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DISENTANGLING LEBANON FROM REGIONAL WARS: RE-THINKING HEZBOLLAH

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INTRODUCTION

The surprise resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri while on a trip to Saudi Arabia in November 2017 sent shockwaves throughout the Middle East. Outrage at the possibility of Saudi's involvement in forcing Hariri to resign was curbed only after he announced the suspension of his resignation two weeks later. This incident is only the latest in a series of tumultuous episodes of Lebanese politics caught in a web of regional power struggles. In this paper, I examine the interplay of domestic and regional constraints that prevent the "normalization" of Lebanese foreign policy, i.e. disentanglement from regional wars, specifically the Arab-Israeli and the Iranian-Israeli conflicts. Although since 2007 the United States and, to some extent, Europe have tried to assist Lebanon in strengthening its army and weakening Hezbollah, these policies have been misguided. Only a better understanding of domestic dynamics can reshape these policies.

After the end of the civil war in 1990, Lebanon had receded in importance for U.S. foreign policy priorities. The United States was reluctant to get involved in Lebanese internal politics after the 1983 attack on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. Rather, the United States preferred to focus on the Israeli-Palestinian and Syrian-Israeli conflicts. Until the 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops after the "Cedar Revolution," the United States dealt only with Damascus on issues related to Lebanon and maintained

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limited economic aid and investments to Lebanon during post-civil war recovery (Schenker 2009; Najem 2012, 111).

Only recently with the "war on terror" and in the frame of countering Iran's influence in the region has Lebanon begun to receive some financial assistance from the United States, if not the attention of foreign policy experts. While the U.S. Congress had kept levels of engagement with Lebanon low since 1983, since 2007 it has committed itself to a Foreign Military Financing program (FMF). This program, which seeks "to professionalize the Lebanese Armed Forces and to strengthen border security and combat terrorism" (Consolidated Appropriations Act 2017, 529), amounted to $1.5 billion USD over the past 10 years (U.S. Embassy in Lebanon 2018). Out of the 31 congressional measures signed into law that mentioned either Lebanon or Hezbollah in the past 10 years, 21 refer to the FMF program in annual budgets and 8 to countering Iran's influence. These eight laws detail sanctions against Iran's ballistic missile program but also against Iran's sponsorship of international terrorism. These measures are specifically aimed at undercutting support for groups such as Hezbollah.

The U.S. government has classified Hezbollah as a terrorist organization since 1997 and this categorization was refined in 2001 to describe Hezbollah as a "Foreign Terrorist Organization" possessing "global reach" (Harb and Leenders 2005, 175; U.S. Department of State). Hezbollah has also been described by many senior U.S. officials as one of the most dangerous terrorist organizations in the region, assessing in particular that it surpassed al-Qaeda as a "threat to peace" in the early 2000s (Harb and Leenders 2005, 175). This increased attention is epitomized by the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015. A bundle of new bills has been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2017 to make this legislation more stringent.

However, the continued view that Hezbollah is an "illegitimate" terrorist organization that a "legitimate" Lebanese state is unable to cope with is flawed and leads to inadequate responses. Indeed, U.S. policies reflect an out-of-date narrative that does not sufficiently capture recent developments (Hourani 2013, 51; Harb and Leenders 2005, 175–177). The reality of the Lebanese state, as in many postcolonial states, is the blurring of lines between state and non-state actors. Entities that are formally recognized as being part of the state and other elements that belong to sectarian political movements combine in the politics of Lebanese security to form "hybrid sovereignties" (Hazbun 2016, 1056). Hezbollah now functions as a "state-within-a-state" and has entered the realm of normal politics by associating itself with new President Michel Aoun's March 8 coalition, one

of Lebanon's two state coalitions. It has also established itself as a welfare network, which I define in this paper as the social infrastructure that enables Hezbollah to provide security, utilities, medical services, education, and employment to its targeted demographic.

In addition to misreading these domestic dynamics, Western foreign policymakers have also misread the international intricacies of Lebanese foreign policy. Torn between Saudi Arabia and Iran and caught in a war of regional influence, Lebanon has tried unsuccessfully to maintain a neutral foreign policy. The American irritation at increasing Iranian influence in Lebanon must be recalibrated in view of Lebanese domestic issues. These considerations raise the following question: how can Lebanon achieve a normalization of its foreign policy? As Hezbollah is the main reason why Lebanon is still in a state of war with Israel and remains involved militarily in neighboring conflicts, can the United States do more to help Lebanon disentangle itself from Hezbollah? By examining Lebanon's domestic politics and institutions, I will show that the country faces structural imbalances that enable the rise of entities such as Hezbollah, which in turn exacerbate these imbalances to their advantage. Network analysis further sheds light on such hybrid sovereignties while speech evidence suggests that Hezbollah is not necessarily unstoppable. These findings highlight the need to identify the right tools to challenge Hezbollah's hold over Lebanon.

