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Identity, Anxiety, and War: Hezbollah and the Gaza Tragedy**

الهوية والقلق والحرب: حزب الله ومأساة غزة

Abstract: This study explores Hezbollah's puzzling engagement in Israel's ongoing military campaign in Gaza. Why has it limited its war to the Lebanese-Israeli border area? Why did not it engage in a full-scale combat akin to the 2006 war with Israel? Why did the movement, despite all the domestic and regional constraints it faced, enter war on 8 October? Drawing on Ontological Security Theory (OST) and primary data, the article finds that Hezbollah faced a predicament: if it abstained from supporting its Palestinian allies, it would threaten its ontological security (core being, reputation, and role as a resistance movement); conversely if it engaged in extensive warfare, it would endanger its physical security. To address this predicament, Hezbollah engaged in *constrained warfare* that aimed to restore its ontological security and preserve the cohesion and survival of the regional Axis of Resistance. The study argues that, in this way, Hezbollah was also constructing the future.

Keywords: Hezbollah; Ontological Security; Anxiety; Gaza; War; Identity.

ملخص: تتناول هذه الورقة مشاركة حزب الله المحييرة في الحملة العسكرية الإسرائيلية المتواصلة في غزة، وسبب اقتصر حربه على منطقة الحدود اللبنانية - الإسرائيلية، وعدم مشاركته على نطاق واسع في قتال شبيه بحرب عام 2006 مع إسرائيل، وسبب دخوله الحرب في 8 تشرين الأول/ أكتوبر 2023 على الرغم من كل القيود الداخلية والإقليمية التي واجهها. واعتمادًا على نظرية الأمن الوجودي ومصادر بيانات أولية، تجادل الورقة بأن حزب الله واجه مأزقًا: فإذا امتنع عن دعم حلفائه الفلسطينيين، من شأن ذلك أن يهدد أمنه الوجودي (جوهر وجوده، وسمعته، ودوره بوصفه حركة مقاومة). وعلى العكس من ذلك، إذا انخرط الحزب في حرب واسعة النطاق، يعرض أمنه المادي للخطر. ولمعالجة هذا المأزق، انخرط حزب الله في حرب مقيدة تهدف إلى الاحتفاظ بأمنه الوجودي، والحفاظ على تماسك محور المقاومة الإقليمي، وبقائه. بهذه الطريقة، تجادل الورقة بأن الحزب كان أيضًا يرسم ملامح المستقبل.

كلمات مفتاحية: حزب الله؛ الأمن الأنطولوجي؛ القلق؛ غزة؛ الحرب؛ الهوية.

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The Puzzle

Hezbollah's engagement in the 2023-2024 Gaza war is puzzling. Since the start of the war on 7 October 2023, Hezbollah has engaged in intensive and costly military combat with Israel that is mostly contained in areas on the Lebanese-Israeli border. Yet, much to the chagrin of many of its supporters who are outraged by Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza, it has not fought a full-fledged war on Israel, as it did in 2006.

Hezbollah's perplexing conduct raises several theoretical and empirical questions. What has motivated Hezbollah's conduct in this war? Why has Hezbollah not simply abstained from this confrontation with a stronger army that is supported by the US? Why, in contrast, has Hezbollah not lived up to its ideals and narratives about "resistance" to and "unity of fronts" against the Israeli occupation and US hegemony and engaged in a full-scale war?

To answer these questions, I draw on Ontological Security Theory (OST) and empirical primary data to make two arguments. First, I argue that Hezbollah's military conduct can be described as *constrained warfare* (CW). This form of warfare involves deliberate attempts by an actor, Hezbollah in this case, to restrain its use of full force to contain the response of its enemies and to deter them. These conscious attempts to restrain its power are dictated by knowledge of perceived constraints, which in the case of Hezbollah, involved: uncertainty about Israel's intentions, domestic considerations, fear of US direct involvement, and absence of a compatible regional political environment. Conceptualizing it as constrained warfare, however, does not explain why Hezbollah has engaged in it in the first place.

To explain Hezbollah's participation in the war, I argue that Hezbollah's engagement in constrained warfare is motivated primarily by the movement's anxiety over its ontological security. Ontological security has less to do with an actor's physical security and more with their understanding of the "Self", of their identity in relation to others, and of their role and reputation in a social setting. Israel's bloody campaign in retaliation to Hamas's 7 October attack generated anxiety, or ontological *insecurity*, for Hezbollah who has, over decades, fostered a political identity and reputation as a "resistance movement" that intends to liberate Palestine from Israeli occupation. Hezbollah thus faced a strategic predicament: if it distanced itself from the war, it would threaten its ontological security, but if it engaged in a full-scale war, it would endanger its physical security. Its response to this dilemma and conduct in the war reveals that it sought to balance the urge to restore its ontological security against the need to preserve its physical one. To curb its anxiety, Hezbollah has engaged in constrained warfare, not only to preserve its own ontological security but also to strategically preserve the identity and cohesion of the broader regional "Resistance Alliance". In this way, Hezbollah is, at the same time, seeking to shape the future. This finding offers empirical and theoretical insights into ongoing debates about the relationship between ontological security and physical security.¹

I develop my argument in three sections. In the first, I examine the main elements of OST, laying out the theoretical basis to examine Hezbollah's "Being", the movement's religio-political identity and goals, in the second section. Finally, I explore Hezbollah's response to the Gaza war. I begin by defining CW and explaining why Hezbollah engaged in it, before demonstrating how the movement attempted to restore its ontological security in the wake of 7 October.

Ontological Security

Hezbollah's behaviour and conduct in the war cannot be explained through mainstream frameworks on the causes of war. This is neither the "defensive" nor the "offensive" behaviour that Neorealist frameworks

¹ Nina C. Krickel-Choi, "The Concept of Anxiety in Ontological Security Studies," *International Studies Review*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2022), pp. 1-21; Bahar Rumelili, "Integrating Anxiety into International Relations Theory: Hobbes, Existentialism, and Ontological Security," *International Theory*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2020); Felix Berensköter, "Anxiety, Time, and Agency," *International Theory*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2020).

would suggest.² Neorealists, focusing primarily on states, argue that under conditions of international anarchy, political actors are never certain about the intentions of their enemies, and so when they perceive a threat, they have no other option but to either act defensively in trying to deter a threat and hence restore the status quo or, in Offensive Realism, to pre-emptively act on the offensive. Although Hezbollah's conduct reveals attempts to deter and, possibly, pre-empt its enemy, these frameworks rely on material factors to explain political action and expect actors to act "rationally": assess the military balance and decide to either "balance" against a threat or power or "bandwagon".³ But Hezbollah did not engage with either expectation. Moreover, despite the overwhelming military power it faced from Israel and the US, it still engaged in constrained warfare with Israel. We see that in these theoretical approaches the analytical weight is placed on the physical not ontological security of actors.

