

To what extent does the national and international legitimacy of a terrorist group threaten a state's sovereignty?

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Abstract

This research paper examines the extent to which the national and international legitimacy of Hezbollah, a prominent Lebanese Shi'a political and militant organization, threatens Lebanon's sovereignty. This question is rooted in the relationship between Hezbollah's social, military, and political roles as an extension of Lebanon's state authority. Through a review of historical, sociopolitical, and legal perspectives, the paper analyzes Hezbollah's influence over Lebanese territory, its social services network, and its military activities. Additionally, the research explores Hezbollah's perceived identity as a terrorist organization in some Western nations and as a legitimate political actor domestically and regionally. The findings suggest that Hezbollah's legitimacy—derived from Lebanese Shi'i and Iranian support, engagement in parliamentary politics, and adherence to selective international humanitarian norms—challenges Lebanon's state monopoly over legitimate force, thereby undermining its sovereignty. This analysis is significant as it highlights the broader implications for state sovereignty when non-state actors gain both national and international legitimacy, explaining how state legitimacy can be eroded by such entities in complex geopolitical landscapes.

Introduction

Hezbollah has long been regarded as an imminent security threat that has most recently led to Israel's 2024 ground operations in Lebanon after more than a decade and a half of border tensions. Israel identifies Hezbollah as a terrorist group, however many other Western countries don't. Why is this the case? In order to understand the geopolitical significance of Hezbollah, it is important to understand its history of revolutionary intent in Lebanon going back to its inception in 1982. The question stands on whether Hezbollah's conserved efforts to maintain their military wing as legitimate wielders of force is recognized by the international community, and subsequently by international norms. By answering these questions, we can derive the extent of national and international perceived legitimacy of Hezbollah, and how this has threatened Lebanon's status as a sovereign actor with legitimate control over force within and beyond its given territory.

Following Lebanon's independence from the French mandate in 1943, "the political system that emerged from the national pact was formalized into a system of sectarian communities, or confessions," (Norton 2018, 1). The highest political position, the presidency, was awarded to the Maronite Christians, with the position of prime minister held by a Sunni Muslim. The Shi'i population, third in their composition of political distribution, were awarded the speakership of parliament, which held far less constitutional power than the presidency or premiership (Norton 2018, 2). The allocation of positions of power was based off a 1932 national census, which has not since been updated and is reflected very differently a quarter into the 21st century (Norton 2018, 2). This is largely due to the generational size of Shi'i families, with the average Shi'i family in the 1970s constituting nine members, whereas the average Christian household had only six (Norton 2018, 3). These social disparities have only grown over the decades.

Given Lebanon's administrative arrangement, it was evident that the Shi'a population had wielded little political authority in government prior to the events of the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990. In 1969, the establishment of the Lebanese Supreme Islamic Council provided a representative body for the Shi'a for the first time (Norton 2018, 10). Led by Musa Al-Sadr, a Shi'i cleric, it issued demands for military, social, economic, and political improvements, including "improved measures for the defense of the South, provision of development funds, construction and improvement of schools and hospitals, and an increase in the number of Shi'a appointed to senior government positions" (Norton 2018, 11). While the Lebanese government was largely unreceptive to these demands, Al-Sadr's leadership gave "direction to the political awakening of the Shi'a" (Norton 2018, 11). However, much of the Shi'a population still rallied under multi-confessional parties and aligned with multi-confessional militias during the civil war over al-Sadr's Amal (Hope) party (Norton 2018, 11). Therefore, the mobilization of the Shi'a population into a revolutionary militia like that of Hezbollah was unprecedented up until Israel's intervention in the Lebanese civil war.

Israel's 1978 invasion, the "Litani Operation", displaced hundreds of Lebanese from the southern region of Lebanon (Norton 2018, 12). As the war drew to an end by the late 1980s, al-Sadr's Amal movement was weak and run-down (Norton 2018, 14). What had once been a popular "dynamic and progressive movement" in the early 1980s had become a corrupt and inequitable "full-blown patronage system", mirroring the very entities that it had initially fought against (Norton 2018, 14). The Shi'i population's continued political marginalization, coupled with the mobilization of resistance against Israel's first invasion in 1978, were both founding factors in Hezbollah's rise to power.

