

Hezbollah's Dilemma: between Resistance and Sectarianism¹

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Abstract

The social mobilization (Hirak in Arabic) started in Lebanon on 17.10.2019 has been an unprecedented event in the modern history of Lebanon, for it has lasted for more than half a year, but most importantly, for being a cross-sectarian and cross-regional mobilization in state based primarily on sectarian structure and on a sectarian-based sharing of power. The present mobilization has put the foundations of the Lebanese regime at stake. This article attempts to trace Hezbollah's reaction by following the trail of the speeches held by the organization's secretary-general about the mobilization in the first two months, as Hezbollah is the main force largely dominating the Lebanese regime, and how the present mobilization has rendered Hezbollah the main advocate for a regime which Hezbollah (at its outset) sought to uproot. The article demonstrates that Hezbollah is somewhat 'embarrassed' at the grass-root level, for its muqawama (Resistance) project would seem deficient unless it provides all the Lebanese with a clear-cut answer regarding the socio-economic situation, something that the party has not done yet.

Introduction

During the past twenty years, especially since the liberation of South Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah has managed to obtain great sympathy from both large various groups inside Lebanon and the Arab world in general due to its embodiment of the culture of resistance against colonialism and against the Israeli occupation. This sympathy increased particularly after the July 2006 war that Israel launched against Lebanon. During that war, Hezbollah withstood for 33 days which was considered by the party and its supporters as a 'Divine Victory'.

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Various academic studies have shown how Hezbollah transformed from the stage of a small military and fundamentalist organization that was concentrated on resistance/Jihad against Israel, to the stage of Lebanonization and openness at the end of the nineties and the beginning of the 21st century (Worrall, Mabon and Clubb 2016; Abboud and Muller 2012; Alagha 2011; Norton 2007; Alagha 2006).

The image of Hezbollah, the embodiment of the project of resistance in Lebanon and the Arab world, has received several strikes. Yet, none of them has been completely deadly. A major one was a result of the party's attitude towards the 'Arab Spring'. Although Hezbollah has welcomed this spring in Tunisia and Egypt, it has turned against it when protests reached Syria, as the party fell into a dilemma: either to support the downtrodden popular masses or to stand by the Syrian regime, which was an important partner and supporter of Hezbollah's resistance against Israel.

The organization has justified its intervention in Syria by deeming itself the protector of Lebanon and all groups that sustain the country's unique character. Hassan Nasrallah has put it this way in the speech delivered in October 18, 2015: 'The Muqawama protects all the nations of this region- the Christians, the Sunnis, the Shiites and the minorities; on the right of partnership and freedom of opinion' (Nasrallah 2015).²

In October 2019, demonstrations erupted in Lebanon. Quickly they turned into demonstrations against the Lebanese system as a whole and against the sectarian regime that has prevailed in Lebanon since its inception about a century ago. Moreover, they were against the sectarian quota and corruption rampant in it since the Ta'if Accord that ended the Lebanese Civil War in 1989 and which actually established the second republic.

Hezbollah was one of the central opponents of the Lebanese regime as well as one of the permanent demanders to terminate the sectarian quota. It has also introduced the method of proportional elections in Lebanon and was in favor of other demands that the protesters are raising nowadays in Lebanon (against corruption, in favor of social justice, among other things). On the other hand, these demands have coincided with a period in which Hezbollah, with its sectarian roots, has succeeded in controlling the joints of the Lebanese system through cross-sectarian alliances.

² Hassan Nasrallah's speech 18.10.2015 <http://www.alalam.ir/news/1750378> (accessed March 15, 2020).

In this article, I argue that the nonsectarian identity of the Lebanese uprising has sharpened the Hezbollah dilemma. In the following sections, I will depict the unfolding dimensions of Hezbollah's dilemma regarding the uprising, how Hezbollah's leaders have dealt with the uprising in the first two and a half months and how this period illustrates the dilemma of Hezbollah. The article will also illustrate the differences in Hezbollah's reaction towards 'Lebanese mobilization/Hirak' versus the 'Arab Spring', and how these differences would affect the credibility of Hezbollah in the eyes of its supporters, especially those who are affiliated with the Leftist circles.

The article points to the seeds of discord among part of Hezbollah's close environment and supporters regarding the party's position towards the Hirak in Lebanon. Moreover, it underlines Hezbollah's difficulty in maintaining the contradiction between its position against western imperialism in the international arena, on the one hand, and its collaboration and protection of the sectarian and capitalist system in the Lebanese arena on the other hand. Consequently, in the article I argue that Hezbollah has lost part of its credibility as a resistance movement due to its decision not to join the rising mobilization against the oppressive Lebanese regime.

The article is based mainly on analyzing the five central speeches of the party's Secretary-General in the first two months of the Lebanese Hirak (speeches he held on the following dates: 19.10.2019, 25.10.2019, 1.11.2019, 11.11.2019 and 13.12.2019). I have chosen these speeches in this particular period, as they were primarily concerned with the Lebanese Hirak in its infancy when the protests took all of the Lebanese political class by surprise. Consequently, the reactions have been more spontaneous and largely reflecting the abstract understanding of the political class (including Hezbollah) of these developments. In addition, at the beginning of 2020, the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani (the commander of the Quds Unit in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard) and the possible outbreak of a regional war and regional tension between Iran and USA overshadowed the issue of the Lebanese Hirak in the speeches of Hezbollah and Nasrallah.

Later, especially since March, the Corona pandemic took the lion's share of the focus of all the countries around the world and local players in Lebanon, including Hezbollah. Thus, the pandemic and the precautionary medical measures have had an impact on the Hirak's intensity and strength (although it was not completely eliminated, and renewed again as a result of the great economic deterioration and the reduction of the first wave of the pandemic.)

In addition to Nasrallah's speeches, I have surveyed the Lebanese and the international press during the first stage of the Lebanese HIRAK, especially al-Akhbar newspaper, which is close to Hezbollah and on the other hand, it positions itself in the leftist camp.

Likewise, in order to compare the dominant narrative in Hezbollah's discourse in general and Nasrallah's in particular about the Arab Spring with the one about the Lebanese HIRAK, I have analyzed four main speeches delivered by Nasrallah in the early stages of the Arab protests/revolutions that took place in what will be known later as the Arab Spring (These are the speeches that Nasrallah gave on the following dates: 7.2.2011, 19.3.2011, 25.5.2011 and 25.5.2013.)

In order to analyze Nasrallah's speeches, I have used the political discourse analysis method (PDA), concerned with understanding the nature and function of political discourse and with critiquing the role discourse plays in producing, maintaining, abusing and resisting power in a contemporary society (Van Dijk 1997).

While analyzing the speeches, I contextualize them by connecting them to the specific historical events which are taking place and which invoked the necessity of holding these speeches in the first place. Simultaneously, I shed light on the particular use of terminology employed by Nasrallah and the transformation of his discourse from a supportive and democratic discourse at the beginning of the Arab Spring and later-on at the beginning of the Lebanese HIRAK, to resistive, anti-colonial and anti-imperialistic signifiers that accentuate the conspiracy paradigm in order to justify Hezbollah's unsupportive actions later on.