This paper outlines several issues that need to be addressed to diminish Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon. The link between sectarian divisions, external penetration, and institutional weaknesses which enables the creation of entities with hybrid sovereignties should be severed. Misunderstanding Hezbollah as simply being "terrorists" rather than a sophisticated network that provides social services in the continuity of Lebanese political practice obstructs novel ways of dealing with Hezbollah as a welfare network. Lastly, Hezbollah's populist nature should be properly identified to make a new range of tools available. Part I of this paper identifies the traditional determinants of Lebanese domestic imbalance, Part II focuses on the hybrid sovereignties that emerge from these conditions, Part III examines how such hybrid sovereignties arise and persist from a network perspective, and Part IV highlights the populist features of Hezbollah, which could limit its influence over governmental functions. Lastly, I will present several policy recommendations.

The Traditional Determinants of Lebanese Imbalance

Sectarian Divisions

The fundamental obstacle standing in the way of "normalizing" Lebanese foreign policy is the sectarian, or "confessional," structure of the Lebanese state. This confessional structure accentuates and is in turn reinforced by external pressures and institutional weakness. Dating back to the National Pact of 1943 and the revised constitution with the Ta'if Agreement after the civil war in 1989, the consociational system—a power-sharing arrangement between confessions—has been in place to overcome sectarian divisions. However, rather than incorporating cultural diversity, the state has remained fractured along sectarian lines. Each confessional community enjoys great powers, playing both religious and political roles. Beyond its authority over personal status law, each confessional community also holds political privileges in terms of reserved parliamentary seats and in the distribution of political roles. For instance, presidential functions are reserved to Maronite Christians, the position of prime minister to Sunni Muslims, and that of speaker of the assembly to Shi'ite Muslims. The state has become a platform for deadlock and competition of diverging interests between rival factions (Wilkins 2012, 25).

As none of the confessional groups comprise a majority of the population, they form coalitions and look for external patrons. A pillar of the National Pact of 1943 was to give Lebanon a neutral foreign policy, a compromise between pan-Arab and pro-Western orientations. This neutrality has never been implemented as each substate group held its own foreign-policy agenda and tried to impose it with external help (Wilkins 2012, 26). This dynamic persists today. The coalitions and agendas may have changed, but the multiplicity of agendas and the impossibility of imposing a neutral foreign policy—or at least a non-belligerent foreign policy—remain.

Post-2005, Lebanon regained some of its independence in foreign policy after the Syrian withdrawal. During this time, two main political coalitions emerged: March 8 and March 14, named for the day of protests held by each coalition's respective followers after Rafiq Hariri's assassination. Syrian allies, mainly Shi'ite parties (along with Hezbollah) and Christian followers of Michel Aoun took to the streets on March 8 to "thank Syria" and reaffirm its special relationship with Lebanon. A week later, Hariri's Sunni movement, along with the Christian political parties Lebanese Forces and Kataeb, responded with an even larger demonstration, lead-

ing to the Syrian withdrawal (Hourani 2013, 48). The two narratives are utterly irreconcilable: the pro-Western and pro-Saudi March 14 coalition emphasizes economic imperatives, the disarmament of Hezbollah, and disengagement from the Arab-Israeli and Iranian-Israeli conflicts, while the pro-Iran and pro-Syria March 8 coalition prioritizes armed resistance against Israel and Western domination (Najem 2012, 116–117).

External pressures

No Lebanese leader can alone prevail over the others. This sectarian imbalance has fueled a recurrent phenomenon where external patrons intervene in Lebanon's domestic politics. Sectarian leaders have often called on foreign powers for help, powers with significant strategic interests in the region. During the civil war, it was the Christian forces who called for Syria and Israel to intervene (Zahar 2012, 66–67). Prior to 2005, Saudi Arabia poured billions of dollars into the Lebanese economy on behalf of the Sunnis. With the support of the United States, Saudi Arabia assured the premiership to Rafiq Hariri from 1992 to 1998 and from 2000 to 2004. The benefactors of Hariri's financial network from Riyadh dominated economic matters, especially in the domains of real estate, insurance, and post-war reconstruction (Hourani 2013, 45). While Saudi Arabia had infiltrated the economy and still plays a major role in it, the security sector was deeply affected by other relationships, mostly between Hezbollah and Syria and Hezbollah and Iran (Wilkins 2012, 43–44).

