

# Hezbollah's Diversionary War in Lebanon: Continuity and Change in the Threat Perception\*

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**Abstract:** Hezbollah intervened in the civil war in Syria when the Assad regime was under threat of overthrow. Its intervention caused criticism from Lebanese actors and therefore required the organization to find legitimate foundations upon which to base its involvement. Discourse and rhetoric were the first elements that changed following the organization's decision to intervene. Hezbollah revised its traditional discourse of security, which refers to Israel as the main threat, in 2013 and added an external enemy, the takfiris, which referred to fundamentalist groups in the civil war, as a new threat. However, it returned to its traditional discourse due to the domestic criticisms that followed. This study aims to explain the changing rhetoric of Hezbollah during the civil war in Syria through the frame of the diversionary theory of war. This theory claims that Hezbollah used a diversionary tactic to justify its intervention in the civil war and invented an external enemy as a threat to Lebanese security and territorial integrity.

**Keywords:** Hezbollah, Syrian Civil War, Arab Uprisings, Diversionary Theory of War, scapegoating, external threat.

**Öz:** Hizbullah, Suriye'de hükümet devrilme tehdidi altındayken Suriye'deki iç savaşa dahil olmuştur. Hizbullah'ın iç savaşa dahil, Lübnanlı aktörlerin eleştirilerine neden olmuş ve bu nedenle örgütün iç savaşa dahlini meşru gerekçelere dayandırma gereği ortaya çıkmıştır. Örgütün söylem ve retorığı, iç savaşa dahlinin ardından değişen ilk unsurlar olmuştur. Hizbullah, İsrail'i temel tehdit olarak gören geleneksel güvenlik söylemini 2013'te revize etmiş ve yeni bir tehdit olarak Suriye'de faaliyet gösteren radikal gruplara atfettiği tekfirçiler söylemini öne çıkarmıştır. Ancak daha sonraki dönemde içeriden gelen eleştiriler nedeniyle geleneksel söylemine geri dönmüştür. Bu çalışma, Suriye'deki iç savaş sırasında Hizbullah'ın değişen söylemini, şaşırtmacı/taktiksel savaş teorisi çerçevesinde açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Hizbullah'ın iç savaşa müdahalesini meşru göstermek amacıyla taktiksel bir yöntem kullandığını ve Lübnan'ın güvenliği ve toprak bütünlüğü için bir tehdit olarak bir dış düşman icat ettiğini iddia edecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hizbullah, Suriye İç Savaşı, Arap Ayaklanmaları, Şaşırtmacı/Taktiksel Savaş Teorisi, günah keçisi yapma.

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## Introduction

Warning the Lebanese public against the enemies at the gates of Lebanon, Hasan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hezbollah, said in his speech on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014:

What would be the case if the takfiri<sup>1</sup> trend takes control? The takfiri does not accept anyone within itself... The takfiri terrorism should be defeated in Syria. If the axis gains victory in Syria, all the Lebanese will be safeguarded (Nasrallah, 2014).

Furthermore, Nasrallah underlined the vital importance of Syria's territorial integrity and security for the sake of Lebanon. It was a problem to do nothing, while there was a growing threat against the motherland:

Syria is the back of the resistance and its foundation, and the resistance cannot stand by watching, leaving its back exposed or its foundation broken, otherwise we would be idiots. The idiot is the one who watches the conspiracy crawling toward him but does not move. If Syria falls into American and takfiri hands, the resistance will be surrounded, and Israel will enter Lebanon to impose its conditions and again carry Lebanon into an Israeli era (Hage Ali, 2019, p. 9).

In this way, Nasrallah illustrated the new understanding of Hezbollah towards the security of Lebanon and its ongoing role to defend it. He insisted on a national dimension to their involvement in the civil war. However, the reactions coming from the Lebanese public were disappointing and caused the organization to reconsider and revert back to the traditional conceptualizations of threat and enemy. This study attempts to explain the changes and continuities in Hezbollah's political strategy and discourse during the civil war in Syria within the frame of the diversionary theory of war. It aims to understand the reasons behind the changes in Hezbollah's discourse orientation, the instruments it used, and analyse its success.

Within this context, this study has two main arguments. Firstly, the former studies on this topic use the diversionary theory to explain the causes of wars (Fravel, 2010; Oakes, 2012; DeRouen and Peake, 2002). These studies point to pre-war conditions such as domestic unrest and the possibility of losing power as the reasons for wars.

