



Beyond Sectarianism: Hezbollah and the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood's Evolving Alliance in the Context of the Al-Aqsa Flood

Mezhep Sınırlarını Aşan İttifak: Hizbullah ve Lübnan Müslüman Kardeşler Hareketi'nin Aksa Tufanı Bağlamında İş Birliği

Talha İsmail Duman 

Visiting Fellow, The University of Manchester, Global Development Institute, Manchester, United Kingdom, ismailduman@sakarya.edu.tr
<https://ror.org/027m9bs27>

Dr., Sakarya University, Middle East Institute, Middle Eastern Studies, Sakarya, Türkiye, ismailduman@sakarya.edu.tr
<https://ror.org/04ttnw109>



Abstract: This article examines the historical and evolving relationship between Hezbollah and Jama'a al-Islamiyya, the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, with a particular focus on the military collaboration between Hezbollah and Jama'a al-Islamiyya's armed wing, the Fajr Forces, following the October 2023 Al-Aqsa Flood operation. While ideological and sectarian differences exist between the Shia Hezbollah and Sunni Jama'a al-Islamiyya, these groups had previously cooperated. However, following Lebanon's growing political polarization after 2005, they began aligning with opposing political camps, and these divisions became even more apparent with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach, drawing on media analyses, official statements, and academic literature to investigate the political and strategic factors enabling this renewed cooperation. Key drivers include the shared perception of Israel as a common threat, leadership transitions within Jama'a al-Islamiyya that reduced Saudi influence, and Hamas-mediated dialogue that helped facilitate this coordination. Contrary to sectarian-based interpretations, the findings show that this partnership reflects how political and military needs can override sectarian reflexes. It does not signal ideological convergence but rather a willingness to cross sectarian boundaries under certain conditions. The article also contributes to broader discussions on sectarianization and de-sectarianization by illustrating how political actors often shape and redefine sectarian identities in the Middle East in response to changing geopolitical realities. In this context, the Hezbollah-Fajr Forces cooperation offers a compelling example of how cross-sectarian alliances can emerge in dynamic conflict environments and reshape local political-military landscapes.

Keywords: Middle Eastern Studies, Hezbollah, Jama'a al-Islamiyya, Lebanon, Sectarianism, Fajr Forces.

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Öz: Bu makale Hizbullah ile Müslüman Kardeşler'in Lübnan kolu olan Cemaat-i İslamiyye arasındaki tarihsel ilişkileri, Aksa Tufanı Operasyonu bağlamında ortaya çıkan Hizbullah ile Cemaat-i İslamiyye'nin silahlı kanadı olan Fecr Kuvvetleri arasındaki askeri iş birliğine odaklanarak incelemektedir. Hizbullah ve Cemaat-i İslamiyye arasındaki ideolojik ve mezhepsel farklılıklara rağmen, bu hareketler geçmişte birlikte hareket etme iradesi göstermişti. Ancak 2005 yılından sonra Lübnan'da artan siyasi kutuplaşmayla birlikte karşıt siyasi kamplarda yer almaya başladılar ve bu ayrılık Suriye İç Savaşı'nın patlak vermesiyle daha da belirgin hale geldi. Çalışma, 7 Ekim sonrası yenilenen bu işbirliğini mümkün kılan siyasi ve stratejik faktörleri araştırmak için medya haberlerinden /analizlerinden, resmî açıklamalardan ve akademik literatürden yararlanarak nitel bir vaka çalışması yaklaşımını benimsemektedir. Söz konusu iş birliğini mümkün kılan temel etkenler arasında İsrail'in ortak bir tehdit olarak algılanmasının, Suudi Arabistan etkisini azaltan Cemaat-i İslamiyye içindeki liderlik değişiminin ve koordinasyonu kolaylaştırmaya yardımcı olan Hamas'ın aracılık ettiği diyalogun yer aldığı tespit edilmiştir. Mezhep temelli okumaların aksine, bulgular, bu iş birliğinin siyasi ve askeri ihtiyaçların mezhepsel reflekslerin önüne nasıl geçebileceğini yansıttığını göstermektedir. Bu ortaklık, ideolojik bir yakınlaşmaya değil, belirli koşullar altında mezhep sınırlarını aşma isteğine işaret etmektedir. Makale, aynı zamanda, Ortadoğu'da mezhepsel kimliklerin değişen jeopolitik gerçeklikler karşısında siyasi aktörler tarafından nasıl şekillendirildiğini ve yeniden tanımlandığını göstererek, "mezhepleştirme" ve "mezhepleştirmeden arın(dır)ma" konusundaki daha geniş tartışmalara katkıda bulunmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Hizbullah-Fecr Kuvvetleri iş birliği, dinamik çatışma ortamlarında farklı mezhepsel gruplar arası ittifakların nasıl ortaya çıkabileceğine ve yerel siyasi-askeri manzaraları nasıl yeniden şekillendirebileceğine dair ilgi çekici bir örnek sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Orta Doğu Çalışmaları, Hizbullah, Cemaat-i İslami, Lübnan, Mezhepçilik, Fecr Kuvvetleri.