After its 2005 military retreat from Lebanon and until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the Syrian government sought to retain control over Lebanon and over the Hezbollah-Israel conflict. It provided Hezbollah with arms (which originated in Iran) and shared key intelligence and strategic planning. Using this cooperation, Syria ensured that Lebanese foreign policy remained aligned with its own. Acting through the March 8 coalition, Syria vetoed pro-Western policies or deals with Israel before they could reach any deal themselves with the Jewish state (Najem 2012, 118). Syria also had a long history of political assassination, eliminating anti-Syrian figures and opposition in Lebanon. Furthermore, even after its withdrawal from Lebanon, Syria kept its transboundary networks. They are interwoven into the Lebanese government and military and continue to engage in corruption and cross-border trafficking of primary goods, such as cement and oil (Picard 2012, 97–100; Hourani 2013, 48).

Hezbollah's relations with Iran go far beyond a strategic entente. The two share a strong ideological affinity. Iran's Revolutionary Guard established Hezbollah among the Lebanese Shi'ite population in the 1980s to

spread the Islamic Revolution and set up an Islamic state in Lebanon. Iran provided Hezbollah with arms, intelligence, and training. Many of Hezbollah's spiritual leaders have family ties with Iranians. Iran has given Hezbollah hundreds of millions of dollars in aid, enabling Hezbollah to effectively become a patronage network within the Shi'ite community but also to rebuild after the war with Israel. The retreat of Israel from the south of Lebanon in 2000 and the stalemate in 2006 demonstrated Hezbollah's value as a critical asset in Iran's eyes. Iran will maintain its support as long as Hezbollah can act as an effective deterrent against Israel. Iran has already threatened to turn the Lebanese-Israeli front into a theatre of war through Hezbollah in case of an Israeli attack on Iranian territory (Najem 2012, 118–119; Wilkins 2012, 34–35).

The absence of U.S. support to Lebanon's formal military before 2007 and the inadequacy of the FMF support that came after accentuated the imbalance between the "state" army and Hezbollah's. As the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) already lagged behind Hezbollah's forces in capabilities, U.S. aid to the LAF simply did not measure up to Iran's financing for Hezbollah. From 2009 to 2011, U.S. aid to the LAF was cut by half from already low levels (U.S. Department of State, 2017) and represented in 2016 one-tenth of what is believed to be Iran's aid to Hezbollah (Harris 2017). Although the FMF funds rose in 2017, the proposed budget for 2018 cancels the FMF for the LAF, which could have even more deleterious consequences for Lebanon (Abrams 2018, 3). Unlike Iran, the United States is also concerned about minimizing the threat to Israel, its regional ally. A surge of arms in the region increases the risk of weapons falling into the wrong hands. This perception has considerably restricted U.S. financial assistance along with lethal and offensive armament delivery to the LAF (Nerguizian 2014, 12).

Institutional weakness

The Lebanese state has always been weak due to its consociational system and lack of military capacity, and this weakness predates the civil war. Nevertheless, after the Ta'if Accord, the system has been even more prone to deadlock: with the attribution of equal powers to the president, prime minister, and speaker of the house, the formerly all-powerful president no longer plays the role of domestic arbitrator (Najem 2012, 120). Similarly, the sectarian allocation of ministries and appointment to public sector positions prevent coordinated policies as each leader puts the need of his or her own group and clientele network ahead of state interests. Looking at foreign policy-making, when the prime minister (PM) and the foreign

minister (FM) belong to different coalitions, as was the case between PM Fouad Siniora and FM Fawzi Salloukh, communication can be completely severed (Wilkins 2012, 46–47). Ta'if also accentuated confessional grievances which reinforce disagreements, as the long-marginalized Shi'ite community still resents unequal participation in power-sharing and the Maronites feel insecure about their diminished role (Hamdan 2012, 44–45).

