught on Lebanon and liberated Lebanese prisoners thereof. Hizbullah was also lauded by international sympathisers who see in Israel an unfathomable aggressor bent on abrogating Palestinian and Arab rights unabatedly. But for the Lebanese people, whose political system post-Taif agreement in 1989 that settled the Lebanese civil war is premised on sectarian power-sharing, Hizbullah represents the community from within which it sprang, the Shiite of Lebanon. This can safely be said for the majority of the Lebanese, who subscribe to sectarian affiliations, whose dangers have been tempered by the awful memories of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1989) (Haugbolle, 2010). For nearly thirty years, Hizbullah succeeded in projecting itself as a party that represents Lebanon, its interests and that stands for Arab rights and aspirations, particularly in being on the side of Arab movements and attitudes concerned with the liberation of Palestine (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002). The liberationist resistance it championed in the 1990s against the violent Israeli occupation to South Lebanon and in 2006 undermined the voices that suggested Hizbullah was an appendage to Iran first and foremost, and that it is of its Shiite community and for them above all.

Against this backdrop, two events came to cast doubt on Hizbullah's intentions as a Lebanese political party with its well-equipped military wing. When the influential former Prime Minister of Lebanon Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in 2005 in downtown Beirut which he helped to reconstruct with Saudi and Gulf finances, Hizbullah was accused of complicity in his assassination. Syria, its ally on the ground then, was forced to withdraw its forces under popular Lebanese pressure. Hizbullah's external political and cultural affiliations which have not been taken into account enough earlier proved important in shaping Hizbullah's politics and actions. The assassination of Hariri with what he represented for Lebanon and the Sunni community in particular fuelled the already suspicious, even if auspicious, civil sphere of Lebanon. Yet, this widely condemned accident, including by Hizbullah itself, did not dent Hizbullah's popularity in the Arab world. Hizbullah was still perceived as a necessity of some kind to deter Israel that has so far wielded all the power for itself in the region, always seemingly capable of reducing its many enemies to ineffectiveness. Hizbullah's resistance and steadfastness gained it admiration, even from those who had harboured doubts about its sectarian tendencies and their ramifications for a region rife with political faultiness. Israel is the

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enemy of Arab interests after all, because it continues to occupy Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian land; and it continues to subject the Palestinians in particular, as evident in Gaza, to utter misery. So Hizbullah's power being so far directed towards Israel subdued the Lebanese voices that call for Hizbullah's integration within the Lebanese State, including its disarmament to comply with Lebanon's sovereignty and monopoly over the use of violence as a nation-state rather than a militia-ridden-state.

The above perception of Hizbullah as a resistance party to Israel suffered with Hizbullah's siding with the Syrian regime against the revolutionaries of Syria, especially the civil and pluralistic elements within the revolutionaries, not the genocidal fanatic ISIL. Hizbullah deepened its participation in the raging civil war in Syria, while its charismatic leader Hassan Nasrallah justified its alliance with the Syrian regime in language that eschews unconvincing contradictions. If he was with the revolutionary wave that swept the Arab world, such as in Tunisia and Egypt, how could he be against it in Syria, which has been even more repressive? This question that has not been adequately addressed by Hizbullah demonstrated that Hizbullah's alliance with the Syrian regime bears ideological as well as real-politic marks. Syria and Iran are bloodlines to Hizbullah's power in Lebanon. Now that Israel has struck Hizbullah, and the latter responded, this can only fuel an already inflamed region engulfed in wars and conflicts.

Yet, there are two battlefronts that might strangely serve as a saving grace for Hizbullah within the contradictory political scene where Hizbullah operates. Firstly, since its inception, Hizbullah has been involved in resisting the Israeli occupation. The Arabs as well as Iran support this resistance, even if mutely or disdainfully on the part of some sometimes as such resistance does not often tally with their interests. Israel continues to pose a threat to the Arab world in general. Now that the intransigent Benjamin Netanyahu has been elected for the fourth time as a prime minister for an Israel mired in expansionism, violence and exclusion of the Palestinians, peace prospects cannot look dimmer. In attacking targets in the Arab world when and wherever it wants, Israel does not cease to exhibit arrogance and disregard to the Arab world, particularly in Palestine. Secondly, though several constituencies and communities, such as the Sunni community, might feel threatened by Hizbullah for its militant tendencies within the Lebanese state itself and its intervention on the side of the Syrian regime, the majority of people seem to understand that Hizbullah's resistance to ISIL is to be accommodated. For many in the Arab world, while different in their tactics, Israel and ISIL seem to be cut from the same ideological cloth in their exclusionary and narrow political endgames. They both aim to establish and preserve states with only their homogenous kind in them rather than plural states that respect people and uphold values of human rights, participatory citizenship and democracy. Not forgetting its sectarian behaviours and agenda, Hizbullah still remains a rational party with which it is possible to dialogue and achieve meaningful political results by all the parties concerned, including Israel. Despite all its blunders and crimes in siding with the Syrian regime, Hizbullah did not reach the level of exclusive indiscriminate criminality attributed to ISIL, as many people understand. In this sense, it will continue to act within a contradictory political structure in Lebanon defined more by preserving balances of power, exploiting regional opportunities and internal considerations for political continuity within a nation-state surrounded and permeated with dangers (Alagha 2006). Meanwhile, and on the long run, the ethnic motivations underlying Hizbullah's politics in acting on the perceived interests of the Shiite community in Lebanon, even when they collide with those of the Lebanese State and its sovereignty, are likely to further erode Hizbullah's legitimacy, thus ending its claim to being inclusive in its politics and respectful of Lebanon's sovereignty and citizenry diversity.

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