1 Takfir is a theological declaration of a Muslim who has become an apostate or declaring takfir means declaration of a person who pursues an act or idea that constitutes disbelief in Islam. Killing a person who is a takfiri is right under several Islamic understandings. For more information on takfir and its meaning in Islam see, Mohamed Badar, Masaki Nagatab and Tiphonie Tuenic, "The Radical Application of the Islamist Concept of Takfir", *Arab Law Quarterly*, vol. 31, 2017, pp. 132-160; Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "The Danger of Takfir (Excommunication): Exposing IS' Takfiri Ideology", *Center for Security Studies*, 2017, <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/316b8048-d26a-44cb-b4ce-48d8167f1c7c/pdf>

There is an external foe used to divert the public's attention from domestic to foreign problems. To consolidate the public behind the leader/government, territorial claims outside the country are instrumentalized and an outsider enemy is invented to link of the foreign to the domestic. As Taylor Fravel (2010) points out, leaders appeal to diversionary wars when their survival is at risk. According to Jack Levy (1988), a ruling elite or leader sees war with an external power as the last chance for a state to overcome internal problems. Jaroslav Tir (2010) makes a similar point that unpopular leaders use foreign policy crises to divert the public's attention away from the discontent with their rule and empower their political status. In the case of Hezbollah, it is clear that the criticisms from domestic audiences increased after it intervened in Syria. The organization was criticized due to its armed wing in Lebanon and its close relations with Iran, but its role as a resistance movement against Israel and its position in the Palestinian cause overshadowed its armament and private relations with Iran. After it intervened in the civil war in Syria, several criticisms emerged within not only the Sunni and Christian communities of Lebanon but also within the Shia population, which is the most important base of the organization. Different from the general use of the diversionary theory of war, this study offers a different type of test of the diversionary hypothesis. Rather than emphasizing the diversionary claims in the pre-war conditions, this study uses it to explain the conditions during wars. In this regard, it will argue that Hezbollah's diversion of the Syrian opposition groups was done in order to cope with the domestic criticisms targeting its legitimacy in Lebanon and questioning its role as a resistance movement. As Hezbollah highlights the significance of its fight in Syria as a requirement for Lebanon's territorial integrity and civil peace, this study asserts that this was done by Hezbollah in response to the criticisms in Lebanon that increased after its involvement in the civil war in Syria.

Secondly, this study introduces territory as a means of instrumentalization in Hezbollah's discourse. Territory refers to the homeland and directly elicits the feelings of the people in terms of consolidation and national identity:

Humans' attempts to define themselves as territorial creatures is a general feeling inherited from a cultural and genetic past... It is seen in the willingness of people to fight and die for territory. People become socialized and emotionally attached to the territory, they think of it as belonging to them, and they believe the land is an integral part of their identity (Tir, 2010, p. 416).

Many people devote their lives to their homeland or fight for a territory, where their government has an irredentist project. The potential invasion of the homeland by an external foe, on the other hand, causes the public to come together and unite

behind the leading actor. In the end, territorial claims<sup>2</sup> enable the ruling elite and the leadership to enjoy some significant advantages such as consolidation of power, increased public support and fortification of the current position (Tir, 2010). Hezbollah defines Lebanon as a homeland, and it has engaged in harsh wars in recent years to protect it from Israeli aggression. Hezbollah's involvement in the civil war in Syria is claimed to be a result of the increasing takfiri threat, which is expected to spread to the Lebanese territories and cause another civil war within Lebanon. Against this background, Hezbollah highlights its Lebanese identity, roots and its role of resistance against Israel, emphasizing Lebanon as the motherland, and diverting the increasing criticisms about its involvement in Syria coming from the Lebanese actors.

In this regard, this study is composed of four parts. The first part evaluates the literature on the diversionary theory of war. The second part discusses the changes in Hezbollah's reputation as a resistance force in both Lebanon and the Middle East before and during the Syrian civil war. The third part includes Hezbollah's perception of the Arab Uprisings and its trajectory of involvement in the civil war in Syria. The last part examines the changes and continuities in Hezbollah's rhetoric during the Syrian civil war and its diversionary policies in Lebanon.

This study is heavily based on the framework of the qualitative research approach, for reasons such as providing a comprehensive perspective to the researcher, providing an opportunity to analyse the studied phenomenon in-depth, and having flexibility in the research design that allows revision in the processes. The study is based on desk-based research, which consists of related books, articles, reports, journals, projects, databases and theses. Also, it covers Hezbollah's media, such as al-Manar and al-Ahed News. The study is based on primary resources consist of 58 speeches of Nasrallah between 2011 and 2016. Books, articles, reports, journals, projects, databases and theses are used as secondary resources.

## **Diversionary Theory of War**

The main argument of the diversionary theory of war is the initiative of the leaders/governments to solve their internal problems by initiating a conflict with an external enemy (Cashman, 2014) and "a seductive explanation for why states begin crises or go to war" (Fravel, 2010, p. 307). Internal problems such as increasing political

2 By territorial claims, I do not refer to Hezbollah's territorial claims out of the boundaries of Lebanon, or that Hezbollah's acts and policies since its formation already have not any irredentist tendencies. Instead, I refer to the Lebanese territory, which Hezbollah claims to be a part of, and promised to protect from any external threats.

opposition, civil war, deteriorating economic conditions or social and cultural issues can besiege states. Leaders aim to solve these problems and strengthen their positions through the instrumentalization of an external foe. They “pursue of aggressive, belligerent, or escalatory foreign policies when faced with internal social, economic, or political problems that threaten their domestic political survival” (Fravel, 2010, p. 311). Foreign policies aim to divert the public’s attention from domestic problems and are designed to help governments to retain their power (Smith, 1996). If the foreign policy overshadows the problems within the country, then the government/leader increases its power and strengthen its position in domestic affairs (Smith, 1996).