Introduction

The Al-Aqsa Flood operation in October 2023 reshaped Lebanon's political-military landscape by exposing new patterns of cooperation and signaling shifts in alliances. Hezbollah's involvement on October 8, 2023, was expected given its consistent posture as the leading actor in Lebanon's resistance to Israel. However, the active participation of Jama'a al-Islamiyya's armed wing, the Fajr Forces, introduced a new dimension to the conflict. Jama'a al-Islamiyya, widely recognized as the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, has historically followed a fluctuating political trajectory, alternating between periods of cooperation and distance from Hezbollah based on evolving regional and internal dynamics.

During the recent conflict, the group played a direct role in operations launched from Lebanon's southern border, including firing rockets at Israeli targets.¹ These operations were framed as an effort to alleviate pressure on Gaza by opening a second front in the north. In this context, Jama'a al-Islamiyya mobilized its armed wing under a joint operations structure with Hezbollah, sustaining significant losses, with over 30 fighters killed, including senior commanders.² The group's Secretary-General, Mohammed Taqoush, was reportedly targeted in two assassination attempts during the conflict.³ Despite these challenges, Jama'a al-Islamiyya remained actively engaged, reflecting a deeper strategic alignment with Hezbollah. A critical moment in this evolving relationship was the high-profile meeting between Taqoush and Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Publicly framed as a renewal of ties, this meeting carried significant symbolic and practical implications.⁴ It reflected not just battlefield coordination but also a potential political realignment, raising questions about the underlying strategic and ideological motivations behind this reconciliation.

While Israel's military operations were undoubtedly the most immediate catalyst for this convergence, they do not fully explain the depth of this realignment. The convergence of multiple factors—including external threats, internal organizational changes, and regional power dynamics—also played a key role. Internally, the leadership transition within Jama'a al-Islamiyya in 2022, which brought Mohammed Taqoush to the forefront, marked a significant shift in the group's direction.⁵ His leadership revived the cross-sectarian, inclusive approach previously championed by Fathi Yakan,⁶ emphasizing the need to prioritize unity against external enemies while setting aside internal divisions for the sake of a broader religious and communal struggle. Externally, Jama'a al-Islamiyya's fluctuating relationship with Saudi Arabia also shaped its evolving stance toward Hezbollah. During periods of close ties with Riyadh, the group distanced itself from Hezbollah, reflecting the broader regional contest between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Following the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005, Jama'a al-Islamiyya joined the anti-Syrian March 14 Bloc, whereas Hezbollah became a leading force in the pro-Syrian March 8 Alliance.⁷ This political divergence only deepened during the Syrian Civil War, when the two groups found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict. From 2012 to 2015, their communication broke down entirely.⁸ Although relations were partially restored afterward, they never returned to their earlier state—until the recent signs of rapprochement during the Al-Aqsa Flood operation.

The relationship between these two groups cannot be fully understood through classical orientalist or essentialist frameworks that reduce Middle Eastern politics to immutable sectarian divides. Scholars situated within essentialist traditions often portray sectarian identities as fixed, ancient, and inherently

1 Nada Homsy, "'We're with the resistance': Hezbollah allies the Fajr Forces join Lebanon-Israel front", *The National* (October 30, 2023).

2 *Al Mayadeen English*, "Islamic Group mourns al-Fajr Forces commander after Israeli strike" (July 18, 2024).

3 Hassan Khalil, "هل انتهت مغامرة الإخوان في لبنان؟", *Hafiyat* (January 22, 2025).

4 *Al Manar*, "لقاء بين السيد حسن نصر الله والشيخ محمد طقوش.. تأكيد على التعاون اسناداً لغزة وأهلها الشرفاء" (June 28, 2024).