The article is divided into three main parts. First, I will provide a fast scanning of the Lebanese sectarian political system and the background upon which Hezbollah has emerged in addition to the main changes in the perceptions of the party. Second, I will survey how Hezbollah has dealt with previous demonstrations and uprisings in Lebanon and in the Arab world since the 'Arab Spring'. The last and main section of the article deals with the way Hezbollah has conceptualized the Lebanese October uprising, what are the reasons for the confusion of the party in dealing with the uprising this time and to what extent did the unsectarian nature of the uprising sharpened Hezbollah's confusion.

The growth of Hezbollah's project in Lebanon —a brief review

Since its establishment as an independent state and separate entity from Greater Syria, Lebanon is considered a special and distinct system from the rest of the Arab regimes in the region. Political scientist Arned Lijphart (1977) considered that Lebanon falls within the group of consensual democratic countries, which depend on a system of balances and participation among elites with different backgrounds that are compatible with power-sharing in a manner that preserves the rights of different elites of the sectarian/national/ethnic groups that constitute the common entity.

The Lebanese 'national pact' and constitution, based on the 1926 mandatory constitution, have provided the main framework for the Lebanese political life throughout the whole period preceding the Civil War. The national pact (1943), a 'gentlemanly agreement' between the Zu'ama' (sectarian leaders in Lebanon) of the two major communities at that time (the Maronites and the Sunnis) was a compromise between the two communities.

Sectarian and socioeconomic disparities alongside regional conditions and changes, led to the outbreak of the blood-soaked civil war, which lasted 15 years (Salloukh et al 2015: 21). The Ta'if Accord, which put an end to the civil war, has duplicated the Lebanese previous sectarian system with cosmetic changes and legitimized Syria's domination over Lebanon (el-Husseini 2013).

As opposed to Amal, which demanded a share of the 'sectarian cake' in Lebanon, at its very beginnings, Hezbollah was raising the banner of an absolute revolt on the sectarian Lebanese regime. It called for its uprooting, towards the establishment of a just state with an Islamic regime, following the example of the Islamic republic of Iran, established following the Iranian revolution in 1979 (Hamzeh 2004). This goal was reflected in the name of the nascent organization '*Hezbollah: al-thawra al-islamiyya fi Lubnan*' (the Party of God: the Islamic Revolution in Lebanon). This revolutionary aspiration was natural in the context of the civil war, which was at its peak when the movement first emerged, and which pushed all the Lebanese movements and organizations to their extreme.

However, this discourse was gradually altered into a more pragmatic one, and the Jihad discourse has developed into one of *Muqawama*

(resistance) (Kanaaneh 2018). With the passage of time, and following the end of the Lebanese Civil War, Khomeini's death and the transition to a more pragmatic stream in Iran, alongside the fall of the Soviet Union and other internal and international events, the Lebanese regime reestablished the sectarian system underwritten by a wide-ranging Syrian intervention in the country's affairs. This led Hezbollah to gradually change its strategy to a more pragmatic approach, at the national level, though with its radical positions towards Lebanon's external enemies maintained (Assad Allhi 2004).

Hezbollah has consciously decided to move from the 'blitzkrieg', in its Gramscian notion, to the 'trench war' or to constructing and implementing a politics of hegemony, through which the party seeks gradually to occupy 'hegemonic' positions in the Lebanese society by disseminating and rooting the resistance narrative and rendering it a meeting point for the largest number of forces and populations constituting the Lebanese society, and by transforming the *muqawama* concept into a meeting point for different partners in Lebanon (Kanaaneh 2020).

The Gramscian approach is significant in understanding Hezbollah's development during the last two decades. By moving the focus from the economic dimension to the ethical and political dimension of the society, Gramsci highlights the need of the social class (or group) to be 'leading' before its rise to power. He even deems it a prerequisite to the rise to power:

A class is dominant in two ways, namely it is 'leading' and 'dominant'. It leads the allied classes, it dominates the opposing classes. Therefore, a class can (and must) 'lead' even before assuming power (Gramsci 1995: 136).

He adds elsewhere that:

There can and there must be a 'political hegemony' even before assuming government power, and in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony one must not count solely on the power and material force that is given by government (Gramsci 1995: 137).

On the Gramscian approach, a project becomes hegemonic when:

One concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations,

particularly in their intellectual and moral connotation (Williams 1960: 587).

Gramsci explains that a certain social group has to start 'practicing' leadership within a historical bloc that promotes a certain hegemonic project. This social class can establish its leadership in a way that enables it to integrate into debate and synthesis with other bodies, not only with other social classes, but also with different groups that exist in the society. Together, they should build and enhance a common 'popular-national' will in the civil society, around which more forces will gather to occupy the hegemonic position of power, not only in the civil society, but also in the political society (Gramsci 1995: 132-3).

Yet, the Gramscian perception of building such a hegemonic project emphasizes the need of the leading group to be open for joint negotiations and articulation with other forces, so that they can create together a broader and new general will. The ability of certain Islamist movements to lead a historical bloc that promotes a certain (counter) hegemonic project, is not obvious. Yet, to achieve this, these movements should either detach themselves from their 'religious essentialism' or undermine it, and somehow to move to the post-Islamism stage of their development (Bayat 2013). Regarding the case of Hezbollah, I would also add the adoption of another floating/empty signifier (Laclau & Mouffe 2001[1985]), around which they can build the desired counter-hegemonic project. This floating/empty signifier is the *muqawama* concept, and it is an empty or floating signifier because it has remained open enough to enable it to build new connections and dialogue with various political and social groups in Lebanon for whom the *muqawama* against the American imperialism and the Israeli occupation is very essential and attractive.

Hezbollah has constructed its hegemonic project on three main pillars. The first pillar has been transforming its fundamentalist³ Islamic thought into a 'resistive' Islamic thought in a way that couples between Shiite Islamic thought and the concept of resistance through the paradigms of *Ashura* and the triumph of blood over the sword (el-Husseini 2008). The second pillar being the national openness towards the different populations comprising

³ I am aware of the many aspects of this term. I am using it here in its general meaning as a modern phenomenon, including the religious response to secularization and 'modernization' of the society.

the Lebanese society, mainly the Christians, and the attempt to build new Lebanese nationalism and resistance, where the Lebanese imagined community embraces all populations under the wing of *muqawama* (al-Agha 2011). The third pillar is the populist economic concept which divides human societies into two main parties: the marginalized and the tyrants, with Hezbollah being the representative party of the marginalized, regardless of their religious affiliation, and for being the representative of the marginalized, Hezbollah would also stand against tyrants and tyranny within the global system in general, and the Lebanese in particular.