Diversionsary wars are claimed to occur among states to strengthen the position of governments against growing domestic opposition or internal rivals rather than serving the national interest. Domestic disturbance is an essential factor for the government’s decision to use force within this context (Oakes, 2012). War or the external foe is claimed to bring the masses under the “flag” in the face of a foreign threat. By so doing, the external enemy becomes a scapegoat. Any internal problems began to be referred to as an act of the external foe and defeat of this external threat emerges as the only way to victory and to strengthen the domestic situation and national interest. Diversionsary usage of force is also a double-edged issue:

Conflict within state A may tempt A’s leaders to resort to the use of force externally for diversionsary purposes, as suggested by the scapegoat hypothesis. Alternatively, conflict within state A may tempt state B to intervene, either to exploit a temporary military advantage created by the impact of A’s turmoil on its military strength or to attempt to influence the outcome of the struggle for power in A. It is possible that both of these processes may be operative. Conflict within A may generate weaknesses, which provide an opportunity for B to attack, which in turn provides the political leadership of A with a real external threat which can be exploited for its own domestic political purposes (Levy, 1988, p. 669).

According to Cashman (2014, p. 201), “the territorial occupation of the opponent can emerge as a solution to provide access to needed resources that alleviate real internal problems”. However, the war may also be used as an instrument of distraction by the government, and in this way, the attention of the public would be shifted from the internal problems to the foreign policy. If it becomes successful, it results in increasing domestic popularity and support for the government. Of course, there is a possibility of the government’s failure in its scapegoat policy. However, it does not matter in terms of the theory. What is important is the governing elite’s belief in scapegoating and instrumentalization of the foreign policy to shift the perceptions of the public from internal to external issues. Whether they are successful or not,

these policies are not necessarily in the interest of the nation, but for the sake of the ruling elite (Smith, 1996). As Quincy Wright (1965) claims, the foreign war comes to the aid of the ruling elite as a solution for internal problems.

There are three factors affecting the success of diversionary politics. Firstly, the extent of internal problems influences the possibility of enforcement of the diversionary policy. In other words, the higher the domestic unrest means, the greater the probability of diversionary force. Leaders are expected to implement a diversionary thesis before the internal conflict becomes acute. When the domestic turmoil is severe, it becomes more dangerous to implement diversionary war (Mayer, 1969). Diversionary policies enforced after the densification of internal problems and opposition insurgence may be too late for diversionary action. Going to war turns into a risky option given that the loyalties of the population and the military may be unpredictable in the aftermath. In the end, a diversionary policy and an external war may cause a civil war or state collapse rather than the consolidation of power. On the other hand, when internal opposition is weak, governments become less inclined to the risky decisions of an international diversion. As a result, the use a diversionary action makes the most sense during mid-level domestic conflicts.

Secondly, the presence or absence of long-standing rivalries with foreign powers affects the implementation of diversionary policies. According to Mitchell and Prins (2004), the presence of states that have been in constant competition justifies the application of diversionary war policies. Enduring rivalries with foreign powers work smoothly during periods of internal turmoil when rival powers can be blamed as responsible for internal problems. The ruling elite or the leader may exaggerate threats coming from rivals to provide domestic support and shore up their current position. In other words, enduring rivalries with foreign actors encourage the ruling elite or the leader to “manipulate foreign affairs to satisfy their own personal and political objectives” (Mitchell and Prins, 2004, p. 945).

Lastly, the social and cultural composition of states affects the use of diversionary force. According to Tir and Jasinski (2008), states that include a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural structure sacrifice their ethnic and cultural minorities in their diversionary war and provide them with the role of “enemy outsiders”. In this regard, they are more prone to use the diversionary war against internal minorities rather than external forces.

## Hezbollah's Reputation in Lebanon and the Middle East

From the early 2000s to 2010, Hezbollah gained a wide ranging reputation both within Lebanon and the Arab World. In 2000, Lebanon was liberated from Israeli occupation, which affirmed Hezbollah's role in the protection of Lebanese boundaries and its position as a resistance force. It also emerged as a regional actor that gained ground in the hearts and minds of Arab audiences (Khatib, 2014). The second Palestinian uprising, intifada, in the same year boosted Hezbollah's popularity in the Arab world and its role as a supporter of the Palestinian cause. The 2006 War with Israel provided a stronger reputation for the organization in Lebanon. The organization affirmed its role as a Lebanese resistance movement and the protector of Lebanon. After the organization declared its victory against Israel, the Arab public embraced Nasrallah as a hero. The organization was defined as the only viable force able to resist Israeli aggression (Daher, 2016).