5 Mohammed Fawaz, "الجماعة الإسلامية تشق مسارها الخاص", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (July 30, 2024).

6 Dima El Helwe, *Shifting Ideological Commitments and Political Practices in Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya: From Radicalism to Moderation and Back* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Master's Thesis, 2024), 16.

7 Talha İsmail Duman, "Lübnan: Müslüman Kardeşler ve El-Cemaat'ul İslamiyye", *Küresel İhvan: Müslüman Kardeşler'in Rejimlerle İlişkileri ve Ulusötesi Niteliği*, ed. Abdülğani Bozkurt - Mehmet Rakipoğlu (İstanbul: Ketebe, 2023), 260-261.

8 Al Sharq Youth, "قوات الفجر وحزب الله.. جبهة لبنانية مشتركة ضد إسرائيل | بودكاست الشرق", *YouTube* (July 12, 2024), 00:15:20-00:15:40.

antagonistic, suggesting that being Sunni or Shi'i is a timeless and deterministic marker of political behavior. Grounded in a static and reductionist view of identity, such narratives emphasize culture and religious identity as the primary drivers of conflict, sidelining the strategic agency of political actors.⁹ Building on this reasoning, certain analysts have gone further to frame the region's political dynamics as the manifestation of a 'clash' within Islam itself by drawing inspiration from Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis and portraying the Sunni-Shi'i divide as a renewed expression of schisms rooted in early Islamic history.¹⁰ In contrast to such deterministic perspectives, this article adopts a more dynamic view of identity, recognizing that while sectarian labels are often mobilized in political discourse, they are neither fixed nor predetermined. Political actors frequently instrumentalize –or set aside– sectarian narratives in response to external threats and shifting strategic interests. The recent alliance between Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah highlights how political actors in Lebanon adapt and recalibrate their positions based on both internal leadership changes and evolving geopolitical realities.

This article aims to explore the evolving relationship between Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah, focusing on the internal and external factors that contributed to their recent reconciliation. Specifically, it seeks to answer the question: What made this alliance possible despite years of political rivalry and sectarian differences? By analyzing this case, the article contributes to broader debates on political realignments, leadership transitions, and the dynamics of alliance formation in deeply divided societies like Lebanon. It argues that the convergence of external threats –particularly Israel's aggression– and internal leadership shifts collectively enabled this reconciliation, revealing the contingent and flexible nature of political alliances in Lebanon's complex landscape.

1. Methodology

This study applies a qualitative case study approach to investigate the collaboration between Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah during the October 2023 Al-Aqsa Flood operation. The qualitative case study method is widely used for exploring complex events and understanding them in their specific context.¹¹ This method focuses on answering "how" and "why" questions,¹² which makes it especially useful for analyzing the factors behind political behavior and alliance formation. Following Stake's typology, this research is best classified as an instrumental case study, where the primary goal is to use the case as a means to explore broader patterns of political behavior and alliance formation in Islamist movements.¹³

Data for this study comes from multiple sources, including media analyses, official statements, academic literature, historical records, and field observations. Rather than focusing on a single perspective, these sources are analyzed together to capture a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the case. The combination of different data types ensures the reliability of the findings and helps reduce potential biases. The analysis also considers the historical and political context, situating the case within the broader timeline of Lebanese politics and regional developments. This contextual approach highlights how internal decisions, and external pressures shaped the evolving dynamics of the alliance at that specific moment. By applying this qualitative case study method, the research aims to uncover these patterns and provide a deeper understanding of how Islamist movements adapt and respond to changing political realities.

2. Rethinking Sectarianism: A Critical Approach and Prospects for Cross-Sectarian Alliances

Sectarianism is often cited as a key factor in the conflicts plaguing the Middle East, a perspective seemingly supported by several regional developments. From the rise of sectarian militias in Iraq to the

9 Vali Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (New York, Oxford Academic, 2017).

10 Robert Brenton Betts, *The Sunni-Shi'a Divide: Islam's Internal Divisions and Their Global Consequences* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2013); Larbi Sadiki, "Huntington in the Middle East", *Al Jazeera* (August 16, 2014).

11 Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995).