Hezbollah's long-term trajectory reveals that its conduct in this war is not entirely surprising. I have argued elsewhere that Hezbollah's political trajectory combines Max Weber's "value rational act" and "instrumentally rational" behaviour, which acts "to put to practice their convictions" but does so with a "prospect for success".⁴ This offers an entry point into the discussion of ontological security. Hezbollah's behaviour is shaped by its religio-political identity and doctrine, which I examine below. Thus, political identity matters in understanding Hezbollah's behaviour, which brings us closer to Constructivist approaches to understanding political behaviour. Constructivism assumes that the identities of actors that provide them with an ideational lens to understand the self in relation to the other, shape how actors distinguish a friend from an enemy. They also carry a set of values and norms that not only shape but also set standards for socio-political behaviour.⁵ Through narratives – stories and memories about the self and the nation – political actors reproduce identities to justify and enable their behaviours (for example, when a government wants to convince its people to go to war). But identities and associated narratives are malleable: they can be manipulated, activated, and de-activated by political actors as they strive to realize their goals. Was Hezbollah's participation in the war a sign of its identity? Only to an extent. Its identity as an Islamic resistance movement, you could argue, shaped its conduct, but identity as such cannot *alone* explain Hezbollah's conduct. Hezbollah could have argued that Lebanese concerns (another identity it holds) and threats to its survival (US potential intervention) require restraint; it could have used Islamist values to justify its choice.⁶ But that is not what Hezbollah did. On the other hand, using Constructivist assumptions, in reverse, one could argue that Hezbollah has intervened *because* it is an Islamist movement and may have fallen victim to what some scholars call "rhetorical entrapment": narratives and ideals that constitute actors' identities which set expectations for their behaviour.⁷ But taking past episodes into consideration reveals that Hezbollah has shown that neither identity alone nor its rhetoric has constrained its actions. For example, when it intervened in Syria in 2012 in support of the authoritarian regime repressing its people, Hezbollah was ready to *overcome* its identity and rhetoric as a movement that seeks to liberate the "oppressed of the world" because there was a threat to its physical security.⁸

² John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY/London: Cornell University Press, 1987); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass./London: Addison Wesley, 1979).

³ Mearsheimer; Walt; Waltz.

⁴ Max Weber quoted in: Adham Saouli, *Hezbollah: Socialisation and its Tragic Ironies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 32.

⁵ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jeffrey Checkel, "Norms, Institutions, and National Identity in Contemporary Europe," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 1 (1999), pp. 83–114.

⁶ Adham Saouli, "Intellectuals and Political Power in Social Movements: The Parallel Paths of Fadlallah and Hizbullah," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 41, no.1 (2014), pp. 97–116.

⁷ Frank Schimmelfennig, "Rhetorical Entrapment in EU–Turkey Relations," in: Wulf Reiners & Ebru Turhan (eds.), *EU-Turkey Relations* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

⁸ Saouli, *Hezbollah*, pp. 158–202.

I argue that the framework that best explains Hezbollah's conduct is OST, which originated in the fields of Psychology⁹ and Sociology.¹⁰ International Relations (IR) scholars drew on the conceptualizations of the sociologist Antony Giddens, who focused on individuals, to introduce OST to IR¹¹ and explore how the same concepts can be applied to states. In IR, OST has drawn on the Classical Realism tradition, which assumed that other than material motivations, state behaviour is shaped by other factors such as fear, shame, and honour,¹² as well as on Constructivism, with its focus on identity and norms.¹³ In the study of the Middle East, May Darwich¹⁴ used OST to explain why the rise of Islamist movements generated anxiety for Saudi Arabia in the 2012-2018 period, Amal Jamal¹⁵ to understand Israel's "securitization" of Palestinian citizens, and Mohamad-Mehid Berjaoui¹⁶ to contrast Hezbollah's intervention in Syria to its engagement in Iraq. What is OST and how does it explain Hezbollah's conduct in the Gaza war?

The ontological security of political actors is about the security of their "Self" and "Being" and not only physical security.¹⁷ It is about the "subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice".¹⁸ Brent Steele has offered a useful distinction of the "two conceptions of security", Traditional Security and Ontological Security, which I adopt in the table below.¹⁹

Table (1): Conceptions of Traditional Security and Ontological Security

	Traditional Security	Ontological Security
Security as	Survival	Being
Agents "structured" by	Distribution of power	Routines as Self-Identity
Challenge/ source of insecurity	Fear (in the face of threat)	Anxiety (uncomfortable disconnect with Self)
The outcome of incorrect decision in the face of challenge	Physical harm	Shame
Measurement of outcome	Change in material capabilities; deaths; damage	Difference between biographical narrative and actual behaviour; discursive
Structural change	Change in the distribution of power	Routinized critical situations; change in self-identity; change in agent routine

Source: Adopted from: Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 52.

⁹ Ronald D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin Books, 1969).

¹⁰ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (California: Stanford University Press, 1991).

¹¹ Jef Huysmans, "Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1998), pp. 226–255; Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2006), pp. 341–370; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

¹² Ned Richard Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests, and Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Steele, pp. 35-40.

¹³ Wendt.

¹⁴ May Darwich, "The Ontological (In)Security of Similarity Wahhabism versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2016), pp. 469–488.

¹⁵ Amal Jamal, "Ontological Counter-Securitization in Asymmetric Power Relations: Lessons from Israel," *International Studies Review*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2019), pp. 932–956.

¹⁶ Mohamad-Mehid Berjaoui, "The Ideational and Material Factors of Hezbollah's Foreign Policy: The Case Studies of Syria and Iraq 2003-2017," Unpublished thesis, University of St Andrews, 2023.

¹⁷ Rumelili, p. 266.

¹⁸ Mitzen, p. 344.

¹⁹ Steele, p. 52.