Hezbollah and the ‘Arab Spring’

After the assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, and the withdrawal of the Syrian troops and intelligence forces from Lebanon, the Lebanese political system was shaped very much by the polarization among two main rival camps: The 14 March Alliance with ‘the Future movement’ (*Tayyar al-Mustaqbal*) as the leader of this group and the 8 March Alliance headed by Hezbollah. Despite the effort of the two groups to emphasize the political nature of this polarization, the sectarian division was too strong to be ignored especially between the Shiite sect and the Sunnis of Lebanon. (Fakhoury 2016: 23)

The Arab spring, which started at the end of December 2010, arrived to the Lebanese context while the sectarian polarization was highly entrenched. The way each alliance dealt with the Arab Spring was a function of its regional and international alliances. At the very beginning, Hezbollah’s position towards the Arab Spring was welcoming, for it considered it another victory of the resistance project over the ‘American Imperialist puppets and Israel’. (Nasrallah 2011c).⁴ The fall of Zine al-‘Abidine Ben-‘Ali, and most importantly that of Hosni Mubarak, deemed by Hezbollah the worst normalizer with Israel on the one hand, and the party’s worst enemy on the other hand for having restricted the movement of the party’s activists to help Hamas and the Palestinian resistance by arms smuggling, had a direct impact on Hezbollah. (Wählisch and Flesch 2016: 2).

On February 7, 2011, less than a week before the fall of Hosni Mubarak’s regime, Hezbollah held a massive rally in support of the Egyptian

⁴ Nasrallah’s speech 25.05.2011 (accessed June 15, 2020) <https://www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=20819&cid=141>

revolution, in cooperation with other leftist and nationalist parties. In his central speech at this festival, Nasrallah considered the Egyptian revolution a continuation of a clash between the peoples of the region, their resistance and liberation project versus the colonial projects led by the United States and Israel. Nasrallah considered that the martyrs of the Egyptian revolution are the martyrs of the party and of Lebanon, just as the martyrs of the Lebanese resistance in its war against Israel in 2006 are the martyrs of the Egyptian people and the entire Arab nation, as Nasrallah stressed in the same speech (Nasrallah 2011a).⁵

The rally also included speeches by Michel Aoun, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, (later the President of the Lebanese Republic and one of the most important Christian allies of Hezbollah), as well as the Secretary General of the Communist Party at the time, Khaled Haddad, the Secretary General of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (Lebanese Party) and others (al-Akhbar 2011).

Yet, things changed as the winds of the Arab spring approached Syria and the Syrian regime. Less than a month later, and as expected, the Syrian protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad have been received differently by the different alliances in Lebanon. While the leaders of March 14 Alliance in Lebanon believed that the spark of the mobilization against Ba'ath regime in Syria started with the expulsion of the Syrian forces from Lebanon following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, Hezbollah and its allies considered the events in Syria part of a conspiracy against Syria and the Syrian people and regime for their support to the resistance and not for any other reason.

The contradiction between the party's position towards the Arab revolutions at its beginning and its position on the events in Syria was grabbed by the party's enemies, especially in the Gulf States but also among the March 14 alliance, who hastened to attack the party's credibility and to accuse Hezbollah of sectarianism, maintaining that the party's stance with Bashar al-Assad's regime is due to Bashar's sectarian identity. (Ranstrop 2016: 41). They also claimed that the party's support to the demonstrators in Bahrain and in Yemen is also due to the sectarian identity of the leaders of the opposition in these countries. (Al-Agha 2014).

5 Nasrallah's speech 7.2.2011 (accessed June 15, 2020) <https://www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=19822&cid=142>

Despite its position, Hezbollah avoided direct and official intervention in the Syrian crisis for almost two years, until it attempted to take the role of an intermediate between the Syrian regime and some factions of the Syrian opposition to encircle the Syrian crisis before it becomes a civil war, and later a war between regional and international forces on the Syrian lands (Kizilkaya 2017: 222).

It was clear that what governs Hezbollah's position towards the Syrian revolution is the extent to which this revolution affects the ability to protect the party's gains and the resistance it leads in the face of the risks threatening its weapons and its presence following the loss of its Syrian logistic backup, which was a major element in the party's endurance in its last war with Israel (July 2006). The prioritization of the military resistance above all other values which Hezbollah had previously called for is not strange, especially as the party's leaders have always declared that the resistance precedes any other social or political gain, or as articulated by Hassan Nasrallah in his speech following the first parliamentary election Hezbollah participated in: 'If [we] were to choose between the Muqawama and the parliament, we would leave you the parliament' (Al-'Ahd 1992).

Moreover, the relationship between Hezbollah and Syria has further developed following the death of the Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, to be succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad, when Syria not only allowed the delivery of Iranian weapons to the party to confront Israel, but also opened the Syrian army's stores, enabling the party to have access to very developed weapons which it did not have before (Ranstorp 2016: 35).

Despite the apparent contradiction in the party's position towards the revolutions, Nasrallah was clear since the beginning of the Arab revolutions, when he announced the standard by which the party will approach these revolutions. Nasrallah considered that the nature of the regimes and their regional and global alignments are crucial elements for the party's position towards these regimes. (Nasrallah 2011a). Consequently, it was clear that this statement would take a different position later, if the revolutions spread to reach countries and regimes opposed to American hegemony in the region, something that actually happened after the protests reached Syria.

In May 2013, Hezbollah moved to the stage of officially declared intervention, affirming that the party is not defending the Syrian regime against the Syrian people, but rather defending the Syrian regime and people, and most importantly the Lebanese people, against the monster of

penitential forces in Syria, and the danger of its infiltration into Lebanon, constituting an existential threat not only to Hezbollah and the resistance and the Shiite community in Lebanon, but also to Lebanon. To legitimize its intervention in the Syrian crisis among the different populations constituting the Lebanese people, Hezbollah referred to basic components of the Lebanese patriotic ethos; namely the multiculturalism and the religious pluralism. Based on this perception, Hezbollah declared involvement in the Syrian war to protect the multifactional and multicultural Lebanon:

There are two sides in the struggle; the first is the US-West-regional Arab side, relying on the *Takfiri* movement's [expiatory movements – A.K.] performance in combat fields. After all, those *Takfiris* behead people and cut their chests, dig up graves, and ruin the past that has existed for 1400 years! For long, followers of different religions have lived there, and so have mosques, churches, shrines, and tombs. That kind of cultural variety has survived as most of the governments ruling were Sunni. But now, they've begun to ruin the past, present, and future, refusing any political solution and insisting on further combat! [...] On the other side is a state or a regime with a clear stance on the Palestinian cause, resistance movements, and the Zionist scheme. At the same time, that regime is constantly ready for dialogue, political solution, and reforms (Nasrallah 2013).⁶

Hezbollah also referred to the importance of protecting the Shiite holy places, like the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, from the attacks launched by al-Qa'ida and ISIS, to affirm the significance of the party's intervention in the war taking place in Syria. Hassan Nasrallah also asserted that protecting the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, being also a holy shrine for the Shiites, would prevent the *Takfiri* movements from transforming the war into a purely sectarian one by inflaming sectarian spirit between the Sunnis and the Shiites, as these movements had previously targeted holy shrines in Iraq (Ranstorp 2016: 38).

The organization encountered an embarrassing situation due to the paradox between the position of the resistance party and the advocate of the most marginalized people, and the demands of the marginalized Syrians.