12 Rahime Süleymanoğlu Kürüm, "Uluslararası İlişkilerde Nitel Yöntemlerle Makale Yazımı: Vaka Analizi ve İncelikleri", *Pamukkale Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 42 (February 2021), 151.

13 Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, 3.

ongoing tensions in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon, many scholars and commentators have drawn a direct line between these conflicts and long-standing religious/sectarian divisions within Islam.¹⁴ This view aligns with the common perception that Sunni-Shi'a rivalries are deeply rooted in centuries-old differences dating back to the earliest period of Islamic history. Prominent proponents of this perspective, such as Vali Nasr, frame sectarianism as a transhistorical force that shapes political behavior, asserting that "it is rather the old feud between Shi'as and Sunnis that forges attitudes, defines prejudices, draws political boundary lines, and even decides whether and to what extent those other trends have relevance".¹⁵ This essentialist reading of sectarian identity is echoed in broader culturalist approaches that regard identity as fixed and conflict as inevitable. Public figures such as former U.S. President Barack Obama and media commentators have further amplified this line of thinking by attributing contemporary instability to "ancient (sectarian) divisions".¹⁶ At first glance, this explanation may appear plausible given the visible sectarian dimensions of several conflicts. However, it overlooks the complexity of the region's socio-political dynamics and the constructed nature of sectarian identities. Rather than being a permanent feature of the Middle East, sectarianism is more accurately described as a political and social phenomenon that has been manufactured and instrumentalized at key moments in modern history.

The concept of sectarianization, as articulated by Hashemi and Postel, offers a more nuanced analytical framework for understanding these conflicts. Rather than viewing sectarianism as an inevitable consequence of religious differences, sectarianization frames it as a deliberate political project shaped by state actors, political entrepreneurs, and geopolitical rivalries.¹⁷ Building on this, Mabon emphasizes the critical role of state actors in constructing and instrumentalizing sectarian identities for political ends. According to Mabon, sectarianism is a dynamic and context-specific process that can be reversed through de-sectarianization strategies. These strategies include promoting inclusive governance, strengthening civil society, reducing external intervention in local conflicts, and fostering regional dialogue.¹⁸ This perspective challenges the dominant essentialist narrative and shifts the focus from immutable religious differences to political competition and state-driven processes.

Historically, several key moments have intensified the process of sectarianization in the Middle East, reshaping regional geopolitics. The 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution marked a watershed moment that alarmed Sunni authoritarian regimes, particularly Saudi Arabia, which framed the revolution as a distinctly Shi'a threat.¹⁹ While the revolution's rhetoric was pan-Islamic in nature, it was quickly perceived through a sectarian lens, leading to an ideological rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This rivalry escalated into a broader geopolitical struggle, with both states mobilizing sectarian narratives to expand their influence across the region. This politicization of sectarian identity became a key tool for both Iran and Saudi Arabia in their competition for regional hegemony. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq further disrupted the regional balance of power and created a political vacuum that allowed sectarian identities to be politicized and instrumentalized.²⁰ The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime opened the door for Shi'a Islamist parties closely aligned with Iran to dominate Iraqi politics, exacerbating Sunni fears of marginalization. The U.S.-led process of state-building institutionalized sectarianism through policies

14 Ranj Alaaldin, *Sectarianism, Governance, and Iraq's Future* (Doha: Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, 2018); Heiko Wimmen, "The Sectarianization of the Syrian War", *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East*, ed. Frederic Wehrey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 61-86; Peter Salisbury, *Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State* (London: Chatham House, 2016); Bassel F. Salloukh, "The State of Consociationalism in Lebanon", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 30/1 (March 2023), 8-27.

15 Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival*, 82.

16 The White House-Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by the President and First Lady on the End of the War in Iraq* (December 2011).

17 Nader Hashemi - Danny Postel, "Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East", *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 15/3 (Agustos 2017), 1-13.

18 Simon Mabon, "Desectarianization: Looking Beyond the Sectarianization of Middle Eastern Politics", *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17/4 (November 2019), 29-32.

19 Yıldırım Turan - Lan Nguyen Hoang, "Beyond Sectarian Identity Politics in the Middle East: The Case of Iran-Saudi Arabia's Rivalry", *Akademik İncelemeler Dergisi* 14/2 (Ekim 2019), 77-120.