Ontological security offers a sense of being, a core self, that furnishes individuals with a sense of stability and continuity. This is crucial on several fronts. It enables individuals and groups to act as purposive agents in the world. Being in the world requires a sense of selfhood, an identity, that situates an actor in relation to others in a social setting, identifying for example the friend from the enemy. Identities offer an ideational (cultural, religious, political) lens to make sense of the world and thus to find purpose and meaning within it. A fundamental purpose for social inaction is to minimize uncertainty and dangers and to sustain a stable social identity over time. The aim is to bring “uncertainty to tolerable levels”²⁰ and, in doing so, social actors intentionally or unintentionally establish *routines* that make the world a relatively predictable place to be in, even if this predictability or routinization involves endured conflict with an enemy (“balance of power” or “rules of engagement” in the language of traditional security). Establishing routines offers the space for actors to focus their daily energies on specific tasks or threats: “routines are internally programmed cognitive and behavioural responses to information or stimuli”.²¹

Thus, a key component of OST is the *social identity* of actors: how they see the world, how they see themselves, how they hope to be seen, and how they are actually perceived in their social context. Giddens argues that “to be ontologically secure is to possess ... answers to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses”.²²

Reproducing how actors perceive the world and how they are judged by others is sustained through action and narrative. The action or behaviour of actors should align with their social identity, particularly the ethical standards and socio-political goals it preaches, and the *role* it assumes in a social setting. Both the identity and role of the actor become internalized, constituting their sense of self: “role identities are formed and sustained relationally; they depend on others to be realized”.²³ Thus, if you present yourself to the world as a socialist, you are expected to act like one, for instance, join your professional union, support the poor and marginalized, join the strike, etc. Do otherwise, and you might be perceived as a hypocrite, which may have an impact on your social ties to others and might affect your sense of selfhood. Narratives, or “narratives of the self” as Giddens called them, tell the story of how an “identity is understood by the self and by others”. For political actors, narratives involve memories about the self/nation/community/movement that connect the past to the present and future, political and ethical ideals that give meaning to life and behaviour, and justifications for political action.²⁴ Intentionally or not, narratives set social expectations – you are expected to act in accordance with the narratives you preach and goals you promise – which, with time, begin to shape your behaviour, enabling or constraining your action.

What happens when the ontological security of an actor is threatened? In the traditional conception of security, a loss in war or an attack on a country causes physical harm; political actors thus *fear* such possibilities. On the other hand, the threat to the ontological security of an actor does not cause fear per se but *anxiety*, “an uncomfortable disconnect with the self”.²⁵ There is a difference between fear and anxiety. Fear is usually directed toward an identified target, such as the fear of death or physical survival or defeat in a war. Anxiety, on the other hand, “comes about when someone’s identity is challenged”.²⁶ Drawing on Paul Tillich,²⁷ Bahar Rumelili argues that there are three types of anxiety. The first concerns the anxiety about death. The other two, which relate to ontological security, involve threats to an actor’s spiritual and

²⁰ Mitzen, p. 346.

²¹ Mitzen, p. 346.

²² Quoted in: Steele, p. 51.

²³ Mitzen, p. 357

²⁴ Steele, p. 10.

²⁵ Steele, p. 52.

²⁶ Steele, p. 51. See also: Rumelili; Krickel-Choi.

²⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven/ London: Yale University, 2000).

moral being. The threat to the spiritual level may cause an “anxiety of meaninglessness”; in the words of Tillich, it is “loss of an ultimate concern, of meaning that gives meaning to existence”.²⁸ The threats to moral being involves the inability of the actor to fulfil moral responsibilities that they have set for themselves which generates “anxiety of condemnation”²⁹ or social “shame”.³⁰

When is the ontological security of actors threatened? Ontological insecurity takes place when routines are disrupted causing anxiety, unpredictability, and uncertainty for actors, what Steele,³¹ drawing on Giddens,³² calls *critical situations*. Critical situations threaten the ontological security of actors (and not only of states, which most of the OST literature is concerned with), obliging them to act to restore it. The 7 October Hamas attack which generated a war, threatened Hezbollah’s identity as an Islamist resistance movement, as it caught the Islamist movement by surprise. The Israeli response, which amounts to a plausible genocide, obliged Hezbollah to act. It had to do so to narrow the gap between its sense of selfhood, narrative as a resistance movement, and its actual behaviour that was constrained by the factors discussed below. But, as I show below, Hezbollah was not only doing so to restore its ontological security; its constrained participation in the war was also *strategic*: a move to construct the future. The literature on OST tends to treat routines as ends for actors seeking ontological security, or one that “necessarily yields a conservative agency that is committed to continuity over change”.³³ OST scholars have debated whether “anxiety inhibits or promotes change” and the difference between “normal and existential anxiety”.³⁴ The “rules of engagement”, which has kept the Lebanese-Israeli border relatively calm since the 2006 war, is perceived by Hezbollah not as an end but as an interval to a future war for liberation of Palestine, which the movement believes is inevitable and which it continues to prepare for. I have called this “war-making”.³⁵ War-making – the constant preparation for and occasional engagement in war – keeps Hezbollah anxious, a “normal” anxiety so to speak, one that actors endure under anarchic conditions. But ontological insecurity, or existential anxiety, is experienced during critical episodes,³⁶ as in the latest war in Gaza. Here, anxiety threatens the ontological security of an actor, generating a sense of uncertainty about the actions of others, how the future will unfold, and the actor’s place and role in a social context.³⁷

Before we examine how Hezbollah responded to the critical episode of the Gaza war, it is important to first explore Hezbollah’s being, the religio-political identity of this Islamist movement and its political trajectory since inception.

Being Hezbollah

Studying ontological security through Hezbollah is useful. This is not an individual which will require “scaling up” to the level of the state, as the early scholarship on OST did. Nor is it a state that will involve the understanding of its corporate and usually contested identity. Hezbollah is, rather, an armed political movement (APM). Its core being, its sense of selfhood, and socialization over time is shaped by a religio-political doctrine,³⁸ which identifies a set of strategic goals that have supplied the movement with a sense

²⁸ Tillich quoted in: Rumelili, p. 260.

²⁹ Rumelili, p. 260.

³⁰ Steele, p. 52.

³¹ Steele, p. 12.

³² Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

³³ Rumelili, p. 269.

³⁴ Krickel-Choi, p. 3.

³⁵ Saouli, *Hezbollah*.