The weakness of the army is even more problematic than the inefficiency of the civil service. Lebanon has a small army with outdated equipment and no real air force or navy (Wilkins 2012, 47). The army has around 70,000 men, including reservists, which is equivalent to the number of Hezbollah fighters (Rose 2018). This deficit can be traced back to the Ta'if Agreement, which established an unequal cooperative relationship between Syria and Lebanon, with the Lebanese army and police being subordinated to their Syrian counterparts. The Lebanese army, which was almost non-existent after the civil war, was remodeled according to the Ba'athist model, based on conscription and obsolete training. Syria had total control over Lebanese intelligence and ensured that Lebanese intelligence officers' allegiances were to Syria. To maintain this control, Syria devoted important financial resources toward training, intelligence, wages, and gifts. Minimal sums were left over for equipment and armament. Syria was also not keen on rearming the Lebanese army, preferring to keep it weak. Moreover, during this period, most Western powers were reluctant to help rebuild an army under Syrian control. Furthermore, Syria set up numerous competing security institutions in intelligence and in the elite military corps, which made coordination between different units negligible, as officers were accustomed to reporting to their own Syrian patrons. The ensuing lack of Lebanese strategic planning and materiel explains why the military was dysfunctional after the Syrian withdrawal. It also explains why the Lebanese military was effectively a bystander during the 2006 Israeli attack and local insurgencies in 2007. It had lost the monopoly on the use of violence over its territory, leaving a vacuum partly filled by other entities including Hezbollah (Picard 2012, 86–90).

Furthermore, the army has not been representative of the ethnic balance of the population. Under Syrian leadership, most anti-Syrian Christians were excluded from the officer corps. Since 2005, the army has reflected the divide between the March 8 and March 14 coalitions. The Syrian withdrawal reactivated the intra-Christian rift between President Aoun on the one hand and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and Kataeb supporters on the other. This rift also fostered more distrust toward the army for being too soft on the Shi'ites by letting them support Hezbol-

lah's military arm. Sectarian allegiances prevail, and in times of war these divided loyalties are counterproductive for any military operation (Picard 2012, 94–97).

Lastly, corruption is rampant across institutions. Corruption has persisted and spread since the days of the lawless economy under Syrian rule. It pervades the system from the level of political leaders and senior civil servants down to the ordinary police officer. Corruption allegedly costs the Lebanese state more than $1.5 billion USD per year (Picard 2012, 98).

Since 2007, efforts have been made to reform the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), but as stated above, American funding has not been enough to overcome the LAF's many defects and has not compared to the aid Hezbollah receives from Iran (Picard 2012, 90). The 2014 Ministerial Conference on International Support for the LAF in Rome demonstrated international concern for strengthening the LAF, capped by a Saudi pledge to donate $3 billion USD worth of French arms. However, Saudi Arabia later scrapped the arms package as the Saudis faced low oil prices and increased spending for their intervention in Yemen. Resentment against the Lebanese government for not condemning the attack on the Saudi embassy in Iran may also have played a role in the cancellation of the arms package (Reuters 2016).

This structural imbalance has made the Lebanese state prone to competition over its sovereignty. The root causes of sectarian divisions, external penetration, and institutional weakness have enabled Hezbollah to thrive and push for a more belligerent agenda. U.S. foreign policy only consists of measures that focus on Hezbollah's military capabilities and connections, overlooking the place Hezbollah has come to hold in Lebanese political life.

Hybrid sovereignties and the transformation of Hezbollah

The official U.S. foreign policy narrative of the "illegitimate" terrorist organization against a "legitimate" state is misleading when it comes to understanding Hezbollah. This narrative is based on misconceptions and on analyses that have not changed since the 1980s. Though Hezbollah did commit acts of terrorism in the 1980s and has been accused of doing so in the early 1990s, and while it does support Hamas in its fight against Israel, amplifying this discourse overshadows other realities. Since the mid-1980s, Hezbollah has replaced suicide operations with more conventional warfare. It has also denied responsibility for other terrorist attacks, such as the 1992 and 1994 bombings in Buenos Aires and London (Harb and Leenders 2005, 175–178). Rather, it shifted towards more sophisticated

military operations, such as launching rockets and missiles on Israeli positions (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002, 133) and now sending men to fight alongside Bashar al-Assad's forces in Syria (Reuters 2018). In this sense, Hezbollah's tactics are less "terrorist" and better described as "quasi-state" military operations.

Another exaggerated claim is that Hezbollah is associated with al-Qaeda (U.S. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States 2004, 128), which completely ignores the long-standing animosity between the two groups. Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah described al-Qaeda soon after the September 11 attacks as an "entity trapped in medieval ages and bent on killing innocent Muslims" (Saab and Riedel, 2007). Reciprocally, the late leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq Abu Musab al-Zarqawi accused Hezbollah of acting as a protective buffer for Israel (Saab and Riedel 2007; Kaplan 2006). Moreover, al-Qaeda has carried out several attacks on Hezbollah, such as the July 2004 attack on Hezbollah senior official Ghaleb Awali (Saab and Riedel 2007).