20 İbrahim Akkan - Fuat Aksu, "Suriye Krizinde Mezhepçiliğin Araçsallaştırılması", *Marmara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilimler Dergisi* 11/1 (Mart 2023), 154-179.

that allocated power along sectarian lines, transforming sectarian identities into a central feature of Iraq's political system. What began as a struggle for power and resources quickly evolved into a sectarian civil war, illustrating how sectarianism can be manufactured and escalated during periods of state fragility and external intervention. Moreover, the 2011 Arab uprisings created a new environment in which authoritarian regimes and various political actors increasingly instrumentalized sectarian identities to maintain power and control. In response to mass protests, some regimes and opposition groups alike resorted to sectarian rhetoric to mobilize support and discredit rivals. As the uprisings evolved into protracted conflicts, sectarian narratives became more prominent, fueled by regional actors pursuing their own strategic interests. External powers amplified these divides by supporting armed factions and framing conflicts through a sectarian lens, further deepening communal tensions across the region.²¹

While these events have contributed to the perception that sectarianism is an intrinsic feature of Middle Eastern politics, many scholars argue that this view is overly simplistic and overlooks the broader political context. F. Gregory Gause III, for instance, challenges the dominant sectarian narrative by highlighting how the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is less about religious differences and more about competing political and strategic interests. According to this perspective, sectarianism becomes a convenient mechanism for advancing broader power struggles rather than an inherent driver of conflict. This instrumentalization of sectarian identities is not limited to state actors; regional media outlets and transnational networks also play a significant role in reinforcing sectarian perceptions. By framing conflicts through a sectarian lens, these actors contribute to the polarization of local communities and escalate political disputes into identity-based confrontations.²² Such dynamics are particularly visible in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, where complex political conflicts have been reduced to simplistic sectarian binaries.²³ However, as Gause and other scholars argue, focusing exclusively on sectarianism obscures the underlying political, economic, and geopolitical factors driving these conflicts. Therefore, recognizing the contextual and constructed nature of sectarian identities is crucial for understanding the contemporary Middle East and the evolving patterns of regional competition.

Valbjørn and Hinnebusch offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing sectarianism by identifying four distinct approaches: primordialist, instrumentalist, constructivist and institutionalist. The primordialist approach perceives sectarian identities as ancient and unchangeable, emphasizing religious differences as key drivers of conflict. While increasingly questioned within academic scholarship, this approach still holds a prominent place in political discourse, the media, and popular narratives. In contrast, the instrumentalist approach views sectarian identities as fluid and malleable, used by political elites to achieve power and control scarce resources. From this perspective, sectarianism is a tool employed by rational actors to pursue political and economic interests. The constructivist approach bridges the gap between primordialism and instrumentalism by focusing on how social and political practices construct and reproduce sectarian identities. While these identities are not fixed, they can become entrenched over time, gaining a dynamic of their own. Constructivists emphasize the role of political entrepreneurs and societal elites in shaping sectarian narratives and mobilizing communities around these identities. Finally, the institutionalist approach highlights the role of state institutions in either mitigating or exacerbating sectarian divides. When institutions collapse, people often turn to sub-state identities, including sectarian ones, for protection and solidarity.²⁴

21 Hashemi – Postel, "Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East", 6-8.

22 F. Gregory Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War* (Doha: Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, 2018), 5-7.

23 Gizem Örgen, *Ortadoğu'da Güç Mücadelesi Çerçevesinde Bir Kimlik Çatışması Olarak Mezhepçilik* (İstanbul: İstanbul University, Social Sciences Institute, PhD Dissertation, 2019), 57.

24 Morten Valbjørn – Raymond Hinnebusch, "Exploring the Nexus between Sectarianism and Regime Formation in a New Middle East: Theoretical Points of Departure", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19 (April 2019), 7.

The collapse of state institutions has been a significant factor in the sectarianization process in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In Iraq, the combination of state collapse and external intervention created fertile ground for the politicization of sectarian identities. The allocation of government positions based on sectarian quotas institutionalized sectarianism and fueled cycles of violence. Lebanon's experience with sectarianism is somewhat different but equally instructive. The country's political system is based on a power-sharing arrangement among its various religious communities. While this system has helped prevent outright conflict, it has also entrenched sectarian identities and made it difficult to build a cohesive national identity. Political elites in Lebanon have often used sectarian rhetoric to mobilize support and maintain their power, exacerbating tensions and undermining the country's stability.²⁵

In this regard, understanding the dynamics of shifting alliances in Lebanon and beyond requires moving beyond classical sectarian explanations and adopting a broader framework that highlights the strategic behavior of political actors. Rather than seeing alliances solely through the lens of religious or sectarian identity, recent scholarship emphasizes how external threats and internal political transformations drive coalition-building processes. These dynamics are particularly visible in conflict-ridden contexts where survival concerns and political pragmatism often override ideological divisions.