³⁶ I prefer to use in the case of Hezbollah critical “episode” rather than “situation” as episodes denote an event that is part of a sequence of events, which in this case is the decades-long conflict between Hezbollah and Israel.

³⁷ Berensköter, pp. 275.

³⁸ This section draws heavily on Chapter 2, “Being Hezbollah,” in: Saouli, *Hezbollah*, pp. 45-85.

of purpose and meaning. This, certainly, does not mean that Hezbollah's identity is fixed; indeed, its socialization in Lebanon and war-making with Israel has developed Hezbollah's identity over time.

As an APM, Hezbollah is a product of the rise of Islamism in the second half of the 20th century. Inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran and motivated by the Israeli invasion of Beirut, Hezbollah was born in the period 1978-1982. It conceives of itself as a transnational Islamist movement. Its strategic charter, *The Open Letter to the Downtrodden in the World* (1985), presents Hezbollah as a "member of the world Islamic *Umma*... tied to Muslims throughout the world by a strong religious and political bond that is Islam". In its Islamic-Shi'a identity, Hezbollah conceives of itself as a member of a historical movement, which starts with the Imamate of Ali (the fourth Muslim Caliph), the martyrdom of his son Imam Hussein, and the line of successor Imams that culminates in the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, the Mahdi (Messiah) who disappeared in 869 AD, and whom the Shi'a believe will return to end corruption and bring peace and order to the world. Imam Khomeini's Islamic Revolution, which brought *Wilāyat al-Fakīh* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) to religio-political rule in Iran, is conceived as a major milestone in the road to the return of the Mahdi. Hezbollah "abide by the orders of the single, wise and just authority" of the Faqih, Imam Khomeini until his death in 1989 and Ayatollah Khamenei since then. Hezbollah conceives of the Faqih as the "deputy of the Mahdi" who, in addition to his responsibility as the religious leader of the Islamic *Umma*, is also paving the way for the return of the Mahdi.³⁹

The last point, which relates to the *future*, is crucial to understanding Hezbollah's political mission. Since its emergence, Hezbollah has identified a set of clear political goals. *The Open Letter* called for resistance to the Israeli and US occupation of Lebanon en route to the liberation of Palestine from Zionism – liberating Jerusalem is the religio-political duty of every Muslim, the movement believes – and the region from US hegemony. Hezbollah gives religio-political meaning to these political struggles. Jihad against Israeli occupation and US "oppression", Hezbollah leaders believe, is not only a religious duty, but in the words of Naim Qassem, deputy of Hezbollah's Secretary-General "part of the practical and realistic operation of *tamhīd* (paving the way for] the return of the Mahdi".⁴⁰ Hezbollah is, thus, much more than a Lebanese resistance; "they are divinely soldiers in the support of the awaited Mahdi".⁴¹

These religio-political elements are essential components of Hezbollah's identity and its sense of being. They are crucial for the internal cohesion of the movement, for its ability to mobilize and retain members, to make sense of and shape the world in which it exists, and to justify actions and decisions. In other words, they constitute Hezbollah as a purposeful agent in the world. Importantly, it is these elements that have shaped Hezbollah's *socialization process* – how actors seek to integrate in, alter, or preserve socio-political contexts⁴² – in Lebanon and the region. Given this ideological depth, Hezbollah's socialization process has prioritized war-making with Israel, adopted *resistance* in the movement's discourse, and painstakingly tried to maintain domestic stability in Lebanon as a safeguard to its war with Israel.

Hezbollah's growth and development were shaped by its priority to resist Israel and to legitimize its presence as an APM in Lebanon in the period 1982-2000. The movement's success in driving Israel out of Lebanon in 2000, freeing all Lebanese detainees in Israeli prisons, and its survival in its 2006 war with Israel, which it considered a "Divine victory", have reinforced the movement's religio-political identity and mission. The movement's belief in God, the Prophet, and the awaited *Mahdi*, notes Qassem, made all this possible.⁴³ The goal of liberating Palestine has continued to shape the movement's mission, although

³⁹ Quoted in: *Ibid.*, p. 63, see: pp. 63-67.

⁴⁰ Quoted in: *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴¹ Ibrahim Amin al-Sayyid quoted in: *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴² For a more elaborate discussion of this concept of "socialization", see: *Ibid.*, pp. 26-32.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

Hezbollah emphasizes the need to preserve its armed status in Lebanon to “protect” the country against Israel.

Regionally, Hezbollah is a key member of the “Axis of Resistance”, the alliance that ties Iran, largely through its Islamic Revolutionary Guards, Syrian Regime, Ansar Allah (known as the Houthis), Islamic Jihad, and, despite their occasional disagreements, Hamas. In the past decade, Iraqi movements who believe in *Wilāyat al-Fakīh* became members of the regional alliance. With certain variations, the alliance shares Hezbollah’s (and Iran’s) goals. The alliance, one could argue, is a realization of Hezbollah’s strategy in *The Open Letter*, which announced that the movement’s “ambition is to make Lebanon an invisible part of the geopolitical landscape that is ruled by Islam...that is in opposition to the US, the arrogant world, and Zionism”.⁴⁴ Thirty years later, Hezbollah MP, Mohammad Fadlallah, would reiterate the same message in the wake of the Arab uprisings: there is a need to overcome political boundaries if “national security” is threatened, which justified the movement’s intervention in other countries. Maintaining the alliance, physically and ontologically, has been a strategic goal for Hezbollah. This goal, for example, explains the movement’s controversial and costly “pre-emptive” intervention in Syria in support of its authoritarian regime in 2012-2013 that aimed to prevent regime change, which could have led to the breakup of the alliance. In that war, Hezbollah’s physical security was at stake.⁴⁵ Hezbollah, along with Iran and Russia, ultimately saved Bashar Assad’s regime, which revealed Hezbollah’s capabilities and its regional influence, and, once again, reinforced its sense of being and mission.

In the past decade, Hezbollah and the other Palestinian organizations began to speak of an ambiguous concept, *Tawhīd al-Jabahāt* or *al-Sāḥāt* (lit. unifying arenas or fronts),⁴⁶ especially the ones surrounding Israel, in preparation for the “great war”. In August 2022, it was reported that Hasan Nasrallah met Palestinian leaders to discuss “unifying arenas”. Responding to Benjamin Netanyahu’s threats against Lebanon in May 2023, Nasrallah claimed “it is not you who threatens us of a great war; it is us who threaten you with one”. Any great war, he added, “will involve all fronts; it will be inundated with hundreds of thousands of fighters”.⁴⁷ It is with no doubt that Hezbollah’s trajectory since its birth and the narratives it has promoted, especially in the last decade, have fostered a certain, if polarizing, reputation for the movement. Its narratives have focused on its military power, perceived achievements, and goals which promised, among other aims, the liberation of Palestine. It set high expectations, especially amongst its own supporters.