The revolution in Iran in the 1970s had shifted the traditional destination for Shi'i religious education from al-Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, as the latter had become unwelcoming towards foreign Shi'a. Al-Muwasi, a prominent Lebanese Shi'i cleric who would later emerge

as an important leader in Hezbollah, returned to Lebanon from Iraq to establish a religious seminary in Baalbek, Lebanon. Hassan Nasrallah, the future secretary-general of Hezbollah, would study under him (Norton 2018, 20). It was then common amongst clerics returning from their religious education in Iraq to hold “shared antipathy toward Israel and loyalty to Iran,” (Norton 2018, 20). Fadlallah, another prominent Shi’i cleric, urged the Shi’a away from the Amal party’s secular approach towards a more Islamic system of rule (Norton 2018, 20).

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had held an operational presence in Lebanon since the 1960s, designating a security threat for Israel and rationalizing its second reinvasion of Lebanon on June 6, 1982 (Norton 2018, 21). Norton makes the argument that even if Israel had not invaded Lebanon, the young revolutionaries among the Shi’a would have still “pursued their path of emulating Iran’s Islamic revolution,” (Norton 2018, 22). Hezbollah started off as a loose group of young revolutionaries, and did not truly emerge as an organization until the mid 1980s (Norton 2018, 23). Both Iran and Syria played roles in sponsoring the young revolutionaries, with Iran taking the lead because it saw the group as a realization to its “self-styled Islamic Revolution” (Norton 2018, 24). Therefore, it was the PLO’s presence in Lebanon, combined with Israel’s invasion and Iran’s ideological backing, that allowed the emergence of Hezbollah as an organization in the 1980s.

The 1980s was known to be a decade of extraordinary violence for all forces present during the Lebanese Civil War. In the international community’s efforts to intervene and bring stability to the region, the Multinational Force (MNF), which consisted of both French and American troops on the ground, was “dispatched to Beirut to bring stability to Lebanon in the wake of the June 1982 Israeli invasion of that country” (Norton 2018, 58). Tragically, on April 18th, 1983, a suicide bombing attacked the U.S. embassy in Lebanon, killing 63 people, 52 of which were embassy personnel (US Embassy Beirut, 2023). On the morning of October

23rd, 1983, 241 US military personnel were killed in a terrorist bombing of the U.S. Marine Barracks by Iranian-backed Lebanese Shi'i militants, followed minutes later by another suicide bombing that caused the death of 58 French paratroopers (Blinken 2023). As a result, by 1984, the MNF had ceased to exist (Norton 2018, 58).

Simultaneously, the 1980s saw Lebanon become an ideal site for proxy wars, with military sponsoring from Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, Israel, the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, and the Soviet Union being present at various points (Norton 2018, 60). With Iran's support and leadership, Hezbollah grew stronger throughout the decade by winning increasing support amongst the Shi'i community (Norton 2018, 61). By 1990, it had replaced Amal as the primary Shi'a organization in and around Beirut (Norton 2018, 61). Its declared goal, as seen by a series of hostage taking of primarily western individuals, was to "expunge" America from Lebanon (Norton 2018, 62).

Following the end of the civil war, and the subsequent withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon in 2000 and again in 2006, there was a stark difference between Hezbollah's "Open Letter" manifesto of 1985 and its "rebirth" through its new manifesto in 2009. The operations and constructed legitimacy of Hezbollah in a post-conflict context are discussed in the findings section, with a big emphasis on its perceived social, national, and international legitimacy. A significant question remains: if the state holds the exclusive right to wield legitimate force, can Hezbollah be considered a legitimate actor in its operations within and from Lebanon?

Literature Review

There is much literature on the legitimate use of force, as this has been a question posed long before the establishment of the modern understanding of states (circa 1648). According to Bassiouni, "the issue of legitimacy of use of force has existed for as far back as organized societies have existed" (Bassiouni 2004, 299). Through the use of violence, the

“appropriation and accumulation (of territory, peoples, and resources) led to the development of our modern understanding of a state” (Wight 2009, 101). German sociologist Max Weber defines a state as a “human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory,” (Weber 1918). It is through this lens we can ask what constitutes an illegitimate claim to force, and how the operation of violence outside of the framework of international norms is managed and defined.

Bassiouni describes the existing literature on the legitimacy of force “as a reflection of the asymmetry of power between competing groups seeking to justify as their means by focusing on the ends,” (Bassiouni 2004, 299). This meant that it is always those that are dominant in their power who “control the characterization of their opponents' violence,” (Bassiouni 2004, 299). Additionally, it also meant that there are always winners and losers in the creation of a state (Wight 2009, 101). Therefore, the development of the modern state through the means of violence has legitimized the use of force in our perception of statehood.