On the other hand, its intervention in the civil war in Syria and armed support for the Assad government tarnished its local and regional reputation (Lob, 2017). After its involvement in the Syrian quagmire, its resistance against Israeli aggression and its role in the Palestinian cause was overshadowed by claims of making sectarianism in Syria, killing "fellow" Muslims and its close and private relations with Iran. Its role in Syria resulted its legitimacy being questioned in Lebanon. There were criticisms that they lost sight of the resistance against Israel and were spreading the civil war to Lebanon.

As the polls conducted between 2007 and 2014 display, Hezbollah had lost its support in the region as well as in Lebanon. Even in the countries, where a third of the population consists of Shiites, such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait; it had only 13–15% approval (Pollak, 2016). In Jordan, where Hezbollah was perceived as a positive actor in 2010 with 55% favourable ratings, its support decreased in 2013 to only 25% (Pollak, 2016). In the following years, it was seen that the number of people in favour of Hezbollah continued to decrease because of its role in Syria. According to the Pew Research Centre's surveys conducted between 2007 and 2014, the number of people with unfavourable views of Hezbollah has risen across the region (Drake, 2013; Pew, 2014). For instance, while only 41% of Egyptians had an unfavourable view of Hezbollah in 2007, it raised to 75% in 2013 and 83% in 2014. Similarly, 44% of Jordanians had a negative impression in 2007, but it increased to 72% of people in 2013, and 81% in 2014.

Similarly, negative opinions of Hezbollah have raised in Turkey from 66% in 2007 to 85% in 2014 and Tunisia from 33% in 2007 to 53% in 2014 (Pew, 2014). Interestingly, the number of people with unfavourable views of Hezbollah increased

in Palestine between 2007 and 2014 from 20% to 55%, which shows that Hezbollah has lost its support in one of its pillars of legitimacy.

Opinions were steady in Lebanon between 2007 and 2014 in that unfavourable views on Hezbollah fell from 64% to 59%. It can be seen that there is a sharp division between religious groups. While a significant majority of the Shiites, almost 87%, have a favourable view of Hezbollah, the ratio falls to 8% among the Sunni population and 24% among Christians (Pew, 2010). It is a result of the Lebanese public's fear of the spread of the civil war into Lebanon and the rise of sectarianism in Lebanon. According to the polls, 95% of the Lebanese population is concerned about the violence spreading to Lebanon. The rate of concern is 99% among Christians, while it is 91% among the Sunnis and 95% among the Shiites (Drake, 2013).

In addition to the opinions on the organization's profile, the popularity of the leader of the organization, Nasrallah, seems to decrease in the region. While Nasrallah was ranked as one of the most popular leaders in the Middle East in a poll conducted in 2008, his popularity dropped after Hezbollah intervened in the civil war in Syria (Dacrema and Talbot, 2019).

### **Hezbollah's Trajectory of Involvement in the Civil War in Syria**

When the uprisings began in several countries in the Middle East in 2010, they had a profound influence on Hezbollah's standing in the region and its relations with Lebanese actors. After the beginning of the uprisings in Tunisia and then their spread to other countries, Hezbollah played an active role supporting the people in the streets of the Arab world. In the first stage, the organization defined the riots and the democratic demands of the people against their authoritarian and pro-American rulers as just. According to the organization, riots in the Arab streets were Islamic awakening movements and comprised of the masses, who supported the Palestinian cause and fight against Israel. The encouraged protesters to establish democratic systems, and Hezbollah declared its solidarity with them:

We are gathering here to announce our solidarity, and our standing side by side in support of the people of Egypt, and before we stood side by side in support of the people of Tunisia. You are waging the war of Arab dignity. Today, with your voices, blood and steadfastness, you are retrieving the dignity of the Arab people; the dignity which was humiliated by some rulers of the Arab world for decades (Nasrallah, 2011, February 7).

Nasrallah defined the uprisings in the Arab world as revolutions not only against the US and Israel but against corruption, oppression and hunger. Nasrallah declared:



This is the true path, when people believe in their resolve... this is the new Middle East created by its own people. Your spring has begun; no one can lead you to another winter. Your belief, vigilance and resilience will overcome all difficulties and make you triumphant (Alagha, 2011, p. 188).

According to the organization, uprisings developed in an anti-American and anti-Israeli manner. As Nasrallah declared:

(...) the ongoing revolutions were made by the people against pro-US regimes, which do not pose any sort of threat to American policies and unequivocally Israel. America does not trigger revolutions against such submissive regimes. It is irrational to say that these revolutions are cooked in the US kitchens, and that this would have been a probability if this or that regime is against Israel (Nasrallah, 2011, March 20).