7 October: Anxiety and Constrained Warfare

In his recorded speech after the 7 October attacks, Mohammad Al-Deif, Hamas’s military commander, called upon “our brothers in the resistance in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran” to join the battle “for this is the day when all fronts will unite”.⁴⁸ Hamas’s attack, which Hezbollah confirmed it was unaware of,⁴⁹ prompted a critical episode which generated anxiety and uncertainty for Hezbollah. Its perceived *role* and *reputation* as a resistance movement in the Arab-Islamic world and its perceived moral *responsibility*, which emanates from its sense of being, was at stake: it had to act. Initial signs of this anxiety were Hezbollah’s

⁴⁴ Quoted in: Ibid., pp. 130-131.

⁴⁵ Adham Saouli, “Hezbollah’s Military Intervention in Syria: Causes and Consequences,” in: Raymond Hinnebusch & Adham Saouli (eds.), *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions* (London: Routledge, 2020).

⁴⁶ Kassem Kassir, “The Phrases of ‘Unity of Fields [of Battle]’, ‘Unity of Fronts’ or ‘Axis of Resistance’: Between Slogan and Reality,” *Policy Paper*, Institute for Palestine Studies, 20 November 2023, accessed on 28/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/c3ayy233>

⁴⁷ Muhammad Hamdar, “Hal Satuwājih Isrā’īl ‘al-Ḥarb al-Kubrā’ ‘alā ‘Iddat Jabahāt?,” *BBC Arabic*, 11/10/2023, accessed on 28/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4d4ttd2n>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See Hassan Nasrallah’s speech on 3 November 2023 at: “al-Sayyid Nassrallah: Ṭūfān al-Aqṣā Assasa li-Marḥala Tārīkhiyya Jadīda.. wa-Kul al-Iḥtimālāt fi Jabhatinā Maftūḥa,” *Almanar*, 3/11/2023, accessed on 28/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/43wnksd7>

restrained military conduct in the first weeks of the war, which drew criticism from its allies and many supporters in the Arab world, who called on the movement to do more,⁵⁰ and the “ambiguous” silence of its leader, Nasrallah, in the first three weeks of the war.⁵¹ But despite that, Hezbollah was taking steps aimed at restoring its ontological security, which was deepening as Israel’s response was beginning to take the form of a genocidal campaign in Gaza. For example, by day 9 of the war, Israel had killed over 2,600 Palestinians.⁵² Hezbollah’s response took two interrelated dimensions. It engaged in what I describe here as “constrained warfare” and symbolic and discursive actions to sustain its social identity. The aim was to realize two goals: restore its ontological security *and* preserve its physical security. This is because Hezbollah faced a dilemma: if it stayed neutral, it would have risked its ontological security; on the other hand, if it engaged in an unpredictable full-scale war, it would endanger its physical security. To contain the anxiety, Hezbollah has tried to stitch two gaps: the first, between its narrative about the self and its actual behaviour in this episode, and the second to preserve the continuity of this social identity (with the ideals it carries) into the future. First, let us explore why Hezbollah engaged in constrained warfare.

The 7 October attacks disrupted more than 17 years of *relative* stability on the Lebanese-Israeli border, a routine that preserved what many have described as “rules of engagement” that structured the Hezbollah-Israeli relations on the border. This came to an end on 8 October 2023 when Hezbollah attacked Israeli posts in the Israel-occupied and contested Shebaa farms, which led to an Israeli retaliation. For the first six months of the conflict (at the time of writing), both parties escalated the level of the conflict but kept the war limited to mostly the Lebanese-Israeli border regions and with attempts to limit the targets to militants on both sides.

In the tit-for-tat confrontation on the border, each party has tried to deter the other, leading to a gradual but restrained escalation of the conflict. Hezbollah has targeted surveillance cameras and Israeli posts on the border, while Israel has targeted Hezbollah’s military leaders, and by 6 March had dropped 117 phosphoric bombs on areas on the border.⁵³ Hezbollah has used its precision guided missiles, including the Kornet and Borkan. Israel, bolstered by strong intelligence capabilities, has skillfully targeted military leaders of Hezbollah as well as Hamas leaders operating in Lebanon. On 3 January 2024, Israel assassinated Hamas deputy leader, Saleh Al-Arouri, in Beirut’s southern suburb, Hezbollah’s stronghold.⁵⁴ Hezbollah’s declared goals, as we shall see below, included support for Gaza to increase pressure on Israel and to “deter” it from invading Lebanon.⁵⁵ Israel, in turn, aimed to curb Hezbollah’s abilities, target its military infrastructure, urge Lebanon to implement UN 1701, and create a political wedge between Hezbollah and the Lebanese public.⁵⁶

Still, the question remains, what factors constrained Hezbollah’s war with Israel? Why was it a limited rather than a full-fledged war like 2006? Constrained warfare involves the purposeful attempts by combatants to restrain their use of violence due to political, moral, and military considerations.⁵⁷ Donald

⁵⁰ “Taḥaddath ‘an Dawr Ḥizballah.. Khālīd Mish‘al lil-‘Arabī: Musta‘idūn li-Kul al-Sināriyuhāt,” *Alaraby*, 16/10/2023, accessed on 28/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2afnd4cn>

⁵¹ “Miḥwar al-Mumāna’a.. al-Fikra wa-Ḥudūdihā (4): Ḥizballah wa-l-Ḍarb Ḍimm Qawā‘id al-Ishtibāk,” *Aljazeera*, 31/1/2024, accessed on 29/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mtzxbuy>

⁵² “Rights expert finds ‘reasonable grounds’ genocide is being committed in Gaza,” *UN News*, 26/3/2024, accessed on 3/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdhtea98>

⁵³ Justin Salhani, “Israel’s toxic legacy: White phosphorus bombs on south Lebanon,” *Aljazeera*, 25/3/2024, accessed on 29/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4mmw3cxu>

⁵⁴ Lyse Doucet, “Hamas deputy leader Saleh al-Arouri’s assassination sparks wider war fears,” *BBC*, 3/1/2024, accessed on 3/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2hrzbtwc>

⁵⁵ Nasrallah declared these goals in his first speech on 3 November 2023. See: “al-Sayyid Nassrallah: Tūfān al-Aqṣā Assasa li-Marḥala Tārīkhiyya Jadīda.. wa-Kul al-Iḥtimālāt fī Jabhatinā Maftūḥa.”