It can be therefore inferred that a state's sovereignty is dictated by its ability to exert control over its population. This implies that a state “responds to no other organization for the modalities and the outcomes of that control,” and that it “exercises that control on its own account, activating its own resources,” without sharing it with other entities and by establishing its own rules (Gianfranco 1990, 21). Any challenge to a state's sovereignty would then necessarily have to take “the form of armed conformation,” (Gianfranco 1990, 22).

The significance of territory in establishing legitimacy for wielders of force is inextricably linked to the legitimacy that the modern state yields, as seen by Max Weber's standardized definition of a modern state. According to Anna Stilz (2009), there are five distinct factors that grant a state the right over its territory: the “rights to exercise jurisdiction over those within the territory,” the “rights to reasonably full control over land and resources

within the territory that are not privately owned,” the “rights to tax and regulate uses of that which is privately owned within the state’s claimed territory,” the “rights to control or prohibit movement across the borders of the territory,” and the “rights to limit or prohibit “dismemberment” of the state’s territories,” (Stilz 2009, 186). One may presume that the legitimate use of force or threat of force is a means to enforcing such jurisdiction, control over land and resources, taxation, regulation, and control of movement and dismemberment or fracturing of state territories.

In understanding how the use of force determines the establishment of states, terrorism can be interpreted as a response to the “process and rejections of the claim to state legitimacy” (Wight 2009, 101). As stated by Colin Wight, “the concept of terrorism already implies the concept of the state,” as it “cannot be defined in the absence of some or other account of the state,” (Wight 2009, 101). We therefore usually perceive terrorism as containing some strain of illegitimate force, carried out only by non-state actors.

Stilz also goes on to ask the question of why states are entitled to a *particular* piece of territory, or what she calls a ‘slice’ of land (Stilz 2009, 187). What grants a population “a strong ‘natural’ entitlement” to land may depend on their historical occupation of it (Stilz 2009, 188). In other words, it is the land that “represents the aspiration to self-determination of a distinct national group” (Stilz 2009, 187). This is important to assess when speaking of the significance of territorial expansion or occupation of certain terrorist groups, and why their self-determination does not give them the legitimacy to ‘secede’ from the preexisting state. After all, no state has a clear title to its territory, as almost all states have gained some territory through conquest or inheritance of similar gains from a predecessor country (Stilz 2009, 189).

In a later work, Stilz defines the legitimate state theory, in which “a state has rights to territory if...it effectively implements a system of law regulating property in that territory....,

its subjects have a legitimate claim to occupy the territory..., the state's system of law "rules in the name of the people," by protecting basic rights and providing for political participation..., and that "the state is not a usurper" (Stilz 2011, 572). According to this argument for the legitimate state theory, "a state only has a claim to territory if it meets a basic threshold for being a legitimate representative of its people" (Stilz 2011, 579). Illegitimate actors, on the other hand, would not have these territorial rights (Banai 2014, 140).

Another attribute of the state in the legitimate state theory is that it "defines the citizenry that is subject to it," (Stilz 2011, 579). The argument is that an "initially unconnected group of citizens" will overtime eventually be made into "a people" by "cooperating together in shared institutions," (Stilz 2011, 580). In assessing this through a modern lens of sectarianism in the multiconfessional system of Lebanon, the rise of Hezbollah into parliamentary participation in the state may be interpreted as the integration of a significant portion of the Shi'ite religious sect into the citizenry of the Lebanese state. However, Hezbollah did not follow through with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559, which required the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon following the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005 (Dionigi 2014, 137). This brings the legitimacy of the Lebanese state into question as Hezbollah's paramilitary apparatus continues to function as a key actor in Lebanon's security crises both domestically and with its regional neighbors. For context, Hezbollah was first labeled a terrorist group by the United States in 1997 following the Lebanese civil war, during which it was held responsible for several attacks on US and Israeli embassies by US courts (Robinson 2024).

Hezbollah's legitimacy has not only been studied as a threat to the sovereignty of the Lebanese state nationally, but also through the lens of international norms. The 2006 UNSC resolutions pertaining to Lebanon were based off "fundamental international norms such as

state sovereignty, and the principles of self-determination and self-defense,” (Dionigi 2014, 137). These resolutions were not only upholding Lebanon’s state sovereignty, but also creating a space for Hezbollah to negotiate as a legitimate actor in the international arena (Dionigi 2014, 138). By acting concurrently with the state monopoly of force, Hezbollah challenges these international norms that were established by granting Hezbollah international legitimacy through several negotiation channels. Due to Hezbollah’s territorial occupation, monopoly on the use of force, and shared identity among a Shi’i population, there is much existing literature on the argument for Hezbollah’s status as a “state within a state”, (Robinson 2014).