⁶ Nasrallah's speech 25.5.2013 (accessed June 15, 2020) <https://www.english.alahednews.com.lb/25839/454>

Yet, the alteration of the Syrian revolution into a cosmic war on the Syrian territories, alongside the recruitment of jihadist and Salafist movements and the Israeli and American support to the anti-Syrian regime mobilization, have turned the Syrian crisis from a dilemma for Hezbollah into an opportunity that should be seized in optimal ways. The resistance narrative has retaken its superior status over any other narrative, and the conflict with the American tyranny and Imperialism has reoccupied the largest part of the general image of the conflict in Syria:

Syria has been the cherisher of the Resistance, so the Resistance can't stand still while that cherisher is being ruined! Acting otherwise would mean we're absolutely dumb because it's only someone dumb who does nothing in time of conspiracy, death, and besiegement! In contrast, a sane, responsible one acts very responsibly. Brothers and sisters, if Syria falls in the hands of the US, 'Israel,' *Takfiris*, and US puppet regimes calling themselves 'states', then the Resistance will be besieged, and 'Israel' will invade Lebanon to impose its conditions and achieve its greedy schemes again. In that case, an 'Israeli' era will mask Lebanon! If Syria falls, then Palestine, the Palestinian resistance, Gaza, the West bank, and the Holy *al-Quds* (Jerusalem) will be lost! If Syria falls into the hands of the US, 'Israel,' and the *Takfiris*, then the peoples of our region will experience one extremely harsh era! (Nasrallah 2013)

What helped Hezbollah gain appreciation, not only on the part of its Shiite supporters from the Lebanese Shiite community but also in the part of the Christian population and the leftist and nationalist movements both in Lebanon and the Arab world, was its successful counteraction against Islamist Salafist and jihadist movements, especially al-Qa'ida and ISIS, and Hezbollah's success in expanding the connotations of the signifier *muqawama* beyond resistance to Israel and the United States, to include resistance to Salafist *takfiri* Islam too. In due course, this has supported Hezbollah's claims regarding its protection of Lebanon and the national ethos in Lebanon and the Levant from the "new external barbarism", represented by these movements.

Many polls have demonstrated increase in the support to Hezbollah's intervention in Syria among Christian respondents. For example, one of the

polls published by the Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar* shows that two thirds of the Christians in Lebanon believe that Hezbollah protects Lebanon from expiatory forces operating in Syria (al-Akhbar 2014). This demonstrates that Hezbollah's discourse about defending the homeland, with all its communities, does not apply only to the Shi'ite community in Lebanon, but also to the Christian.

In general, these Arab revolutions did not affect the party's positions inside Lebanon due to the Lebanese political system uniqueness. The Lebanese state, in light of the diversification of the centers of power, and the multiple players on the one hand, and the developed civil society, relative to the other Middle Eastern states on the other hand, has summoned another type of politics, namely hegemonic politics. It requires all political-social groups in Lebanon to integrate into alliances and continuous negotiations with the other groups. The aim is attaining control, broadening the impact zone and taking over more positions in the long-term 'trench warfare', and not through the 'blitzkriegs' that are more common in other Middle Eastern states, where the civil societies are not well-developed.

Therefore, we see that Hezbollah was keen to take advantage of the Arab revolutions, especially in its beginning, and to reframe these revolutions in order to fit them to the party's theory of resistance and to its main project: the confrontation with American imperialism, Israeli occupation, and the Arab regimes affiliated with the USA.

The background of the Lebanese Hirak and its main characteristics

The Lebanese territories have witnessed tensions and conflicts for so many years since the beginning of the Arab Spring, and the Syrian arena has constituted a very significant arena in which the different forces in Lebanon fought against each other, without leading to a civil war within Lebanon. This enabled the growth of some Salafist movements in Lebanon, and some factions of the 'Future Movement' smuggled weapons and participated directly in the Syrian war alongside the different opposition factions against the Syrian regime and its allies, especially Hezbollah (Gade 2017: 188).

The direct reason for the Lebanese Hirak starting on 17.10.2019 was the Lebanese government's intent to impose taxes on WhatsApp calls, broadly used among the populace and the middle class in Lebanon, for its enables free communication via internet (although the tax was called the WhatsApp

tax, it was intended to other free calls apps like Facebook, *inter- alia*) (al-Akhbar 2019a). This tax was the straw that broke the camel's back, following long-year accumulation of complaints and reproaches against the Lebanese political and economic system, saturated with corruption, favoritism and sectarian-based sharing which impoverished the state's treasury, while the sectarian leaders and their friends accumulated their wealth at the expense of the great majority of the Lebanese people.

The Lebanese mobilization in October 2019 was preceded other smaller protests, namely the one called 'You Stink', which was launched in 2015 against the crisis of accumulated litter in Lebanon, associating it with the inefficiency of the state and its deficient performance, in addition to the health and environmental hazards that threatened the citizens at the time (Saade 2015). However, these protests led by young civil society activists lost momentum due to sectarian division, for the protestors disagreed which leaders should be held responsible for the crisis.

Later, in 2019, a few days before the outbreak of the Lebanese Hirak, more than 100 great fires broke out in different places in Lebanon as a result of the dry weather and the high temperature, burning huge amounts of trees and vast areas of what was left of the forests in Lebanon, which was called the Switzerland of the East and one of the most beautiful regions in the Middle East (BBC News 2019). Having yielded three victims and several dozens injured, these fires have touched a raw nerve in the Lebanese ethos with respect to the nature and beauty of Lebanon, proving again the state's inability to handle this natural disaster, for several players have held the state and its sectarian regime and the endemic corruption responsible for these fires and their outcome, and its inability to handle it, mainly as they had only three firefighting aircrafts, all invalid due to their high maintenance costs.

A few days later, the governmental consultations for the approval of the 2020 budgets yielded the aforementioned WhatsApp tax (in addition to other tax increases, mainly the 2% increase in VAT) pouring fuel on the fire, and leading to unprecedented mass protest all over Lebanon, rising above sectarian divisions in a great scene that brings to mind the mass demonstrations that broke out after the assassination of prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Yet, the demonstrations this time were devoid of the sectarian dimension and the vertical political division between March 14 Alliance and March 8 Alliance, to be an unprecedented event in Lebanon in

terms of magnitude and importance after *al-Ta'if*.

This transcendence of the vertical division between members of different factions is somewhat embodied in the slogan 'All of them means all of them' (are corrupt) which is directed against the political class as a whole, from all sects and denominations, regardless of the doctrine or religion of the politician or the leader. Meanwhile, it can be said that this slogan is mainly directed towards the raw nerve of Hezbollah because it is the latest to reach the ruling class in Lebanon, and because it considers itself as a representative of the resistance and the popular masses, in addition to the general belief that the party's hands are clean in terms of financial corruption. Therefore, the party considers that this slogan came to cause confusion among the masses.