⁵⁶ “Israel’s Defence Minister says strikes will increase against Hezbollah,” *Euronews*, 30/3/2024, accessed on 3/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mrxz2k3p>

⁵⁷ Donald Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and US Strategy from the Korean War to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 86-87.

Stoker has identified some constraints that restrain state behaviour, but which are relevant to Hezbollah. These include uncertainty about the enemy's intention; fear of "third-party intervention"; geopolitical environment; domestic environment; and limited political goals.⁵⁸

a) Uncertainty about Israel's Intentions: When Hamas attacked Israel on 7 October, Hezbollah was caught by surprise. In a shocking and coordinated air, sea, and land offensive, Hamas infiltrated the Gaza-Israel border, attacked small towns, army bases, and an outdoor music festival, and simultaneously fired thousands of rockets into Israel, killing around 1,139 Israeli civilians and soldiers, and kidnapping around 250 Israelis. In response to the deadliest attack on Israel in its history, its far-right government, led by Netanyahu, declared a state of war, activating Article 40 of its Basic Law, and mobilized around 300,000 reservists. Israel announced its declared objective to eliminate Hamas in Gaza and to free the hostages. Another aim was to restore its deterrence. Israel's defence minister Yoav Gallant ordered a total blockade of Gaza, cutting its electricity and the entry of food and fuel. "We are fighting human animals", he announced.⁵⁹ He added that he "released all restraints": "whoever comes to decapitate, murder women, Holocaust survivors, we will eliminate them with all our might, and without compromise".⁶⁰

In the coming weeks and months, Israeli air, sea, and land offensives targeted Gaza's civil infrastructure, including its buildings, hospitals, schools, and universities causing (by the time of writing) the death of more than 30,000 people, including 13,000 children, injuring 71,000, and displacing 80% of the population, causing one of the worst humanitarian crises.⁶¹ The International Court of Justice "found it plausible that Israel's acts could amount to genocide". Israeli threats to "turn Beirut into a Gaza",⁶² have made it difficult for Hezbollah to predict how Israel would act. Hezbollah feared that Israel could exploit the Hamas attack and the regional and international support it garnered to attack and possibly eliminate Hezbollah.⁶³ There was a threat to its physical security.

b) Fear of Third-Party Intervention: Another constraint was the fear of US intervention in the war. The US, which offered military, diplomatic, and economic support to Israel, dispatched USS Gerald R. Ford, a carrier of "more than 75 aircraft and electromagnetic launch gear" which carries "five destroyers with Aegis air-defence radars and missile interceptors" to the eastern Mediterranean and a similar one, USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, to the Gulf. This supplemented its 30,000 military personnel with 2,000 marines.⁶⁴ US President Joe Biden threatened Hezbollah and Iran not to intervene in the war. His National Security advisor made it clear that the "president's movement of these assets [was] to send that clear message of deterrence to make clear that this war should not escalate".⁶⁵ The US quest to avoid an escalation of the war contributed to deterring an Israeli pre-emptive attack against Hezbollah.⁶⁶

c) Geopolitical Environment: A third constraint is the geopolitical environment. Hamas's attack on Israel drew wide international condemnation. Western powers, including the US, UK, and EU,

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 86-88.

⁵⁹ Quoted in: Emanuel Fabian, "Defense minister announces 'complete siege' of Gaza: No power, food or fuel," *The Times of Israel*, 9/10/2023, accessed on 21/2/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4bm355nr>

⁶⁰ Quoted in: Emanuel Fabian & Jacob Magid, "Gallant: Israel moving to full offense, Gaza will never go back to what it once was," *The Times of Israel*, 10/10/2023, accessed on 22/2/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2tx4ypyr>

⁶¹ "Rights expert finds 'reasonable grounds' genocide is being committed in Gaza."

⁶² Tovah Lazaroff, "Netanyahu to Hezbollah: If you attack, we'll turn Beirut into Gaza," *The Jerusalem Post*, 7/12/2023, accessed on 3/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mshcahc6>

⁶³ See Naim Qassem interview on Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation aired on 5 March 2024 at: "Na'im Qāsim, Ḥalqa Khāṣa," *LBC*, 5/3/2024, accessed on 3/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/5dv4khtc>

⁶⁴ "The three steps on America's ladder of military escalation," *The Economist*, 25/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2zbu9mjz>

⁶⁵ Peter Baker & Farnaz Fassihi, "Fearing Escalation, Biden Seeks to Deter Iran and Hezbollah," *The New York Times*, 15/10/2023, accessed on 24/2/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4u2cd84c>

⁶⁶ Edward Wong, Ronen Bergman & Julian E. Barnes, "Biden and Aides Advise Israel to Avoid Widening War With Hezbollah Strike," *The New York Times*, 20/10/2024, accessed on 26/2/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yx4s2wv5>

condemned the attack and supported Israel's "right to defend itself", a position that did not radically change for the first 3 months into the war despite the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza.⁶⁷ Regional powers, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE, had sour relations with Hamas, perceiving the organization as "extremist"⁶⁸ (in 2014, they designated the Muslim Brotherhood from which Hamas emerged as a terrorist organization).⁶⁹ Despite the calibrated formal statements on the Hamas attack, which put the blame on the Israeli occupation and called for restraint, the US-allied states did not oppose Hamas's defeat and the weakening of the Iran-led Resistance Axis. It took almost one month for Arab and Muslim leaders to meet in Saudi Arabia and to call for an "immediate end to military operations", which had no practical impact whatsoever on the war.⁷⁰ The unfettered Western support for Israel, the Arab governments' acquiescence, an economically paralysed and politically fragmented Syria, and the absence of a substantive Russian or Chinese intervention have all constrained Hezbollah's actions and threatened to isolate it or its regional patron, Iran. Like the US, Iran consistently announced that it did not want a regional war, which partly explains Hezbollah's own restraint. Regional (and international) environments were not conducive to a full-fledged war.