Hezbollah poses a unique case of the study of terrorism due to its differing positions in attacks against western institutions, its role in legitimate governmental institutions, and its position in domestic social and political conflict in Lebanon. It is important to note that while many key US allies in the West identify Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Netherlands, and Israel, many European countries would rather identify it as a liberation movement (Kindt 2009). This split in perception is reflected in the existed literature on Hezbollah, as much of academia that approaches Hezbollah through the lens of its role as a state apparatus focuses on its oddly successful transition into a legitimate and representative institution since the end of the civil war, while much of the Western research approaching Hezbollah as a security concern identifies Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, typically citing events such as the “suicide truck bombings targeting U.S. and French forces in Beirut (in 1983 and 1984) and U.S. forces again in Saudi Arabia (in 1996)”, as well as “its record of suicide bombing attacks targeting Jewish and Israeli interests such as those in Argentina (1992 and 1994) and in Thailand (attempted in 1994), and a host of other plots targeting American, French, German, British, Kuwaiti, Bahraini and other interests in plots from Europe to Southeast Asia to the Middle East,” (Levitt 2005). The latter

accounts are especially prevalent prior to the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. This paper attempts to approach Hezbollah with a holistic view, acknowledging Hezbollah's manifesto, the suicide bombings it has been connected to during and after the Lebanese Civil war, its transition into a party holding significant amounts of seats in Lebanese parliament, and the hybrid nature of its political and military wings. It will also consider the recent escalations in violence on and beyond its border with Israel at the time of writing this paper, and the wider security implications they cause regionally.

This split in the characterization of Hezbollah also prompts many authors to utilize the cliché “one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.” In the theory of four waves of terrorism advanced by David Rappaport, one would intuitively place Hezbollah in the fourth ‘religious wave’, however there are arguments, such as the one of Worrall, Mabon, and Clubb, that there are nuances in classifying Hezbollah as ‘religious terrorism’. For one, it is distinct from other Islamist groups through its “fusion of nationalist and acceptance of the Lebanese state,” (Worrall et al. 2016, 13). Dioni would also argue this sentiment, as he states that “Islamist political theory does not recognize the legitimacy of institutions that are not entirely founded on Islamic principles and Lebanese institutions are certainly not among these,” (Dioni 2014, 118). This makes it distinct from other Islamist terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, and why many academics opt to study Hezbollah as a social movement.

There is no commonly agreed upon international and all-encompassing definition of what terrorism is. However, according to A.P. Schmid's assessment of 250 different definitions of terrorism, some common attributes may include: its symbolic nature, its indiscriminate nature, its focus on civilians and noncombatants, the aim to disrupt public order and security, the creation of a climate of fear to a wider audience, and the disregard of the rules of war (Worrall et al. 2016, 14). There has been an effort on the behalf of international organizations to define terrorism, such as through the United Nations, however

this has proven rather difficult given how different contexts and backgrounds may characterize terrorism. *Perceived* legitimacy can also be a defining factor of terrorism, in the sense that “the more illegitimate the violence is perceived as, the more likely an actor will label it as terrorism,” (Worrall et al. 2016, 15). This is important when distinguishing the frameworks of political violence from the definition of terrorism. What is most revealing is that the state in which it operates chooses to not call it a terrorist organization.

According to Worrall et al., being designated a terrorist group can also limit financing and mobilization of support, which Hezbollah has maneuvered around through Iran’s continued state-sponsoring of its efforts. According to Marc DeVore, state sponsors can “directly leverage their aid to shape the strategic decisions of armed non-state actors, forcing their clients to either expand or restrict their activities,” (DeVore 2012, 85). He identifies three reasons why Iran is motivated to support Hezbollah and other nonstate groups in the middle eastern region, typically referred to in the public media as the “axis of resistance.” For one, it gives Iran a way to inject its opinion in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, which has been a central issue in the Arab world and has been one that Hezbollah has been involved in since its inception. Secondly, it is able to appoint itself as the defacto leader of oppressed Shi’i groups across the region. The third argument made is the conventional weakness of Iran’s own military force, which it counterbalances by relying on proxies as security to “deter or attack its adversaries,” (Devore 2012, 90).