However, when the uprisings reached the streets of Damascus, Hezbollah experienced several challenges. The demise of the Assad regime was an existential threat for the organization because it was heavily dependent on Syria acting as an intermediary to receive military, logistical support from Iran.

The literature on Hezbollah's involvement in the civil war in Syria can be grouped in two general approaches. According to one school of view, Hezbollah made the choice to join the Syrian civil war out of its own self-interest and calculation. Scholarship in this group contends that Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war was a deliberate decision and an outcome of its dependence on Syria for survival. These studies also highlight Hezbollah's role in Lebanese internal politics. Marisa Sullivan (2014) provides a thorough study of Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war. She asserts that its engagement in Syria was tactically necessary. The fall of the Syrian leadership would have had significant repercussions since Syria is a member of the Iranian-led axis of resistance. In the eyes of Hezbollah, the reputational costs are less expensive than the price of passivity in Syria (Sullivan, 2014, p. 24). Syria is crucial because, according to Dara Conduit (2014, p. 102) if Iran is Hezbollah's oxygen tank, Syria would be the air hose." Because of this, "for the second time since 1992, survival became crucial and swiftly raised Hezbollah's goals outside of the organization. Armenak Tokmajyan (2014, p. 108) asserts that "religious and political factors play a more significant role in Hezbollah's Syrian policies than mass mobilization and the commitment of Hezbollah members to the idea of resistance". According to him, Hezbollah did not want to lose one of its key allies in the area.

According to a second school of thinking, Iran dictated the choice rather than Hezbollah itself. Yezid Sayigh and Makram Rabah are among those who claim Iran directed the group to become involved in the mess in Syria. Rabah (2016; 2017) contends that Hezbollah's participation in Syria was not a choice made voluntarily by

the group itself, but rather was directly motivated by its Iranian overlords. Similarly, Yezid Sayigh (2014) asserts that Hezbollah's presence in Syria is a decision made by Iran, characterizing the Assad regime as Iran's principal partner and Hezbollah's background support.

In the early days of the uprisings, Hezbollah's activities in Syria were limited. It sided with the Assad regime but did not take more than advisory and supporting roles. It only encouraged the Assad government to make political reforms. According to the organization, the government in Syria was open to making political reforms:

Since the beginning of Syria's war, we have said that Assad's regime has its merits and demerits. Reform is required, and the only way to reach this is through political dialogue. I have contacted Assad and members of the opposition to reach a settlement. Assad accepted the suggestion whereas the opposition rejected it (Nasrallah, 2013).

The organization publicly supported the regime and opposed the protesters. It labelled the protesters as foreign forces backed by the US. In 2012, Nasrallah said that "he was a friend of Syria, but not a Syrian agent" (Alagha, 2013, p. 221). At this stage, Nasrallah rejected Hezbollah's interference in Syria and the allegations that the organization sent fighters to Syria. He insisted on Hezbollah's advisory role and peaceful diplomacy in Syria.

In 2013, when the opposition in Syria strengthened and began to threaten the regime, Hezbollah's involvement shifted from an advisory mission to direct combat and operations in large numbers alongside the regime (Sullivan, 2014). Through the lenses of the organization, what was taking place in Syria had transcended the calls for reform and democracy. According to the organization, Syria was at the centre of the resistance, and its falling into the hands of the opposition groups could result in Hezbollah being surround by the US, Israel and takfiris. The fall of the Assad government would cause Israel to impose new conditions on Lebanon, and it would affect the Palestinian resistance (Ezzi, 2020). The war evolved into a sectarian phase in which ISIS and Al-Qaeda became more powerful than before. The participation of jihadists in the opposition groups was seen as a direct threat to Hezbollah. For this reason, it was no longer an option for Hezbollah to be involved in the civil war. As Tokmajyan (2014) claims, Hezbollah's argument of calling the opposition in Syria as takfiris was an instrument of pre-emptive measures for the prevention of an expansion of the war into Lebanon.

When the Assad regime's power declined against the opposition groups, military action emerged as the only and ultimate solution for Hezbollah. The organization's historical experience in urban and guerrilla fighting became an essential factor in

supporting the Assad government against the opposition (Devore and Stahli, 2012). The recapture of Qusayr by the Hezbollah-led Syrian forces became a turning point for Hezbollah's trajectory of involvement in Syria. Then, Hezbollah joined further operations in Syria including Qalamoun, Damascus, Daraa, Aleppo and Idlib, which both helped the organization to be a permanent fixture on the battlefield and deepened the political gap between the organization and its adversaries in Lebanon and the region (Daily Star, 2013, November 29; 2014, April 11; 2014, July 14).

### Hezbollah's Diversionary War in Lebanon

Fravel (2010) underlines two conditions that pave the way for the exercise of a diversionary war:

The first condition is the presence of an opportunity for escalation, namely a salient issue around which leaders can increase social cohesion or demonstrate their competence and frame the use of force as legitimate, serving national and not private interests. The second condition is the possession of military capabilities sufficient for the execution of a limited aims operation (short of war) over the salient issue, which depends on assessments of military hardware and strategy (p. 313).