One of the most powerful catalysts for cross-ideological cooperation is the presence of significant external threats –such as military aggression, or perceived foreign intervention– which compel political actors to prioritize collective survival over factional interests. In these moments of heightened external pressure, even long-standing adversaries may set aside their differences to form strategic alliances aimed at resisting common enemies. For instance, Clark's study of opposition coalitions in Jordan during the 1990s shows how resistance to peace with Israel brought together ideologically divergent groups in a shared effort to counter normalization and defend national sovereignty. These coalitions were not driven by shared ideology but by the immediate need to confront a larger, external challenge.²⁶ Similar dynamics can be observed in the Lebanese context, where external threats have repeatedly reshaped political alliances. During periods of heightened external pressure, political actors in Lebanon –despite being deeply embedded in sectarian structures– have engaged in cross-sectarian collaboration to achieve shared objectives.

Another illustrative case is the enduring alliance between Hezbollah and Hamas, two Islamist movements with distinct sectarian affiliations. Despite Hezbollah's Shi'a identity and close ties with Iran, and Hamas's roots in the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood tradition, both actors have consistently prioritized the shared imperative of resisting Israel. Over the past three decades, they have cooperated through intelligence sharing, military training, coordinated public messaging, and mutual support during periods of armed conflict.²⁷ This cooperation intensified despite their ideological divergence, highlighting how external threats, particularly Israeli military aggression, can override sectarian boundaries. A parallel example is the fluctuating but resilient relationship between Hamas and Iran. Although tensions emerged during the Syrian civil war, particularly due to Hamas's opposition to the Assad regime, Iran later resumed substantial financial and military support to Hamas, including its military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades. This rapprochement, especially evident after 2017, illustrates the instrumental nature of sectarian boundaries when confronted with shifting geopolitical necessities. As with Hezbollah, Iran's alignment with Hamas is less a product of ideological convergence and more a reflection of common strategic calculations in confronting Israel.²⁸ These examples demonstrate that while cross-sectarian alliances often emerge in response to immediate strategic

25 Adham Saouli, "Sectarianism and Political Order in Iraq and Lebanon", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19 (April 2019), 67-87.

26 Janine A. Clark, "Threats, Structures, and Resources: Cross-Ideological Coalition Building in Jordan", *Comparative Politics* 43/ 1 (October 2010), 101-120.

27 Maren Koss, "Flexible Resistance: How Hezbollah and Hamas Are Mending Ties", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (Accessed January 15, 2025).

28 Talha İsmail Duman, *Ortadoğu'daki İslâmî Hareketlerin Siyasal Entegrasyonu: Mısır İhvanı, Hizbullah ve Hamas Örnekleri* (Sakarya Üniversitesi, Ortadoğu Enstitüsü, Doktora Tezi, 2023), 343-348.

imperatives, they can evolve into more sustained forms of cooperation under certain conditions. In this sense, external aggression may catalyze cooperation, but its durability depends largely on internal organizational dynamics and leadership decisions.

Leadership transitions, in particular, play a crucial role in determining whether such coalitions endure or collapse. Nepstad and Bob argue that leadership change can introduce new strategic perspectives, allowing organizations to adapt to shifting political landscapes and reconsider their alliances. Leaders with strong leadership capital –those who possess significant cultural, social, and symbolic resources– are often better positioned to forge pragmatic coalitions and reframe political rivalries.²⁹ While leadership change does not always lead to moderation, even ideologically rigid leaders can embrace broad alliances if they view them as essential for long-term survival. The interplay between external pressures and internal adaptability thus creates fertile ground for innovative coalition strategies that transcend traditional divides. When analyzed through the lens of sectarianism, these dynamics reveal how sectarian identities are neither fixed nor inherently conflictual but instead contingent on political and strategic calculations. External threats and leadership transitions provide political actors with opportunities to reconfigure alliances, often shifting the role of sectarian identity from a marker of division to a flexible political tool.