This literature shows that by using Hezbollah as a case study, we can assess how the relationship between its national and international legitimacy has impacted and arguably eroded Lebanon’s state sovereignty. This has been challenged through the legitimate use of force, control over territory, and self-determination of populations in wielding this power. Hezbollah garners its legitimacy from both Lebanon as a state, and other domestic actors, as well as international channels of negotiation and state-sponsoring.

Findings

In order to assess the standing of Hezbollah's perceived legitimacy, one might begin to assess their social legitimacy amongst populations residing in their areas of operation. As an Islamist social movement, it is based around a Shi'a constituency that calls for "a strong level of social engagement" (Worrall et al. 2016, 73). This social welfare, also referred to as *da'wa*, is often financed by Iran and various Islamic philanthropies (Azani 2013). Through a 'resistance identity' that it derives from its historical struggle with political marginalization of the Shi'a population in Lebanon, Hezbollah has advocated for better social services for its own communities, including better education, healthcare, and social work. By distributing its services through official state structures, such as municipalities in Shi'a areas over which it has influence, it may seemingly take on the role of a state (Worrall et al. 2016, 74). Hezbollah also endorses social groups such as the "Martyr's Association" which offers benefits such as free food, living essentials, and social recognition for family members who may have had one or more individual in their families martyred or taken into custody (Worrall et al. 2016, 74). This kind of public support not only creates a symbol of solidarity, but also derives a kind of social legitimacy in the Shi'a public's perception of the entire organization of Hezbollah as a validating force.

Providing material assistance through goods and services is a common feature of many other Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Hamas in Gaza, who are also commonly backed and funded by Iranian organizations (Worrall et al. 2016, 76). It is seen "not only as a religious duty but also as a critical means of spreading the word of god and of building a base from which to operate" (Worrall et al. 2016, 76). These services are mostly aimed at the fighters and their families, "including a separate organization catering for the needs of widows" (Worrall et al. 2016, 76). Additionally, Hezbollah may draw legitimacy from religious sects other than the Shi'ites in Lebanon by providing social

services to any Lebanese residing in their operating districts, including Lebanese Christians residing in the south of the country (Worrall et al. 2016, 76). In fact, the movement's welfare provision is so pronounced that "it far exceeds the capacity of the Lebanese state," (Worrall et al. 2016, 77). Its effectiveness in its community forces the state, NGOs, and other community actors with the same objectives to work with it (Worrall et al. 2016, 77). This also benefits its perceived legitimacy by placing it on the same operating ground as the state and other legitimate registered organizations.

Hezbollah's provision of education is rooted in the "dissemination of the Islamic message, and the message of resistance," with the intent of recruitment (Azani 2013). Upon graduating from Hezbollah-funded Islamic colleges, many students went on to join the ranks of Hezbollah's core activists (Azani 2013). The education projects for younger children were heavily financed by Iran, with data from 1987 showing that Iran invested 1.6 million US dollars in the education of Lebanese Shi'ites, with more than 68,000 elementary school pupils and 91,000 secondary and post-secondary school students benefitting from Hezbollah's educational initiatives (Azani 2013). In more recent years, Islamic and military education "has since developed into a network of schools that teach both religion and practical subjects," with a reputation of students being well prepared in technical subjects such as math and sciences once they reach university (Worrall et al. 2016, 77). Through these educational initiatives, Hezbollah attains a certain level of governmental and social legitimacy as a provider of public services with significant impacts on its direct community. As a patron of the programs, Iran also grants a level of social legitimacy to Hezbollah, especially as an authority of the dissemination of Shi'i religious thought and as a state sponsor to the spread of religious education throughout the middle east. Therefore, Hezbollah derives its legitimacy from both its da'wa initiatives and its public recognition as a proxy to a key state actor.

One of the most significant ways in which Hezbollah pushes back on the state's sovereignty is through its military power, which it views as a crucial component of its resistance movement since the Israeli invasion of 1982. In his book *Hizbullah and the Politics of Remembrance* (2016), Bashir Saade explains how Hezbollah was able to legitimize its military action of resistance by “archiving” events that have made up its history. They do this by publishing texts, newspaper articles, and even journals, research, and biographies produced by Hassan Fadlallah, a prominent Shia cleric and religious leader in Hezbollah. By implementing a “politics of remembrance” that emphasizes the importance and justification of historical military resistance, Hezbollah is able to communicate the necessity of its military standing alongside the national army as well as its continued acts of resistance against what it deems oppressive forces (Saade 2016).