Indeed, various parts of the HIRAK refused to include Nasrallah in the list of 'All of them means all of them', considering him to be different from the other leaders, at least because his own son (Hadi) is a martyr who was killed during the resistance operations against the Israeli occupation and for the liberation of the Lebanese lands. Clashes took place between different groups of the HIRAK and supporters of Hezbollah to stop this slogan and the more specific one 'All of them means all of them, Nasrallah is one of them' (Al-Monitor 2019a).

On the other hand, some protesters from various areas in Lebanon, and not only from the Shiite community, asked Nasrallah 'to be with us' or to 'join us' in the HIRAK and not to defend the corrupt politicians from the other parties and movements (Al-Akhbar 2019c). The HIRAK included protestors from all the Lebanese sects, including the Shiites from the south the *Biq'a'* in the east and from the *Dahyih* of Beirut. Part of Hezbollah's supporters who participated in the HIRAK followed Nasrallah's instructions to withdraw from the HIRAK, others decided to continue protesting despite Nasrallah's position, while the rest admitted that this was the first time, since their involvement in political activism, they find themselves on the opposite side of Nasrallah and Hezbollah (Al-Monitor 2019a).

The uncertainty of Hezbollah's position towards the HIRAK led part of the Hezbollah and Amal movement's supporters in the south in Sidon, Nabatieh, Tire, and Beirut, to attack the peaceful demonstrators, under the pretext of blocking the streets and chanting against Amal movement's Chief, Nabih Berri, who is one of the main actors in the Lebanese political system during and after the civil war. Since 1992, Berri has assumed the position of Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament (which according to the Lebanese

sectarian system is devoted to the Shiite community) and is accused of accumulating a large wealth as a result of corruption. Yet, he is a staunch ally of Hezbollah within the Shiite community, and therefore one of the main factors of stability inside the Shiite sect, especially in south Lebanon, one of the crucial areas for Hezbollah's struggle against Israel (Al-Akhbar 2019b). It is important to note that the sit-in youth in the southern regions are affiliated mainly with the Lebanese Communist Party and other left and secular forces, as well as to non-partisan groups, although they support Hezbollah on the issue of resistance against Israel and the United States (al-Akhbar 2019d).

One of the main features that emerged in the first months of this HIRAK is the orientation and attempt to liberate areas and real estate in the various regions of Lebanon, particularly in Beirut, from the hands of investors and beneficiaries of the political class, who managed to lay hands on these places in different and devious ways. One of the HIRAK's most important goals is the resistance against the corrupt neoliberal system in post-Ta'if Lebanon, with the former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, being one of its most important founders and symbols. On November 5, hundreds of young demonstrators attacked the waterfront at Zaituna Bay, owned by Solidere, a development company founded by Rafiq Hariri to carry out a rebuilding project in Beirut following the civil war. This company has become a symbol of corruption on the one hand, and of neoliberal brutality on the other (Al-Monitor 2019b).

Another central target of the protesting youth is the banks, especially the Central Bank in Lebanon and its governor, Riad Salameh. Leftists and other groups affiliated with Hezbollah's environment have attacked banks, given that these banks are the main representative of the existing Lebanese system, responsible for the deteriorating economic situation that the Lebanese state has reached (BBC News 2020a). In the case of Hezbollah, the Central Bank of Lebanon and its governor, Riad Salameh, who has held the position since 1993, are considered central opponents of the party in particular, as the latter cooperated with the US in imposing sanctions on banks that cooperate with Hezbollah and in narrowing the economic screws on the party (BBC News 2020b).

How has Hezbollah received the Lebanese HIRAK?

In his first speech directed to the protestors a few days after the outbreak of the Lebanese HIRAK, Nasrallah considered it a real national mobilization

caused by the real problems and challenges facing the poor strata in Lebanon. He also affirmed that this mobilization is not incited by foreign embassies or intelligence agencies:

The importance of your recent mass mobilization lies in its being genuine and spontaneous, I would stridently confirm that no one can claim that there is a certain party or organization or a foreign embassy standing behind, because we have the tendency to talk about conspiracy theories. No one is standing behind these demonstrations (Nasrallah's speech 19.10.2019).⁷

It was clear that Nasrallah's speech aimed to express support and alleviate the anger of the masses towards the Lebanese political system as a whole. However, Nasrallah was actually defending a corrupt regime by refusing the demonstrator's calls for the government's resignation, led by Sa'd Hariri, one of Hezbollah's prominent political adversaries, in an attempt to avoid the political vacuum, which would aggravate the crisis. Nasrallah also warned against targeting the president Michel Aoun, Hezbollah's important ally among the Christians in Lebanon. Nasrallah directed his speech to the Christian parties within the political sectarian-based structure in Lebanon so that they would not deem it an opportunity to target the 'Christian' president to inherit him and to strike Hezbollah too.

In response to the embarrassing contradiction between the party's slogans and actual action, Nasrallah explained that Hezbollah's abstinence from organized participation in the demonstrations meets the interests of the mobilization itself, for Hezbollah's participation would lead the mobilization towards a political polarization and intervention of regional forces. Therefore, despite Hezbollah's support of the protestors' needs, it would not take part in it in order not to harm it:

I do not want to delve further into this point, I would just tell you that if Hezbollah had joined you on the day after, the mobilization would have reached elsewhere; it would have simply become a political conflict, a conflict between different axes. Iran send America a letter via Riad Al-

⁷ Nasrallah's speech 19.10.2019 (accessed June 15, 2020) <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12148&cid=148>

Solh [square], doesn't it? (Nasrallah speech 19.10.2019)⁸

This point is a clear indication of the dilemma Hezbollah is encountering, and which will increase between its military and regional dominance and between achieving local and internal goals for which the party was established, at least at the declarative level.

On the other hand, the party tried to highlight the differences between the state's institutions and Hezbollah and the *muqawama* by shedding light on a sensitive issue, being the confidence in the state's institutions:

Despite all sanction, why would people give their money to the muqawama, why would women give their jewelry to the muqawama, why would some people give up their houses for the muqawama, why would families send their children to fight for the muqawama? For a simple reason, they have confidence in the Muqawama. They know that the money that goes to the muqawama does not get stolen or wasted, it is rather spent on defending our land, our honor and our dignity. This is the equation we currently need in this state, there is a serious mistrust issue between the Lebanese people and the state, with all its institutions, for whatever is said is unbelievably. What is important for the citizen is what he sees not what he hears, so let us show him the truth that we can create with strong will and steadfastness (Nasrallah speech 19.10.2019).

In this paragraph, Hezbollah confirms, through the speech of its secretary-general, that the main problem lies in corruption and stealing, and not in the roots of the Lebanese economic and political system which constructs an economy dominated by a group of ruling oligarchy and commercial and banker bourgeoisie under the cover of Lebanon being the 'Switzerland of the East', a point repeated in the speech of Hezbollah regarding the economic issue in Lebanon.