When an actor encounters these two conditions, it becomes able to divert domestic turmoil to international problems. In this regard, Hezbollah considered the initiation of the civil war in Syria as an opportunity in which it could play its "Lebanese" role without going out of its national role. Preventing the civil war from spreading to Lebanon was presented as in the national interest. It was Hezbollah that would protect Lebanon from the civil war and against the increasing threat of sectarianism and takfiris with its enormous military capabilities. Its fight against the takfiris was called an existential battle (Daher, 2016).

In this way, Hezbollah framed its intervention and use of force in Syria as legitimate, serving national and not private interests. However, changes in Hezbollah's discourse encountered increasing opposition in Lebanon. From the beginning, the Lebanese state has followed a policy of official dissociation from all sides of the conflict in Syria and sought to protect its neutrality. The Lebanese government called on all Lebanese actors to uphold non-intervention in Syria (Daher, 2014). It also called on Hezbollah to stay within the boundaries of the Baabda Declaration that was signed by various Lebanese political groups in 2012. This arrangement underscored Lebanon's neutrality regarding the developments in the Middle East and aimed to distance Lebanon from the civil war in Syria to avoid a spill over effect (Dakroub, 2013). Fouad Siniora, the former prime minister of Lebanon, claimed that

Hezbollah's taking action in Syria was "very dangerous and undermining national laws and principles, the Constitution, the Baabda Declaration and international agreements" (Daily Star, 2013b). Michel Suleiman, the former president of Lebanon, called on Hezbollah to withdraw its fighters from Syria and said that involvement in the civil war of a neighbouring country would cause instability in Lebanon (News24, 2013). He claimed:

Hezbollah is a resistance (...) this resistance is present in the ministerial statement as part of the phrase 'the army, the people, and the resistance.' So how can the resistance act unilaterally without the army and the people? It is they who departed from that triplet (the army, the people, and the resistance). They took the part that concerns them and acted on their own (Rammal, 2013).

Saad Hariri, the Sunni prime minister and the strongest figurehead of the March 14 Alliance, criticized Hezbollah for dragging the fires of Syria to Lebanon and carrying sectarianism to Lebanese territories (CBC, 2015). He alleged that Hezbollah's claim of fighting against sectarianism in Syria is no more than making sectarianism. Hariri also claimed Hezbollah was alienating the Lebanese public: "since it heard voices only coming from Iran, Hezbollah would not hear the call of the Lebanese people" (CBC, 2015). Waleed Jumblatt, the Druze leader, claimed that Hezbollah was acting under the Iranian command and made a call to Hezbollah to stop its activities in Syria. Additionally, Subhi al-Tufeyli, the first secretary-general of Hezbollah, claimed Hezbollah was an organization killing its people and supporting the Syrian regime, which did nothing for the Palestinian cause.

According to a survey conducted by Sofres Liban Polling Agency in 2014, the majority, almost 56%, of the Lebanese respondents opposed Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, 28% supported it, and 16% had no opinion or did not answer (Now Media, 2014). Among the religious communities, 60% of the Shia supports the intervention, while 82% of the Sunni population, 61% of Christians and 63% of the Druze community opposed it. Hezbollah's intervention in Syria was also opposed because it created economic and social turmoil in Lebanon. The worsening security situation negatively influenced the financial condition, business, and investment climate, especially in the border areas. In the cities, restaurants and shopkeepers saw a decline in sales. Due to the increasing number of migrations, "residents attempted to sell or rent their apartments and relocate to other parts of the city, driving down property values" (Lob, 2014, pp. 3-4).

While Christian and Sunni communities criticized Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, there were also criticisms among the Shia community. The Shiites in Lebanon initially questioned Hezbollah's involvement in the civil war (Lob, 2014).

Hezbollah's deaths in Syria caused a sense of dissatisfaction among its Shiite supporters (Daher, 2016; Lob, 2017). Increasing casualties triggered criticisms from inside and uncertainty among the Shiite population regarding Hezbollah's involvement in the civil war. The families whose sons died in Syria began to question the wisdom of fighting against Muslims in Syria. As Randa Slim (2013) points out, their ambivalence and suspicions of the intervention increased after they witnessed the growing number of body bags and funerals of Hezbollah fighters. In order to appease the criticisms coming from the Lebanese Shiites, Hezbollah attempt to re-invent tradition. It began to re-sanctify martyrdom in public meetings and used holiness of sacrifice in its media outlets. According to Bianchi (2018), reports of dreams involving martyrs and sacrifice have been mentioned at least six times more in pro-Hezbollah media since 2013.