Additionally, by linking Saade's notion of the politics of legitimacy to a state's claim to space, territory becomes a facet of power (Saade 2016, 111). This is the case for Hezbollah in the territory of Southern Lebanon, a Shi'i populated region which has been historically marginalized by the multiconfessional system of Lebanon. Hezbollah has had other territorial “strongholds” in Lebanon, including training and development grounds in the Bekaa valley and Baalbek, and Dahyeh, the southern suburb of Beirut in which the resistance was “most active” (Saade 2016, 111-112). Along with its history of reclaiming Southern Lebanon from occupying Israeli forces during the Lebanese civil war, its continued military presence in distinct territories allows Hezbollah to act as a legitimate occupying force and in some ways as an extension of the state.

By abiding with international norms, Hezbollah also derives its legitimacy from the international community. Hezbollah acts upon Islamic principles within the scope of its operations, lending credence to its categorization as a group that adheres to political Islamism. Political Islamist groups have historically been incompatible with international

norms and ethics, because they generally do not subscribe to ideologies, especially liberal ideologies, that are not justified along traditional Islamist lines (Dionigi 2014, 4). As a hardline Islamist movement, Hezbollah is also incompatible with international norms because it lends itself to political violence and the use of force without much hesitation (Dionigi 2014, 97). According to Filippo Dionigi's book *Hezbollah, Islamist Politics, and International Society* (2014), there are several different instances in which Hezbollah has become 'socialized' with international society by interacting with international norms, sometimes in opposition to its Islamic principles. One of the most significant ways it has done this is through its efforts to abide by international humanitarian law by distinguishing Israeli combatant forces and acknowledging noncombatant immunity. Dionigi's book specifically references the Qānā massacre of 1996, in which Israel deliberately bombed a UN compound protected by the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) after Hezbollah fighters used the surrounding area as a launch pad for their attack into northern Israeli territory. This resulted in the deaths of over one hundred refugees taking shelter within the UN premises in southern Lebanon. As a result, diplomatic negotiations were accelerated to end hostilities, with Israel, the US, France, and Syria mediating. On April 26th, the 'April Understanding' was signed, importantly establishing a clause about the prohibition of targeting noncombatants, which Hezbollah eventually invoked "as a condition for a ceasefire for the 2006 conflict," (Dionigi 2014, 106). While this does not mean that the law has always been respected by Hezbollah in its regional warfare, it has led to the revision of military strategy based on international law, and it is indicative of an initial stage of "socialization in the international normative framework" (Dionigi 2014, 100).

Additionally, killing noncombatants is not without its conditions in International Humanitarian Law (IHL), as civilians can be collateral damage to strategic military targets. While generally aiming to avoid noncombatant targets, Hezbollah, as well as its adversary,

have both targeted strategically advantageous sites where noncombatant populations were present (Dionigi 2014, 109). Additionally, Hassan Nasrallah, the former secretary-general of Hezbollah, indeed denounced the April Understanding in 2001 during a speech in which he proclaimed that Israeli citizens were also aggressors, serving as a confirmation to the occupation (Dionigi 2014, 110). The conclusions drawn from this event in Dionigi's book indicate that Hezbollah did in fact agree to the discrimination between combatants and noncombatants "as a result of a process of interaction with international actors that enforced a principle of IHL" (Dionigi 2014, 110). Hezbollah would later break this international norm in response to Israeli attacks against civilians in Lebanon.

In observance of international humanitarian law, Hezbollah has also condemned the practice of targeting civilians by other actors, including other religiously motivated Islamic militant groups. In his book, Dionigi sites Hezbollah's condemnation of the attacks against Christian monks in Algeria in 1996, tourists in Egypt in 1997, and even the attacks on September 11th, 2001 at the World Trade Center, while still justifying the attack on the pentagon as a legitimate military target (Dionigi 2014, 112). However, there are still indications that Hezbollah has remained selective with its commitment to international law, most notably with the targeted civilian bombings at the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1992, followed by the 1994 attack on the Israeli-Argentinian Mutual Association (Dionigi 2014, 109). While Hezbollah has denied accountability for these attacks, the Argentinian prosecutor has attributed affiliation with the attacks to the group, amongst others actors. With this accusation, the case could be made for Hezbollah's selective approach towards noncombatant immunity, especially regarding terrorist attacks against Israelis or Zionists, people who advocate for Israel as the homeland to an independent Jewish state.