In his next speech, less than a week later, on 25.10.2019, Nasrallah's tone about the mobilization changed. He moved from absolute conviction about the absence of foreign intervention to raising doubts about certain demonstrations, drawing attention to the attempts of some political parties, the partners in power for 30 years, to ride the wave of the mobilization and

8 Nasrallah's speech 19.10.2019 (accessed June 15, 2020) <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12148&cid=148>

take it away from its real and just goals, and to undermine Hezbollah and its armament. Nasrallah added that if the demonstrators' main goal had been to overthrow the sectarian system and the sectarian-based distribution of power, Hezbollah would have been the first to support this mobilization, but he maintained that this is not the case. Therefore, Nasrallah called the *muqawama* supporters to leave the streets due the vague identity of a part of the mobilization leaders.

An interesting point in the speech was the cultural discussion conducted by Nasrallah about the reference to Imam Husayn (the third Imam in the Shiite belief) by some of those who reproached Hezbollah for its non-participation in the Lebanese mobilization. The former maintained that Hezbollah stepped out of al-Husayn's camp (the revolutionary camp) by its abstention from participation in the demonstrations and by urging its supporters to follow its path. Nasrallah argued that the Lebanese mass mobilization had just slogans and goals, but it lacks a clear leadership, like that of al-Husayn, and lacks a clear alternative like the one offered by al-Husayn, hence his opposition to this comparison, which has clearly caused some embarrassment to Hezbollah.

In his following speech held on 1.11.2019, Nasrallah clearly addressed the dilemma, which Hezbollah encountered, as he stated that Hezbollah is:

Honestly walking on the edge, for on the one hand, there are just demands and sincere feelings of the aching people, and there is extravagant corruption in the country and in the regime, on the other hand, the country would end up in a very dangerous situation as a result of the political vacuum, and this would lead to an economic and financial collapse (Nasrallah's speech 01.11.2019).⁹

However, what prevents the party from joining the masses is its fear from the possibility that mobilization changes from a social into a political one, as stated by Nasrallah himself. Nasrallah admits thereby that the advocate of the poor and popular classes cannot join the mass demonstration of the popular classes because its weakness lies in its being a sectarian party related with external axes. This does not necessarily mean that the party is corrupt

9 Nasrallah's speech 01.11.2019 (last visited on 15.03.2020) <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12617&cid=148>

or dirty-handed, it simply reflects self-awareness, as the party is encountering a dilemma that can be handled only through readdressing the mobilization by an anti-colonialist discourse, which Nasrallah did in his following speech in November, about one month after the mobilization was started and the resignation of Sa'd Hariri's government.

In this speech, he tried to place Lebanon within a broader context and within the regional and international contexts, in which Hezbollah exhibits a better performance, and which are less complicated than the internal Lebanese arena. To achieve this, Nasrallah offered some suggestions to revive the Lebanese economy, in a way that does not demand subjection to American pressure. Nasrallah suggested specific solutions: opening the Lebanese market to Chinese and Russian investments, opening the Lebanese market to Iranian investments, providing opportunities for investment in reconstructing Syria, opening thereby the doors for a Syrian-Lebanese cooperation and profiting from the countless opportunities lying in the reconstruction of Syria after the civil war. He also suggested entering the Iraqi market and exporting the Lebanese agricultural and industrial products to the Iraqi market, a step that requires challenging the American administration, because products are exported through land borders, namely the Syrian-Iraqi borders, thus refusing whatever the American dictations are for these borders (Nasrallah's speech 11.11.2019).¹⁰

In this speech, Hezbollah tries to put Lebanon within an 'imagined' regional position which is different from the long-year dependence of the Lebanese political and economic system on the West, via France and the United States, in addition to the Gulf states' investments which developed and supported the Lebanese service economy at the expense of productive economy for so many years. In fact, Nasrallah suggested a primary holistic economic and political vision for an axis that departs from Lebanon towards the reconstructed Damascus, and then towards Baghdad that is releasing itself from the American fist, of course, with a Russian-Chinese-Iranian backup.

This speech is a return to Hezbollah's safe zone, which is the resistance to the western colonialism and to the United States, without addressing the

¹⁰ Nasrallah's speech 11.11.2019 (last visited on 15.03.2020) <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12960&cid=148>

essence of the Lebanese system, be it the sectarian-based political essence or the extremely liberal capitalist essence which strikes the productive agricultural and industrial sectors.

This approach was adopted by Nasrallah in his next speech held at the zenith of the consultations about entrusting the new government to handle the crisis. It was very important for him to open his speech by referring to the American position articulated by the American Secretary of State Pompeo and other officials who try to ride the wave of the Lebanese mass mobilization to launch a strike against Hezbollah, which seems evident to Nasrallah. He confirmed in his speech that the United States does not seek to solve the problem of Lebanon, adding that solving the problem of America and Israel lies in undermining the power of Lebanon, namely the *muqawama* that protects the Lebanese resources, mainly the gas fields on the Lebanese coasts and the borders demarcation between Lebanon and Israel (Nasrallah's speech 13.12.2019).¹¹

Only after referring to the regional situation, Hezbollah addresses the different forces operating within Lebanon, and urges them to work together on the formation of a national unity government that represents the main forces in Lebanon. By the main forces, he means The Free Patriotic Movement, being the most powerful movement among the Christian Lebanese, Amal Movement despite the ongoing controversy about the corruption of some of the movement's officials, and the Future Movement, being the main representative of the Sunni population in Lebanon. Thus, the solution proposed by Hezbollah is the recycling of the sectarian-based distribution of power with the same players in the Lebanese political arena, deemed responsible for the accumulation of reasons behind the Lebanese revolution. This demonstrates again that Hezbollah, which has defined itself as the revolutionary party in Lebanon, is doing its best to procrastinate any change in the present reality, claiming that it seeks to prevent *fitna* (discord) and political vacuum that would threaten the entity of the Lebanese state.

This position by Hezbollah has been repeated and reiterated by Nasrallah in the comprehensive interview with radio *al-Nour*, long after the formation of the government without the Future movement, when Nasrallah stated that 'The tools of change in the Lebanese internal arena must take into account the country's composition and the fears it contains' (al-Ahed

11 Nasrallah's speech 13.12.2019 (last visited on 15.03.2020) <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=14083&cid=148>

news 2020). In other words, Nasrallah admits that there is no way to 'fix' the Lebanese system and he surrenders to the very sectarian regime that the protesters revolted against in the first place.

These economic ideas of Hezbollah did not meet the minimum demands of the youth and movements strongly involved in the social protests. In spite of their different affiliations and orientations, the economic demands of these movements start from a fundamental change in the Lebanese political system to liberate the Lebanese state from sectarian quotas and from leaders of sectarian parties, who directly control the country's economy. In addition, they demand a fundamental transformation in the Lebanese economic structure, in which the state plays a major role, stopping privatization processes that did not keep much of the state's property and calling for progressive taxes on capital owners and other issues.¹²

With the strident refusal of the Future Movement to join a national unity government, the government formation mission was assigned to the economic expert and lecturer at the American University of Beirut, Hassan Diab, who is a Sunni (as determined in the Lebanese constitution), with the support of Hezbollah and its allies. Therefore, the reigns of the three main authorities in these hard times ended up in the hands of Hezbollah and its allies: the republic is headed by the strongest ally, general Michel Aoun; the parliament is headed by the chief of Amal Movement Nabih Berri, and the government is headed by Hassan Diab. Although not directly affiliated with Hezbollah, yet, his government was formed thanks to the parliamentary majority led by Hezbollah. Consequently, Hezbollah has become the main reference for solving the crisis that hit the Lebanese regime. Hezbollah has taken the role of the reformer of the corrupt regime after al-Ta'if, of which it was not a part for a long period, but rather an opponent at the very beginning, and has officially become responsible for reforming the present situation.