d) Domestic Environment: Since its emergence in 1982, Hezbollah has operated at the intersection of two arenas: the divided society of Lebanon, where Hezbollah has striven to establish a legitimate existence; and war-making with Israel, which involved occasional combat and continuous preparation for war. Balancing the pressures arising from these two arenas has shaped Hezbollah's political development.⁷¹ The 7 October attacks came at a time when Lebanon was suffering from political paralysis and an economic crisis. Lebanon has no president and no governor for its central bank. It has a caretaker government and a deeply divided parliament. The country has been divided since 2005 when its former Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri, was assassinated. The assassination, the Syria war, which Hezbollah joined in 2012, and Hezbollah's politico-military influence in the country have deepened the divisions, creating political paralysis and state erosion. In October 2019, a national uprising took place against sectarianism, corruption, and economic failures. The uprising failed to uproot the political elite and deepened economic crisis, which was one of the worst in the country's history. The crisis led to the collapse of the currency, losing more than 98% of its pre-crisis value in 2023, an inflation averaging 171% in 2022,⁷² a drop of the GDP per capita by 36%, an increase in poverty levels, and a rise in the unemployment rate from around 11% in 2019 to 30% in 2022, with almost half of the population under the poverty line.⁷³ Moreover, the presence of Syrian refugees, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the 2020 Beirut Port explosion intensified the crisis. These domestic factors and the widespread opposition, even among allies, to Hezbollah's entry into war with Israel have constrained the armed movement's actions.⁷⁴ Hezbollah may have feared that a war could cause a catastrophic displacement crisis, especially for Lebanese southerners who form its main social base. Unlike the 2006 war, displaced populations would not necessarily find a hospitable climate in other parts of Lebanon, nor would disintegrated Syria be a viable option for them to resort to.

⁶⁷ "US vetoes another UN Security Council resolution urging Gaza war ceasefire," *Aljazeera*, 20/2/2024, accessed on 28/2/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/5dcr8ap9>

⁶⁸ Hassan Abu Hannieh, "Why does Saudi Arabia describe Hamas as a terrorist organisation?," *Middle East Monitor*, 9/3/2018, accessed on 2/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdhn2s>

⁶⁹ "Saudi Arabia declares Muslim Brotherhood 'terrorist group'," *BBC News*, 7/3/2014, accessed on 2/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc53es5a>

⁷⁰ Aziz El Yaakoubi & Nayera Abdallah, "Arab and Muslim leaders demand immediate end to Gaza war," *Reuters*, 12/11/2023, accessed on 26/2/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4dfsmrys>

⁷¹ Saouli, *Hezbollah*.

⁷² "Lebanon: Normalization of Crisis is No Road to Stabilization," *The World Bank*, 16/5/2023, accessed on 2/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2jk6z5va>

⁷³ "The World Bank In Lebanon," *The World Bank*, accessed on 2/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/237dynt5>

⁷⁴ Niqola Nassif, "'Awn: Hāththartu Hīzballah wa-Khā'if 'Alayh," *Al-Akhbar*, 15/3/2024, accessed on 3/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/498a8wcz>

e) **Limited Political Goals:** As Stoker observes, setting limited goals for a war might itself form a constraint on behaviour.⁷⁵ Great powers might do this because they do not treat a war as existential. In Hezbollah's case, the setting of limited political goals is a derivative of the constrained nature of the war, which we have just explored. Hezbollah identified its political goals in entering the war as "support and backing for Gaza" and announced that its war with Israel will not end until Israel ceases its onslaught on Gaza.⁷⁶

The above factors have constrained Hezbollah's actions, preventing the movement from engaging in a full-scale war. By restraining itself, Hezbollah was concerned about its physical security. In theory, Hezbollah could have remained neutral for its own survival and the safety of Lebanon, but it did not. It still engaged in a costly war, albeit constrained. By 10 March 2024, Hezbollah had lost around 222 of its members, 35 members of other Lebanese and Palestinian armed groups, one Lebanese soldier, 42 Lebanese civilians, and three journalists.⁷⁷ That is in addition to the displacement of around 90,000 from southern Lebanon,⁷⁸ suspension of schools and businesses in border areas, and the suffering of the agricultural and tourist sectors. Hezbollah believed that this "level of war was necessary as [a moral] duty for Palestine".⁷⁹

Reflecting on these multi-level pressures, Nasrallah justified Hezbollah's participation in the war by asserting that "[o]ur decision aligns the *strategic vision* with the need to support Gaza and take into account *Lebanese national interests*".⁸⁰ As OST assumes, "ontological security can conflict with physical security".⁸¹ In joining the war, Hezbollah was preserving and reproducing its identity: "a crucial requirement of a stable self-understanding is that one's actions can sustain it overtime".⁸² Doing otherwise would have exposed Hezbollah to shame and condemnation, but as I am arguing here, it could also erode its long-term strategy. In addition to war, through discourse and the reproduction of narratives, Hezbollah attempted to restore its ontological security.

On 25 October 2023, Nasrallah wrote a letter to media outlets associated with Hezbollah asking them to name all fighters who fall in the battle as "Martyrs on the road to Jerusalem". This naming, he added, "is an affirmation of the *identity* of the sacrifices made for the sake of Almighty God on our Lebanese borders with occupied Palestine... any new martyr is referred to as a martyr on the *road to Jerusalem*".⁸³ The speech-act here serves more than one purpose. It reaffirms a religio-political ideal and moral commitments that Hezbollah carries, which is important for the ideological stability of its own self-hood. But this is also orientated toward the reaffirmation of Hezbollah's commitment to its regional allies, an act that sustains the alliance and, by emphasizing the idea of "on the road to Jerusalem", Hezbollah is also shaping the future. Symbols matter for retaining members and for the legitimacy of the movement. Contrast this with AMAL, another Lebanese-Shi'a movement, which also joined the war, albeit on a smaller scale. AMAL labels its own fighters who fall in the war as martyrs in the "defence of Lebanon and the South". Asked why the slogans differ, an AMAL official said "we disagree with them [Hezbollah] on the military and

⁷⁵ Stoker, p. 87.

⁷⁶ See Nasrallah's speech on 3 November 2023: "al-Sayyid Nassrallah: Tūfān al-Aqṣā Assasa li-Marḥala Tārīkhiyya Jadīda.. wa-Kul al-Iḥtimālāt fī Jabhatinā Maftūḥa."