A final misconception is about Hezbollah's ideal of establishing an Islamic state in Lebanon. Although establishing an Islamic state was Hezbollah's goal at its inception, Hezbollah has not proposed the establishment of an Islamic state in its political platforms since it began participating in Lebanese elections in the early 1990s. Party leaders still contend that it is an abstraction to be aspired to, but that it is impossible to impose without consensus, given the pluralism of the Lebanese context (Harb and Leenders 2005, 179).

Many sources base their "terrorist" claims on Hezbollah's public discourse, with its anti-American rhetoric and full support of Palestinian armed resistance (U.S. Department of State 2004, 122). However, this strong discourse is similar to many party discourses in the Arab world (Salamey and Pearson 2007, 422).

Hezbollah has developed into a whole new kind of organization since the 1980s. It has become a state-like entity that provides electricity and water as well as a wide range of social services including healthcare, education, and economic development programs. It assures basic welfare to its constituency and offers new opportunities for unemployed youth through its numerous affiliated companies and charity organizations. It also assists Shi'ite citizens in securing positions within the government or in ministries and helps them navigate Lebanon's corruption-prone bureaucracy. It is a highly professional network, and its efficacy in long-neglected Shi'ite areas enabled it to absorb other Shiite rivals and to gain wide popular support (Hourani 2013, 40–41; Deeb 2006, 118).

At the same time, Hezbollah has also managed to develop into a Lebanese Shi'ite social movement. Its holistic approach goes far beyond material assistance to its constituents and promotes an elaborate ideology. Hezbollah's mission is centered around the concept of resistance against Israel and Western domination, both in terms of the West's regional policies and of the capitalist and materialist culture it imposes on the Middle East (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002, 88). Its military and social dimensions are deeply intertwined, as armed resistance against Israel is associated with the Shi'ite social and moral responsibility to resist Western decadence. Hezbollah aims to produce a new "Resistance Society" and push for modernization with an Islamic outlook. The combination of the material and ideological components in its discourse appeals to different segments of the population and makes Hezbollah a formidable adversary that cannot simply be "removed" by force (Harb and Leenders 2005, 184–188; Deeb 2006, 122).

In view of these dynamics and of Hezbollah's ability to take on the role of a state where the Lebanese state is absent, the official U.S. narrative on Hezbollah must change. Lebanon is not simply a weak state that lacks sovereignty. Rather, it should be viewed as a constellation of hybrid sovereignties. Beyond the state/non-state dichotomy, one should also take into account polities which do not coincide with the state, but which fulfill state-like functions where the central government is absent. These realities change the way one should conceive of the state and of non-state actors, especially when the former does not completely assume its role and relies on the latter to complement its services, be it in the provision of military protection or of social welfare. These special arrangements shed light on the different ways of governing a territory that are prevalent throughout much of the postcolonial world (Fregonese 2012, 659; Hourani 2013, 41).

Understanding Hezbollah's evolution is necessary to comprehend how it has taken root in the fabric of Lebanese politics and society. The simple "terrorist" label has concealed for too long what makes Hezbollah so enduring—namely, its ability to fulfill particular material and ideological needs for the population. Nevertheless, this form of governance is not novel in Lebanon, and proceeding to a network analysis sheds some additional light on the development and possible trajectories of such entities.

Seeing Hezbollah Under the Network Lens

Rather than invoking the state/non-state dichotomy, policymakers should view Hezbollah as part of a succession of sectarian-based networks that have controlled Lebanon. These networks, "in which political movements develop and become anchored in non-state and parastatal institutions that

provide economic, social and security services and even military capabilities" (Hourani 2013, 41), are paradigmatic of the Lebanese mode of governing.

One could trace this pattern back to the wartime Christian Kataeb network, which from 1975 to 1990 established a parastatal institution in the region it controlled, and then began to capture existing state institutions in 1982. It redistributed economic aid to political allies and military assistance to its militia, the Lebanese Forces, and to the loyal part of the Lebanese Army. It maintained its clientele by incorporating Phalangist institutions into the state apparatus, notably the Council on Foreign Economic Relations which became the Board of Foreign Economic Relations (BOFER). The BOFER had wide latitude to manage tourism, industrial development, and foreign trade, making deals with private companies and directly negotiating with foreign governments. The Kataeb network declined due to two reasons. First, U.S. support was withdrawn under President Ronald Reagan after then-Lebanese President Amine Gemayel failed to sign the May 17 Agreement with Israel in 1985. Second, the 1989–90 economic crisis triggered the collapse of Lebanese financial institutions upon which the Kataeb mercantile elite were dependent. Subsequently, other smaller networks came to prominence, such as the Druze "Administration of the Mountain" created by the militia of the Jumblatt family, the most politically prominent Druze family in Lebanon (Hourani 2013, 41–42).