Trapped between two Resistances

12 See for instance the 'Citizens in a State' Movement's program, here: https://mmfidawla.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/The-tragedy-is-not-fated_FINAL-1.pdf (accessed June 15, 2020); and the Lebanese Communist Party's program, here: <http://www.lcparty.org/en/statements-en/item/31737-political-and-socio-economic-program-regarding-the-uprising-and-the-transitional-phase> (accessed June 15, 2020).

The Iranian-American researcher Hamid Dabashi radicalizes the resistive nature of Shiite Islam. He challenges Shiite activists in general, and Hezbollah in particular, with a difficult dilemma. He demonstrates that Shiite Islam is a resistive Islam, an Islam of the marginalized versus the tyrants. He argues that 'Shi'ism is a paradox. It dies at the moment of its success. It succeeds at the moment of its failure' (Dabashi 2008: 96). Dabashi maintains that since Husayn is 'Mazloun' (oppressed) and symbolizes all the oppressed people worldwide, he cannot win and establish his state. However, he is capable of and obliged to continue struggling and resisting oppression, and his triumph is actually his murder and 'his loss'. The ability of Shiite Islam to seize power and practice it without losing its essence is nonexistent according to Dabashi. Upon seizing power, the Shi'a, like any other state, is supposed to expropriate the absolute legitimacy of using power (according to Max Weber's definition of the state). Therefore, and by virtue of this definition, the Shi'a will lose its resistive essence; it will project its resistance on others, and will consequently lose its Shi'ism (Dabashi 2008: 71).

Dabashi argues that Shiism and resistance had been interwoven together, until the Islamic revolution in Iran lost its Shiite essence once it seized power and moved from the side of the oppressed people to that of oppressive power. It thus lost its essence and the basis of its legitimacy. Dabashi examines Hezbollah as opposed to Iran, and maintains that the former is also likely to lose its Shiism (resistance) (2008: 154). Yet, he indicates that a pluralist state like Lebanon (unlike Iran, where 90% of the population is Shiite), which has multiple ethnic and political groups, has the potential of constituting an interesting synthesis that would preserve the resistive essence of Hezbollah, and pose a serious challenge to Israel (the Jewish state).

Hezbollah, in its transition from the so-called ideological purism into a stage of 'openness' and Lebanonization, has partially attempted to develop this potential by raising the banner of *muqawama* and by building the *muqawama* project, as a counter-hegemonic project, that renders Hezbollah the leading authority in a historical bloc founded on different players, without seizing absolute power, which would (theoretically) lead to undermining Hezbollah's existence and legitimacy.

Hezbollah has attempted to maintain the built-in tension between its being an embodiment of the pure resistive Shiite project on the one hand, and its being a significant player who strives to achieve a certain form of control in the internal Lebanese arena on the other. This is achieved by hybridizing the *muqawama* signifier with the religious discourse on the one

hand, and with the economic-national discourse on the other, in order to unify between additional social and political forces in the pluralist Lebanese arena.

Although Hezbollah was an actual and effective national resistance against Israel and against US imperialism, the resistance that is no less important and through which its project could develop and mobilize more popular and leftist players in the Lebanese arena, is the resistance to the existing Lebanese system. But the party's position towards this system has changed, which was expressed by the party's general secretary:

Hezbollah has changed, and its priorities have also changed based on circumstances [...] There was a time when we used to see Lebanon as a colonial construct that was part of the Ummah [...] That was in our early days, and the country was going through a Civil War. All parties were calling for a Nation that fit their liking [...] Today, conditions have changed. We believe that this country is our country, and that the flag of the cedar is our flag that we need to protect, too. At this stage, our priority is to protect the state in Lebanon and to build it. (al-Akhbar English 2013).

In one way or another, Hezbollah has stepped back from the stage of building a real counter-hegemony with the possibility of leading the Lebanese system towards a real progressive, democratic and egalitarian regime to the stage of defending the existing system under various pretensions, thus turning into the guardian of the system and preserving it instead of revolting against it or changing it.

The Lebanese Hirak seems to accentuate the negative answer to 'the fundamental question' that the sociologist Asef Bayat has raised regarding the Islamist movements in general, which 'is not whether Islamism challenges imperialist interests, which it does. Rather, the question is to what extent, if any, this struggle entails an emancipation of the subaltern population in Muslim societies' (Bayat 2017: 79).

Hezbollah, in particular, could have formed a model different from the rest of the Islamic movements. Its presence in a unique pluralistic arena comprised of different sects allows it to be an example of openness to other powers and still provides real economic answers to the popular classes in Lebanon.

However, Hezbollah has evolved from a small party to one that represents not only the popular classes but also a broader society, as the former Director of Hezbollah's development think-tank Abd al-Halim Fadlallah said: 'Hezbollah is not a small party anymore, it's a whole society. It is the party of the poor people, yes, but at the same time there are a lot of businessmen in the party, we have a lot of rich people, some from the elite class' (cited in Daher 2016: 91).

Even the economic vision that the party gave as an answer to the protesters and the activists, which calls for economic integration and openness to the East (Russia, Iran and China), falls under the existing economic system in Lebanon. In fact, it enables the emerging Shiite bourgeois class to take hold of new and important joints in the Lebanese economy in place of the former hegemonic Maronite and Sunni bourgeois class. Consequently, this economic plan, which is oriented to the East, will be transformed if it merely applies a cosmetic change to the sectarian quota system in Lebanon instead of changing it from the foundations. Consequently, this HIRAK demonstrates that the existing conflict is a struggle between different bourgeoisies with different sectarian backgrounds who benefit disproportionately from the economic system and from the existing financial corruption in Lebanon, against which the Lebanese rose up from the beginning.

As I had previously argued, Hezbollah's hegemonic project was built on three central pillars: revolutionary Shiite Islam; imaginative new Lebanese nationalism, which emphasizes 'resistance' as a central signifier to link its various components. The third and weaker pillar is the economic foundation that is supposed to provide an alternative to the existing Lebanese economic system, which has largely pushed Hezbollah's constituencies out of influence over decades.

This project of Hezbollah is capable of living without a conclusive position on the economic issue as long as the basic discrepancy in the Lebanese arena is framed by the dual understanding of the world which is divided to two main components: The axis of resistance in its anti-imperialist version, versus the axis of American imperialism, (including the Israeli occupation, and the Arab states affiliated with the United States including the allies of the USA in the Lebanese arena). Consequently, Hezbollah's ability to frame the Arab mass mobilization in general, and inside Lebanon in particular, within this dualism during the first Arab Spring period helped the party evade the economic question and thus from giving an alternative comprehensive

project to the ruling Arab regime in general and to the Lebanese regime in particular.