⁷⁷ "Death Toll in Lebanon," *Lorient Today – Instagram*, accessed on 30/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/bd2nv5kz>

⁷⁸ Justin Salhani, "Israel's toxic legacy: White phosphorus bombs on south Lebanon," *Aljazeera*, 25/3/2024, accessed on 30/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4mmw3cxu>

⁷⁹ See Naim Qassem interview on Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation aired on 5 March 2024: "Na'im Qāsim, Ḥalqa Khāṣa."

⁸⁰ "al-Naṣ al-Kāmil li-Kalimat al-Sayyid Naṣrallah bil-Thikrā al-Sanawiyya al-Rābi'a li-Istishhād al-Qā'idayn Sulaymānī wa-al-Muhandis," *Almanar*, 4/1/2024, accessed on 29/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yznw9y5v>. Italics added.

⁸¹ Mitzen, p. 342; Steele, p. 2.

⁸² Mitzen, p. 344.

⁸³ For the letter, see: "Naṣrallah Ṭalab Tasmīyat 'Anāṣir 'Ḥizballah' al-Lathīn Saqaṭū Munthu Tishrīn al-Awwal bi-'al-Shuhadā' 'alā Ṭarīq al-Quds'," *Elnashra*, accessed on 29/3/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/5n6ex3b3>. Italics added.

strategic vision: they are with the unity of arenas in the Axis of Resistance and we are for the unity of Lebanese territories”.⁸⁴

To the outrage of many Lebanese, and potentially at a high political cost, Hezbollah opened the southern front to other Palestinian armed groups, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, to conduct operations against Israel.⁸⁵ The action served more than one purpose. Hezbollah did not want to be associated with Arab regimes that are shamed for closing the borders in the face of groups who want to fight Israel and are accused of “protecting” Israel’s borders. But Hezbollah was also reaffirming its religio-political commitment to the common battle against Israel that unites Resistance Axis members, and once again narrowing the gap between its narratives and behaviour. In several speeches, Nasrallah stressed how various “arenas” and “fronts” have come to support Gaza in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, and Iran’s crucial role in supporting and coordinating these efforts, which started before 7 October.⁸⁶ The actions taken by the movement, Nasrallah was affirming, bridge past actions to the present, represented in the Gaza war, and the future.

To debunk accusations that attempted to shame Hezbollah for not engaging sufficiently in the war, Hezbollah used its speeches to underline – and in so doing to restore its ontological security – the sacrifices it is enduring for Gaza and the price Israel is paying. The “Lebanese front”, asserted Nasrallah, “has attracted one-third of Israel’s armed forces ... half of its missile defence are targeting Lebanon ... and tens of thousands have vacated their settlements in the north ... which generates financial, psychological, and economic pressure” on Israel. “This is all a product of the battle on our borders”.⁸⁷ The Hezbollah-Israel war has been costly for Israel, but whether it has had a direct effect on Israel’s conduct in Gaza is not so certain.

The above discourse demonstrates how Hezbollah has attempted to restore its ontological security in this critical episode. Clearly, through constrained warfare and justificatory discourse, Hezbollah has tried to connect its identity and perceived moral commitments to its actions: “there is no doubt about the moral, legal, and religious basis for this battle; it is one of the greatest examples of martyrdom for the sake of Allah”, it emphasized.⁸⁸ It also has tried to link this critical episode to the future:

We pledge to [our martyrs] that we will continue this path as a resistance...and we will preserve their goals... and accumulate their achievements to reach victory. The final victory is coming, it is coming, God willing. Our generations will witness the liberation of Palestine and the liberation of Jerusalem. This fact will be proven in the coming days, weeks, months and years.⁸⁹

In attempting to restore its ontological security, Hezbollah was also reinstating its vision, which is key for its own sense of self-hood. In doing so, it was also trying to control the future.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to explain Hezbollah’s puzzling engagement in the Gaza war. Hezbollah did not engage in a full-fledged war, nor did it stay neutral. Rather, as the study has shown, it conducted a “constrained war” aiming to restore its ontological security and to cope with the anxiety caused in the wake of the 7 October attacks. Hezbollah, the study has found, has tried to balance between restoring its

⁸⁴ Quoted in: Amal Khalil, “Shuhadā’ al-Ḥaraka ‘alā Ṭarīq Lubnān’ | Amal fī Qalb al-Muwājahā: ‘Awda ilā al-Juthūr,” *Al-Akhbar*, 6/2/2024, accessed on 3/4/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/muzpn5es>. I thank Wassim Mroue for pointing out this idea to me.

⁸⁵ Kassir.

⁸⁶ “Kalimat al-Amīn al-‘Ām li-Ḥizballah Samāhat al-Sayyid Ḥasan Naṣrallah fī Iḥtifāl Yawm al-Shahīd 11-11-2023,” *Almanar*, 11/11/2023, accessed on 3/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdfmpjju>

⁸⁷ “al-Sayyid Nassrallah: Ṭūfān al-Aqṣā Assasa li-Marḥala Tārīkhiyya Jadīda.. wa-Kul al-Iḥtimālāt fī Jabhatinā Maftūha.”

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ “Kalimat al-Amīn al-‘Ām li-Ḥizballah Samāhat al-Sayyid Ḥasan Naṣrallah fī Iḥtifāl Yawm al-Shahīd 11-11-2023.”

ontological security without jeopardizing its physical security. Through constrained warfare on the Lebanese-Israeli border and a series of discursive acts, Hezbollah has attempted to narrow the gap between its social identity and actions, and thus, it was sustaining its reputation and role as a “resistance movement” and those of the alliance, Resistance Axis, that it belongs to.

The Hezbollah case offers important theoretical insights. First, it shows how in certain critical episodes, physical and ontological securities can *interact* to explain outcomes. In Hezbollah’s case, aims to preserve the movement physically have shaped its approach to restore its ontological security. These attempts at ontological restoration paved the way for the sustenance of Hezbollah’s identity and regional alliance. Second, it reveals that actors need not perceive routines as ends in themselves. Routines may offer a predictable environment for actors which could reproduce their ontological security. In Hezbollah’s case, routines have been perceived as time intervals for possible disruptions. Indeed, stable periods have included elements – preparation for war – that may form ingredients for future disruptions. Hezbollah’s being, along with its sense of mission, is future-orientated. Whilst there is a risk that it could slip into stasis or political conservatism, failure to live up to its mission may lead to meaninglessness and erode its role, reputation, and need as an APM in a divided society.

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