The Hariri network is another example of this mode of governance, and it thrived after the civil war when the remodeled state would have been expected to regain its control. The Saudi-backed billionaire and construction magnate Rafiq Hariri controlled a constellation of companies and charities and also provided an impressive range of social services such as healthcare, education, and post-war reconstruction planning. He also captured Lebanese financial institutions, the Central Bank and the Banks' Association, and inserted his allies into the state apparatus. His former lawyer became the minister of justice and the head of his Mediterranean group became the finance minister. Moreover, he put in place a powerful Council for Development and Reconstruction, which acted just as the BOFER did before with the Kataeb network (Hourani 2013, 43–44).

An analysis of these networks highlights another common feature, which is their transnational nature: they rely on foreign patronage. Both the Kataeb and the Hariri projects were successful because they had the financial and military backing of foreign powers, the United States for the former and Saudi Arabia for the latter. Moreover, the withdrawal of external support is usually part of the reason why these networks collapse. It is when they lose their usefulness for their external patron that they start

to decline, as was the case with the Kataeb and the United States, and as seems to be the case today with Hariri and Saudi Arabia (Hourani 2013, 45–46).

Hezbollah shares many of the features of the Kataeb and Hariri networks highlighted above. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference in that Hezbollah does not seem to seek control of the Lebanese economy. Rather, it emerged to fill the military vacuum left by the Hariri network in the South (Hourani 2013, 46). In other words, all of these networks have provided social welfare, but while the Kataeb and especially the Hariri networks were mostly concerned with capturing the economy, Hezbollah, building on its anti-neoliberal stance, largely focuses on its armed resistance against Israel and Western domination. In terms of financing, Hezbollah does not seem to need to capture the economy. It is mainly funded by Iran, but also to a large extent by the donations of expatriate Lebanese, which are presumed to be in large part derived from criminal networks (Levitt 2013, 248, 328–329), and pious Shia, who consider their contributions as a form of religious tax in line with a key pillar of Islam to give to charities (Deeb 2006, 121).

Lebanese history offers some perspective on Hezbollah's current trajectory. In view of all the similarities to the other networks, one could argue that Hezbollah is following a similar path to power. It has evolved from a militia into a state-like entity providing needed welfare to a long-marginalized population. It has succeeded in infiltrating state institutions and enjoys strong financial and military backing from Iran. However, even though it exhibits many of the features of previous ruling networks such as the Kataeb or the Hariri networks, it does not dominate the financial and trading sectors. This unique feature is a result of Hezbollah's populist nature, which differentiates it from previous ruling networks but also limits its governmental influence.

Populism As a Constraint on Hezbollah's Ascendency to Power

Hezbollah's success and popularity lies not only in its military victories but also in its "symbolic capital" in terms of honor, dignity, and martyrdom. The party was on the verge of disappearing in 2003, but Israel's attack in 2006 rejuvenated it. Hezbollah used the war to rebuild its narrative and navigate its way back into Lebanese politics. Hezbollah shares four main characteristics with populist movements. First, the party uses a strong anti-elite discourse: the United States' and Israel's corrupt allies in the government did nothing when Lebanon was under attack. Second, it targets its

message to the "silent majority," the "good" average Arab who is suffering in silence and with whom Hezbollah's discourse resonates. Third, Hezbollah's charismatic, non-corrupt, and puritan leader, Hassan Nasrallah, holds great sway over his constituency as well as over other segments in society and is easily accessible via his TV channel. Lastly, it maintains its influence by perpetuating the narrative of armed resistance and the defense of the nation against the Israeli enemy. If, in 2003, Hezbollah was on the verge of becoming a rebel without a cause, today the party emphasizes more than ever its self-stated noble purpose of leading the defense against the existential threat from Israel. This discourse directed at the pious poor and underclass reflects to a large extent the current trend of Islamic populism in the Middle East (Leenders 2006, 44–47). Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Jaysh al-Mahdi in Iraq, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and Egypt exemplify such practices (Salamey and Pearson 2007, 420–421).