In other words, Hezbollah has not been able yet, as is the case with the various Islamic movements, to present a complete liberation project and not just a project to fight American imperialism, or as the sociologist Asef Bayat argued:

Any struggle, however heroic, that replaces imperialist supremacy with domestic forms of oppression will not serve the well-being of the subaltern population. An emancipatory project may not deserve its name if it falls short of being inclusive, egalitarian, and universal. [...T]he central question, then, is not just how to challenge the empire but how to realize liberation; for the ultimate end is not simply anti-imperialism but emancipation (Bayat 2017:91)

The Lebanese HIRAK, for the first time, has confronted Hezbollah directly with its central dilemma as a resistance movement, and with its own public, as it emerged as a resistance movement and as a movement defending the popular masses. The HIRAK challenged Hezbollah to give a clear and non-elusive answer about the party's position towards the possibility of integrating the party's resistance against imperialism on the one hand with the resistance against the core of the Lebanese sectarian and oligarchic regime on the other hand, namely the regime attached to the global imperial system against which the party stands.

While Gramsci's theory of hegemony accentuates the type of leadership that aims to help the masses to express, deepen and strengthen their self-engagement for socio-political transformation (Thomas 2013: 26), it seems that Hezbollah has failed in fulfilling its role in dealing with this HIRAK in Lebanon. Instead of deepening the popular masses' engagement in a revolutionary act the organization stood as the savior of the oppressive system.

Conclusion: The dynamics of Hezbollah's attitude towards the Lebanese mobilization

A look at the change in the speeches held by Hezbollah's secretary-general reveal important points about the party's attitude towards the Lebanese HIRAK, which is different from its attitude towards the Arab Spring about a decade ago.

The party attempts to identify with the demands of the vast majority of the Lebanese people, including the Shiite communities in the South, the Beqaa' and al-Dahiyeh. The party's attitude combines inclusion on the one hand and vigilance on the other hand, placing special emphasis on the endurance of the *muqawama* and the possibility of external intervention in the mass protests to change their direction to achieve the goals of the axes war.

Hezbollah implicitly admits that it is a part of this axes war in the region; however, the interesting point in Nasrallah's speeches is his emphasis on Hezbollah being a main nerve representing one religious community in the complex sectarian structure of the Lebanese society; and due to the different axes war reflected in the Lebanese political arena, Hezbollah cannot take part in the just demonstrations and mass mobilization so that the latter would not be considered a part of this war.

Hezbollah is aware that this approach opens the doors for other forces, like the Phalanges Party, the Lebanese Forces and the Progressive Socialist Party led by Waleed Jumblatt and other forces to ride the wave, thus, the mass mobilization would be fought for it would be considered led by the other axis. Yet, more than half a year after the mass mobilization was launched, its different leaders are preventing its appropriation and sectarianization by the different forces, a thing that would have occurred had Hezbollah allowed its supported to take an active part in the protests.

A closer look at Hezbollah's changing position reveals that what worries the party is the clash between the public demands and the main structure of the Lebanese political system, and this influences the party's reaction at different levels:

1. The mobilization would develop into an extensive attack on them and the whole sectarian-based system in Lebanon, which enabled Hezbollah to hold the reigns and become a dominant force the political system, not through violence but through cross-sectarian coalitions. This position attained by Hezbollah would not be easily renounced by the party, at least not before it guarantees that the alternative would not be the sectarian political forces from the opposite axis.
2. The mobilization against the corruption would hurt Hezbollah's worst adversaries within Lebanon, but it would also hurt its allies from Amal Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement, therefore, this would disrupt balances that Hezbollah have sought to achieve for more than two decades. Therefore, Hezbollah would not allow the fall of any of its

allies, so that it will not stay alone if targeted later.

3. Hezbollah's fear from any American political or intelligence activity is real. It is marketed through reference to different examples like Syria and Iran, both in the past and the present, even countries in Latin America and other places, in which the American hand has always interfered to make gains of any internal troubles that would serve its agenda. Hezbollah refers also to the current United States' intervention in Venezuela and Bolivia to demonstrate that the United States acts against any government or regime, even if elected by the people, if this regime does not comply with the American foreign policies.

Given these elements altogether, Hezbollah tries to walk between the dots without getting wet. It seeks to preserve a regime ravaged by corruption while flattering the mass protests, in an aim to solve the Lebanese crisis by heading again outside Lebanon and by trying to convince its allies, and the Lebanese official regime, to conduct a regional repositioning of Lebanon so that the solution is achieved through economic and political integration with the axis of resistance. However, this tactic is not destined to succeed for two reasons: first of all, it is very difficult for Lebanon, historically destined to be fully affiliated with the West, to become the Eastern axis without undergoing a drastic and cross-sectarian change, for recruiting the different religious groups for this project is unlikely both in the short and the mid-terms. The second reason is that any dependence on external support without creating a drastic change in the internal Lebanese socioeconomic structure will remain superficial and will not affect the sectarian structure of the Lebanese society, therefore, the social crisis will be postponed rather than solved.

In light of this, Hezbollah remains incapable of providing comprehensive solutions to the Lebanese political system, and with the current social protests, the party finds itself in an embarrassing situation in front of its Shiite supporters who constitute a major part of the populations directly affected by the consecutive economic crises caused by the Lebanese regime. The social mobilization has also placed Hezbollah in an embarrassing situation in front of patriotic and leftist movements and forces in the Arab world, which deemed the party a representative of their aspirations, enabling them to confront the Israeli occupation. Yet, to achieve this, it should not be confined to the sectarian Lebanese regime and the sectarian-based distribution of power in order for it to attain a humanistic internationalist status, a goal which Hezbollah has not achieved yet in the current Lebanese mobilization test.

The party's hesitation in providing a clear answer by joining the HIRAK, led a group of Hezbollah's supporters to pay attention to this inconsistency, expressed by one of the demonstrators who identified himself as a supporter of Hezbollah in Lebanon:

His [Nasrallah's] priorities here are different from our priorities, we want to change the system, get ourselves a better life; in short, we want a new life, while Hezbollah's priorities are keeping the system and making sure they're on good terms with their allies (Al-Monitor 2019b).

In other words, at least a part of Hezbollah's supporters began to realize inconsistencies in the party's positions and consequently did not accept half-rights or 'half-resistance.' The popular HIRAK pressures and pushes Hezbollah towards resolving its issue and its position in the Lebanese internal equation. Is it a real and comprehensive 'resistance' movement, or is it rather a resistance movement according to regional alignments abroad, while at home it is the protector of a brutal sectarian and capitalist system. It seems that Hezbollah has chosen to be the savior of the oppressive system.

The HIRAK diminished the credibility of Hezbollah as a comprehensive resistance movement. While the party's credibility had received many strikes, especially during the war in Syria, the party was able to justify and, in some cases, exploit the developments of the global conflict in Syria to obtain gains and rebuild its credibility in the eyes of its supporters from the popular classes. However, the party's stance against the current local popular movement, which stands against one of the most exploiting political systems, is a severer strike to the party's credibility, especially among the factions closest to the party.

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