The Lebanese Shiites were also afraid of widening the civil war and the Sunni-Shiite tensions towards Lebanon (Dettmer, 2013). As the attacks against the Lebanese Shiites increased, they realized that Hezbollah's actions in Syria were "subjecting them to physical and material harm" (Lob 2014, p. 3). The criticisms eventually intensified after the Syrian rebels and Sunni extremists launched armed attacks in areas, where the Shia population largely lives. Moreover, some of the allies of the organization in Lebanon also refused to fight in Syria and criticized the organization's decision to intervene in the civil war. For example, the Ansar-Allah group and the Lebanese Resistance Brigades refused to fight for Assad (Daher, 2016). The organization and Nasrallah confronted the criticisms and declared that Israeli and American agents infiltrated the Al-Nusra Front and ISIS organized the Syrian opposition's attacks in Lebanon. Furthermore, Nasrallah pointed to Saudi Arabia as the power behind these attacks. He claimed that Hezbollah was fighting to protect Lebanon against these Western and pro-Western powers and if it does not make provisions against them, the bombs will come to kill the Lebanese people. Hezbollah sought to lead its militants with the legacy of Shia history and religion. As it claimed, "what was happening in Syria was a repetition of what happened in Karbala" (Daher, 2016, p. 184). Even though there has been no fatwa from a Shia cleric, fighting in Syria was presented as a religious duty. As takfiris were attacking the Shia shrines and holy places in Syria, protecting these places was Hezbollah fighters' ethical obligation. "It was not uncommon to see Hezbollah soldiers fighting in Syria wearing headbands embellished with the phrase 'O Hussain', an exaltation of Hussain ibn Ali" (Blanford, 2013). As Daher (2017) argues, there has also been a rise in the number of photos and songs glorifying Shia religious symbols, and the martyrs.

Creation of an external enemy became Hezbollah's central strategy. Nasrallah claimed:

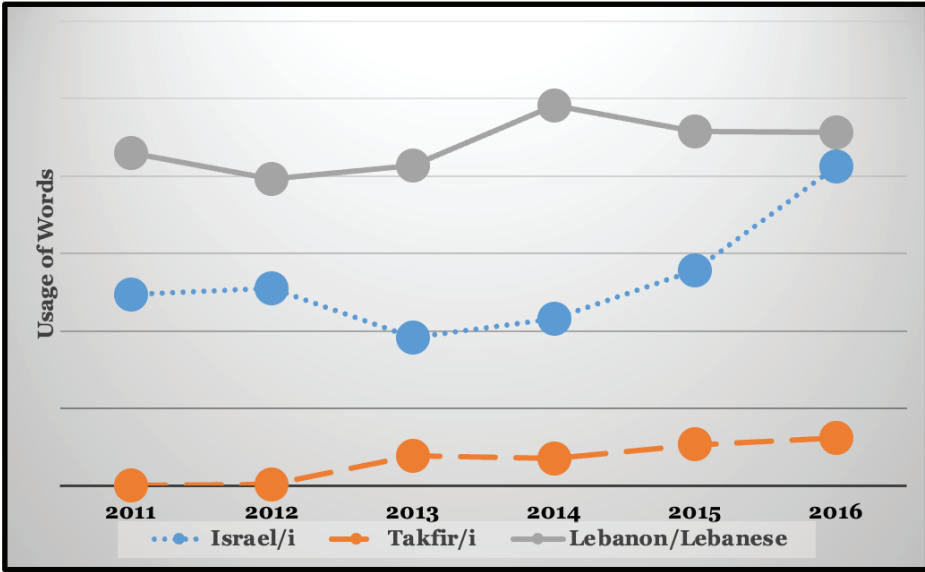
It was not a battle for toppling the regime (Assad), but rather a battle that aimed at imposing demographic changes in the region... ISIL and Al-Nusra wanted to eliminate certain groups that have been in the region for centuries, not just the minorities, but even the Sunnis and anyone who opposed their project (Nasrallah, 2016).

Claiming the opposition groups in Syria were supported by the US and Israel, the organization not only showed it was still focused on resistance to protect Lebanon but also pointed to takfiris' intention to invade Lebanon. Israeli attacks on Hezbollah in Syrian territories were claimed to be evidence of Israel and takfiri collaboration. In this way, the organization referred to the takfiri as an external threat and addressed the fears and feelings of the Lebanese public. In return, it expected them to rally around the flag. However, defining the opposition as takfiris and non-religious carried the risk of alienation to the Sunni public in the region and falling into the trap of sectarianism.

Through cultivating the image of fear, Hezbollah aimed to establish possible coalitions with the Lebanese actors at the national level. Cultivating an image of fear among the non-Muslim Lebanese seemed to be successful in several areas. Murat Tinas (2016) states that, based on the information he obtained from the interviews he conducted in the field, the widespread opinion among the Lebanese non-Muslims is that Hezbollah protected the Christian settlements on the Lebanon-Syria border. Changes in population structure preoccupies the agenda of non-Muslim communities in Lebanon. Changes in the population structure occupy the agenda of non-Muslim communities in Lebanon as this might influence the Lebanese political system as well. According to Filippo Dionigi (2016), "the Christian factions are concerned about the Syrian Issue because they fear that refugee presence may alter the sectarian composition of Lebanon in favour of the Sunni Muslim community".