A consequence of this populist strategy is that it limits the involvement of Hezbollah in government. Hezbollah needs to stay separated from state institutions as it builds its popularity by denouncing them. Since it began to participate in "normal" politics, Hezbollah has witnessed an erosion of its "corruption-free reputation" and its nation-wide support. Indeed, participation in the consociational system requires a sectarian orientation. Hezbollah was therefore expected to represent its Shi'ite constituency. Moreover, criticism about its role in the 2006 Israel war, as it is widely viewed that Hezbollah brought about the Israeli retaliation, forced Hezbollah to fall back on its Shi'ite support base. Lastly, it is not in Hezbollah's interest for the state to collapse, and the state-like role it plays is likely more than it wished for. The need to focus its resources and personnel in Lebanon diverts Hezbollah from the initial core purpose that enabled it to carve out a social and political space in the first place: its armed resistance (Leenders 2006, 48–51; Blanford 2015). The following excerpt of a recent statement by Nasrallah after U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital highlights some of the elements mentioned above, particularly the moral dimension of Hezbollah's message. More importantly, it emphasizes the need for Hezbollah to return its focus to the armed resistance against Israel in Palestine:

> The advantage of this American decision is that it reveals the vicious from the good in our Arab and Islamic worlds (…) I speak today in the name of all the resistance axis—people, states, and factions—the resistance axis has overcome the previous phase and today, it stands strong and victorious as it is finishing its battles and defeating the U.S. and Israeli elements, and

now Palestine, its people, and al-Quds will return to be its top
priority. (Moughnieh 2017)

Policy Recommendations

In this paper, I outlined several issues that need to be addressed to plausibly challenge Hezbollah's control in Lebanon, which would lead to a normalization of Lebanese foreign policy. The first main question raised is that of the link between sectarian divisions, external penetration, and institutional weaknesses which enable the creation of entities with hybrid sovereignties such as Hezbollah. The second key issue is Western powers' failure to understand Hezbollah's current role as a state-within-a-state and of its formation as a network in continuity with Lebanese political practices. This misunderstanding explains why counterterrorism measures are ineffective against Hezbollah. A thorough reform of Lebanon's political system is required to uproot an entity so interwoven with society. Lastly, the dearth of analysis on Hezbollah's populism has thwarted effective challenges to Hezbollah's influence.

In view of these problems, the United States, and to a certain extent Europe, must pursue a multifaceted strategy to dilute the factors that keep Hezbollah pertinent:

- As it is not currently feasible to address sectarian divisions and external penetration, policymakers should focus on correcting Lebanon's institutional weakness. The United States must continue to support the LAF by strengthening the training of officers and providing equipment. Crucially, the lack of offensive weapons is the LAF's Achilles' heel (Picard 2012, 102). Additional funds or weapons would enable the LAF to generate deterrence power and combat Hezbollah to re-establish the state's monopoly over violence. Strengthening the LAF is also a necessary first step in countering Hezbollah's narrative. If the LAF's capabilities are increased to match and even surpass Hezbollah's, it would undercut Hezbollah's argument that it needs to keep its weapons to defend Lebanon in case of an Israeli attack. Until now, both the Ta'if Agreement and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) have failed to disarm Hezbollah. Today, more than a decade later, no one seems to be able to force Hezbollah to give up its arms (Abrams 2018, 3–5). Continued diplomatic pressure on Hezbollah through the March 8 presidential coalition and support for the LAF would make it harder for Hezbollah to justify its unwillingness to disarm. Hezbollah's reputation as a "normal" and "benevolent" Lebanese political party would be undermined.

- There must be a reform of the consociational system, if not in its core, then at least in the distribution of welfare services. Such an effort must arise from the domestic sphere in the long term. This reform is hardly feasible in the short term, as the influx of Syrian refugees weighs on public services. However, it is very likely that Hezbollah would resist this process in the future as it draws its support base from these welfare networks. Only under two scenarios could we imagine Hezbollah agreeing to relinquish its control over its distribution of services. The first would be in the context of a war with Israel. With its resources and manpower under strain, Hezbollah could not possibly convince its core supporters to reject governmental help to maintain social services. The second would be to implement colossal state-sponsored development projects to build infrastructure and bring opportunities to southern Lebanon, which would restore confidence in the state. However, these plans would necessitate Hezbollah's cooperation, which would empower it further by depicting it as the party that brought the Shi'ite population back on the government's radar. This scenario would become more likely once Hezbollah begins to be weakened by the policies mentioned earlier in this section.