Since 1992, Hezbollah's parliamentary participation in Lebanon has arguably been the most legitimizing channel of power through which it has operated. Hezbollah's political

wing, the Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc party, came about following the establishment of the Taif agreement during the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1989 (Dionigi 2014, 116). The implications of Hezbollah joining a state system with secular ambitions established along the lines of “Western liberal canons of statehood” raised questions about how it could retain its Islamic political values (Dionigi 2014, 116-117). Since Hezbollah’s legitimacy was derived from the interpretation of Islamic principles, joining a state it had once labeled as illegitimate due to its malpractices and corruption caused a schism in the organization, most notably amongst hard-liner Islamist members (Dionigi 2014, 117). Hezbollah’s presence in a legitimate state institution would subject them to interaction with norms disconnected from Islam, especially given the prevalent role of Maronite Christians and other religious sects in parliament. Nonetheless, a religious ruling was issued by clerical leadership in favor of partaking in Lebanese political institutions.

Hezbollah has approached the paradox between its ideology and political involvement in two ways: first, it created a Council of Parliamentary activity separate from the Political Council, which was receptive to Hezbollah’s central decision-making council; second, it limited its political participation to only parliamentary activity, at least until 2005; and third, it acknowledged that the democratic processes of parliament would ultimately result in legislation that did not align with Islam, and instead positioned itself as an actor that “minimizes the impact of even more anti-Islamic legislation,” (Dionigi 2014, 120).

One piece of legislation from which Hezbollah has derived a lot of legitimacy from the international community is its neutral stance on the Lebanese parliament’s adoption of human rights legislation. Based on Dionigi’s analysis of human rights legislation in the Lebanese assembly and the progression of parliamentary debate, he found that from 1992 to 2006, Hezbollah Members of Parliament only intervened occasionally, proposing a few technical comments amongst an estimate of 50 human rights laws considered during this

time. They did not necessarily criticize the “fundamental nature of the law itself,” (Dionigi 2014, 123). Dionigi highlights the exceptions to this trend, noting that during the discussions on ratifying the treaty banning cluster ammunitions, Hezbollah argued that Lebanon should not ratify it, citing security concerns because Israel had not done so (Dionigi 2014, 123). Another particularly problematic case is in Article 562 of the Lebanese Penal Code, condoning “honor crimes,” or non-premeditated violence, against women who are caught in situations of adultery. While this law was abolished in a majority ruling in parliament, Hezbollah’s MP continued to support the legislation in parliament, arguing that there is a difference between premeditated and non-premeditated violence that should be reflected in the penal code (Dionigi 2014, 131). However, in cases of the equal treatment and socioeconomic rights of women, the prohibition of exploitation of child labor, the provision of services and facilities for disabled persons, other reforms on penal code procedure, and the ratification of other international and regional human rights treaties, Hezbollah did not present any Islamist arguments or object to their adoption, with exceptions like asking clarifying questions and proposing changes to wording (Dionigi 2014, 131). Another value Hezbollah maintains in parliamentary sessions is the condition that legislation will not be in contradiction with the “personal status law”, which is central to the moral agendas of Hezbollah and other political forces in Lebanon. This means that religious authority in the regulation of family affairs is institutionalized under law, as it is in much of the rest of the Arab world (Dionigi 2014, 130).

Conclusively, there is no active effort from the Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc party to promote an Islamist Political Agenda in parliament, such as Shari’a law, but rather raise concerns through the refusal of legislation that may work in opposition to Islamic principles and the resistance against Israel (Dionigi 2014, 125-126). Alternatively, issues of controversial nature regarding the status of women or the reform of personal status laws are

generally not brought to the table by Parliament for this very reason. Overall, through Hezbollah's neutral stances on issues pertaining to human rights, it has acquired a degree of legitimacy by not being at odds with human rights legislation and refraining from introducing Islamic-based legislation to Parliament.

The withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon in 2000 and Syria in 2005 changed the political and military circumstances within which Hezbollah was operating, bringing to question the disbandment of its paramilitary apparatus under UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which had required the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon at the end of the Civil War conflict in the early 1990s. This caused Hezbollah to partake in governmental procedures beyond that of parliamentary participation beginning in 2005. Following the reinvasion of Israel into Lebanese territory in the 2006 July war, UNSC Resolution 1701 was adopted to enforce a ceasefire and deploy a reinforced UNIFIL peacekeeping mission. The interaction of Hezbollah with the UN Security Council gave it credibility as a legitimate actor in post-conflict negotiations. For instance, it wrote a ministerial letter to the Security Council asking to be identified as a "national resistance movement" rather than a "militia" so that it could reaffirm its role in the security of the state and retain its capacity for military force (Dionigi 2014, 142-143). Dionigi argues that although Hezbollah initially derived its legitimacy from politically Islamic principles and ethics, its interaction with international institutions and resolutions created on the basis of fundamental international norms such as state sovereignty, self-determination, and self-defense, shifted the construction of its legitimacy to one that defined its resistance movement by said international norms (Dionigi 2014, 138).