**Table 1.**

*Usage of Words (Israel/i, Takfir/i, and Lebanon/Lebanese) in Nasrallah’s Speeches Between 2011 and 2016*



The inefficacy of the Lebanese army to protect the Lebanon-Syria border has been another factor that strengthened Hezbollah’s legitimacy of the intervention in the civil war. For instance, after a conflict broke out between the Lebanese army and the Al-Nusra Front in Aarsal close to the Syrian-Lebanese border, on August 7, 2014, more than twenty Lebanese soldiers were killed and many were taken hostage. Afterwards, an agreement was reached and the hostages were released, but the fact that the jihadist threat reached Lebanon and the Lebanese army showed its inadequacy helped to strengthen the legitimacy of Hezbollah’s fight in Syria (Aziz, 2014).

Because of increasing opposition in Lebanon, the organization was at a crossroads. Usage of the traditional discourse of threat against Israel returned to the organization’s language. On the other hand, the organisation did not give up the usage of takfiri threat rhetoric. In an analysis of Nasrallah’s speeches between 2011 and 2016, Nasrallah’s use of words such as “Lebanon”, “Lebanese”, “takfiri” and “Israel/i” showed that the change in Hezbollah’s discourse and rhetoric mirrored its policies in Syria (Table 1). Hezbollah’s use of the word “takfiri” started in 2012 and increased largely after its involvement in the Syrian civil war. Parallel to this, its usage of the words “Lebanon” and “Lebanese” increased at a tremendous rate. It can be concluded that Hezbollah sought to overcome domestic criticisms about its involvement in Syria. As explained

earlier, Hezbollah's activities in Syria were perceived within the context of sectarianism as the Lebanese public criticized the organization for waging war against the Sunni Muslims. It seems Hezbollah increased the usage of these words related to its Lebanese identity to overcome these criticisms. Another essential indication the table shows is the usage of the word "Israel/i". While usage of "takfiri" increased between 2011 and 2013, the usage of the word "Israel/i" decreased dramatically until 2013 and began to grow after then. As one of the criticisms of the Lebanese public against Hezbollah is its loss of focus on resistance against Israel, Hezbollah started to use its Israeli opposition to divert the reactions against its involvement in Syria. As a result, usage of the words "takfiri" and "Israel/i" increase in parallel with each other. Even after Hezbollah took the cities close to the Lebanese border from the Syrian opposition in 2015, Nasrallah declared that the road to Jerusalem passes through these places and linked the Palestinian cause with the civil war in Syria (Nasrallah, 2015).

Through the frame of the diversionary war, Hezbollah aimed to divert the public from their suspicions about the organization, prove its 'Lebaneseness' as a national actor, and stimulate the nationalist sentiments of the Lebanese people. In this regard, its ultimate goals were rallying the public behind itself, decreasing the severity of the blame placed on them for internal problems, and then restoring its image in Lebanon by highlighting its Lebanese identity and its role as the protector of Lebanon. Within this context, the diversionary theory of war provides a domestic-level explanation for an international conflict (Fravel, 2010) and studying Hezbollah as a case offers an essential alternative to the the views of a war based on the state as a unitary actor.

## Conclusion

As Syria was a partner and backer for Hezbollah in the region, the organization was involved in the civil war in Syria to support Assad's rule. It built its rhetoric on the fight against takfiris. In this way, it aimed to form a legitimate base for its intervention. As a result, the understanding of traditional threats was replaced with a new perception. While references to Israel as a traditional threat decreased, usage of takfiris increased. However, the organization was criticized for endangering Lebanon. To divert these criticisms targeting its involvement in the civil war in Syria, Hezbollah reemphasized its role in Lebanon and the Palestinian issue and highlighted its resistance role against Israel. It stressed its position as the protector of Lebanon's territorial integrity and social peace and its anti-Israeli manner within the context of Palestinian resistance. By doing so, it, on the one hand, diverted the public reactions from its intervention in Syria to the security of Lebanon and Palestine, on the other hand, it aimed to protect its reason for being. Within this context, it is seen that after the end of 2013,



Hezbollah began to focus on Lebanese domestic politics to stabilize the situation (Daher, 2016). It used the rhetoric of the Israeli threat parallel to a takfiri one. What enabled Hezbollah to maintain the usage of a takfiri threat and involvement in the civil war in Syria were the fragile structures of the Lebanese state and Hezbollah's political and military power in Lebanon. This study also draws attention to the criticisms that non-state actors such as Hezbollah do not take into account the views of the public and that there is a disconnection between them. Hezbollah's return from its discourse of the takfiri threat to its traditional understanding shows the influence of the public over Hezbollah's rhetoric and policies.

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