Regarding Hezbollah's populism, several approaches can be adopted:

- Revisit the current U.S. policy of tightening sanctions on Hezbollah, as it mainly damages the Lebanese banking sector without affecting Hezbollah's cash flows from Iran and Lebanese Shi'ite expatriates. Current sanctions endanger Lebanon's economy, which is heavily dependent on diaspora remittances that comprise around 20 percent of the economy (Gardner 2016). Hezbollah thrives in an environment of economic crisis. While some of its growing middle-class support base may be affected by these measures, sanctions feed the party's anti-American and anti-neoliberal rhetoric. Efforts should be devoted towards tracking Hezbollah's alleged criminal networks in Latin America and Africa (Levitt 2013). The United States should continue to conduct operations such as Operation Titan from 2008, in which U.S. and Colombian authorities raided a cocaine-smuggling and money-laundering ring that funneled part of its profits to Hezbollah (Brice 2013).

- The United States should amplify denunciations of Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict and, in view of the anti-American sentiments in the Arab world, pressure European leaders to intensify their verbal condemnation of Hezbollah's role. Hezbollah's image and credibility as a defender of the people took a hit when its open alliance with Bashar al-Assad drew it into the Syrian war to help save an authoritarian leader from being overthrown by his own people. Moreover, as ISIS retaliation attacks in the north of

Lebanon increased public disapproval of Hezbollah's operations, the party sought to deflect attention from its involvement in Syria (Khatib et al. 2014, 181–182). Renewed criticism would accentuate the setback that Hezbollah's popularity has suffered in the past few years.

- Fighting corruption is essential, as it is one of the root causes of all of Lebanon's evils. It feeds Hezbollah's populist rhetoric and institutionalizes sectarian divisions. Nevertheless, implementing anti-corruption measures and good practices requires political will, which is not present at the moment. For example, the government created the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform in 1993, with combating corruption as one of its aims. However, lack of funding and general indifference have hindered its functions (Wickberg 2012). Civil society should be encouraged to continue lobbying for new legislation and better results from these existing institutions.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is possible to disentangle Lebanon from regional wars and normalize its foreign policy to promote peace and stability. Due to its confessional political structure and weak institutions, Lebanon will always be prone to external pressures and can easily be dragged into regional conflicts. However, it is both possible and necessary to diminish the influence of Hezbollah, which prevents Lebanon from pacifying its relations and moving on to economic and social reconstruction. The current U.S. foreign policy narrative should be revised to comprehend both Hezbollah's network form and its populist orientation. A better understanding of Hezbollah and the forces that sustain its hybrid sovereignty is a first step toward forging policies that can stabilize Lebanon in the long term.

Hezbollah will remain a dominant political force in Lebanon in the near future. Although its involvement in the Syrian conflict to help the Assad regime has diminished its popularity among Sunni populations, the resolution of this conflict will likely not be a game-changer for Hezbollah (Blanford 2015). Though the regional divide between Sunnis and Shi'ites will foster a hostile environment that can potentially escalate, and while the current policies of the Trump administration in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict present an additional challenge by inflaming and legitimizing Hezbollah, Hezbollah's biggest challenge will be domestic. The expansion of the party and its increased involvement in domestic politics will be at odds with its corruption-free reputation and its core purpose of resistance in the long term. Nevertheless, if Hezbollah manages to consolidate its power in the Lebanese government and parliament, it may appoint its

allies in top security positions and even push to amend the Constitution in its favor (Ghaddar 2017).

The May 2018 parliamentary elections confirmed this trajectory. While Hezbollah's number of members of parliament has not significantly changed, it won more than half of the seats in parliament through its coalition allies. This "parliamentary and moral victory," (Perry et al. 2018) as Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has boasted, not only dealt a heavy blow to Hariri's leadership but also strengthened the parties that have accepted Hezbollah's military arsenal. These results will make it even harder to bring back the issue of Hezbollah's disarmament on the government's agenda. Moreover, this parliamentarian majority increases the risk that international actors, such as Israel, no longer differentiate between the Lebanese government and Hezbollah, which could entail harsher stances towards Lebanon in the future. Lastly, this win also enabled the return to parliament of pro-Syrian political figures that had not held office since Rafiq Hariri's assassination in 2005. Although voter turnout was still relatively low, around 49 percent (down from 54 percent in 2009) (Perry et al. 2018), these elections reflect worrying trends for Lebanon. The policies recommended in this paper will be crucial for blunting Hezbollah's increasing influence before it holds all the cards.

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