It is here that we see how the contentious relationship of a terrorist group or illegitimate source of force and a state force's interaction can define a state's legitimate consolidation to power. By allowing the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to be deployed alongside UNIFIL under UNSC Resolution 1701, Hezbollah "acknowledged its authority of

state army and hence the authority of the state as the monopolist of force in Lebanon” (Dionigi 2014, 138). Of course, this is a contentious claim given Hezbollah’s continued refusal to disarm its military wing and the subsequent recent reescalation in conflict with the 2024 Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon.

Contrarily, by being recognized as a national resistance group by the Lebanese state, Hezbollah was also able to transition its own international status from a terrorist group to a national resistance movement, at least in the broader context of its international standing, since “within the international context, a non-state actor carrying weapons can only be defined as a terrorist or criminal organization or a national movement for self-determination” (Dionigi 2014, 154). By operating based on principles of international law, they “enjoy more legitimacy internationally and domestically,” (Dionigi 2014, 154). However, in reference to the previously mentioned list of countries that still recognize Hezbollah as a terrorist group, this is only somewhat established.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper demonstrates that Hezbollah’s national and international legitimacy poses a considerable threat to Lebanon’s sovereignty. Hezbollah now holds a unique dual identity as both a state-integrated political actor and a proxy military organization in Iran’s sphere of influence. This status undermines the Lebanese state’s monopoly on legitimate force, a cornerstone of sovereignty as defined by Max Weber. There are arguments that Hezbollah constitutes a “state within a state”, because it has perceived territorial legitimacy as well as the power to be a wielder of military force on it, based on a shared communal identity of Islamic resistance.

Hezbollah derives its national legitimacy from Lebanon’s Shi’a population by providing social services through infrastructure that operates parallel to, and at times in place of, the state. By addressing the socio-economic needs of the Shi’a community through

education, healthcare, and social welfare, Hezbollah garners significant local support, sometimes even beyond the Shi'i sect. By operating in official state entities such as municipal offices, Hezbollah further legitimizes its operations as an extension of the state.

Moreover, Hezbollah's ability to engage with international norms and legal frameworks have shifted its status globally. As outlined in the findings, Hezbollah's selective adherence to international humanitarian law—such as distinguishing between combatants and noncombatants in the aftermath of the Qana massacre and other conflicts—has allowed it to position itself as a legitimate actor within international discourse, despite its terrorist designation by certain states. This alignment with certain humanitarian principles allows Hezbollah to claim a degree of moral authority and legitimacy in the global arena. However, this compliance is often selective, as illustrated by its targeted attacks on Israeli diplomatic missions abroad in the 1990s.

The findings also reveal that Hezbollah's participation in Lebanese parliamentary processes has legitimized its political wing while simultaneously binding it to secular, state-controlled systems that contradict its foundational Islamist principles. The political wing, called the Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc, has been largely indifferent to the advancement of Lebanon's human rights legislation and has not indicated direct efforts to impose Sharia-based legislation. The political integration of Shi'ites has helped address their historical narratives of political oppression and marginalization, yet Hezbollah continues to add a layer that limits the state's ability to pursue its secular objectives.

Iranian influence through Hezbollah has further posed a threat to Lebanese sovereignty. This relationship has provided Hezbollah with resources and strategic backing that empower it to act independently of the state, and have as a result continually resisted disarmament efforts by the Lebanese government and UNSC Resolutions. Hezbollah's armed

capabilities have allowed it to assert significant influence over Lebanese defense policy, effectively blurring the lines between state and non-state authority.

Ultimately, the evidence in this paper suggests that Hezbollah's combined national and international legitimacy has eroded Lebanon's sovereignty. Its role as a dominant actor both domestically, through social and political structures, and regionally in border and cross-border conflicts, has challenged the Lebanese state's ability to assert exclusive control over its territory and populace. These effects indicate broader implications for state sovereignty when a non-state actor garners both domestic and international recognition, potentially redefining the parameters of state legitimacy regionally.

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