Thus, the politicization of sectarian identity must be understood within this broader context of strategic behavior, rather than as a purely ideological or religious phenomenon. The same actors who mobilize sectarian identities for political gain can de-emphasize them when it serves their interests. This perspective aligns with the broader framework of sectarianization. In this context, external threats and leadership transitions serve as key variables in the shifting patterns of sectarianism, illustrating the constructed and malleable nature of sectarian identities in the region's ongoing political struggles. The alliance between Hezbollah and Jama'a al-Islamiyya in Lebanon provides a compelling case study that highlights how cross-sectarian coalitions can emerge in response to shifting political dynamics.

3. The Historical Background of Relations Between Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah

The relationship between Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah is deeply rooted in Lebanon's complex political and security dynamics. Both movements emerged during periods of crisis, shaped by shifting internal realities and broader regional transformations. Although Hezbollah is often perceived primarily as a military organization due to its role in armed resistance against Israel, its origins were far more embedded in Lebanon's socio-political fabric. It was initially established as a multi-faceted movement with a strong social foundation, but the realities of conflict and occupation pushed it toward a more militarized structure. Similarly, Jama'a al-Islamiyya began as a Sunni Islamist socio-political movement but eventually developed an armed wing in response to the changing security environment.

Following the end of Lebanon's civil war, both movements became increasingly active in the country's formal political processes while maintaining their distinct ideological and strategic priorities. Their relationship evolved over time, shaped by external pressures and domestic political shifts, oscillating between cooperation and rivalry. In this section, the emergence and evolution of Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah will be explored, focusing on their initial goals, the key moments in their relationship, and the underlying factors that influenced their interactions. This historical overview will lay the groundwork for understanding how the 2023 conflict created new possibilities for strategic alignment between the two movements.

3.1. The Emergence of Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah

Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah represent two significant Islamist movements that developed under different circumstances but eventually converged in their opposition to Israel. Jama'a al-Islamiyya traces its roots back to the 1950s, inspired by the ideas of prominent figures such as Hasan al-Banna and Mustafa al-Siba'i. Initially focused on education, social welfare, and moral reform, the movement

²⁹ Sharon Erickson Nepstad – Clifford Bob, "When Do Leaders Matter? Hypotheses on Leadership Dynamics in Social Movements", *Mobilization: An International Journal* 11/1 (July 2006), 1-22.

gradually expanded its activities in response to Lebanon's changing political landscape.³⁰ By 1964, it had become the first officially recognized Islamic movement in Lebanon,³¹ marking a significant step in institutionalizing its presence. Despite its ideological alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood, Jama'a al-Islamiyya remained cautious about direct political involvement during its early years, carefully balancing its socio-political activities without fully engaging in armed conflict or electoral politics. However, by the early 1970s, the movement began signaling a shift toward political engagement. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 proved to be a turning point for Jama'a al-Islamiyya. In response to the occupation, the movement established its armed wing, the Fajr Forces, to participate in the resistance. Led by figures such as Jamal Habal and Abdullah Tiryaki, the Fajr Forces focused primarily on defending Sidon and nearby areas.³² Unlike Hezbollah, which grew into a formidable military-political organization, Jama'a al-Islamiyya maintained its identity as a socio-political movement with a limited military presence, reverting to armed resistance only when external threats necessitated it. The Fajr Forces played a crucial role in early operations against Israeli forces, marking Jama'a's direct entry into the resistance landscape.

Hezbollah, on the other hand, emerged in 1982 as an immediate response to the Israeli invasion. The movement's emergence was driven by the dissatisfaction of Islamist cadres within the Amal Movement, which had shifted toward a more secular direction after Musa al-Sadr's disappearance. Supported by Iran, Hezbollah positioned itself as a comprehensive Islamist movement with a military, social, and ideological framework rather than a mere armed faction. Its primary objective was to lead the resistance against Israeli occupation while simultaneously building a strong social foundation among Lebanon's Shi'a population.³³ As Hezbollah grew in influence, the shared focus on anti-Israel resistance brought Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah into closer coordination. While their strategies and organizational structures remained distinct, their common enemy and overlapping goals facilitated occasional tactical cooperation. This dynamic reflected the broader Islamist response to Israel's ongoing occupation, which reshaped the political and military landscape in southern Lebanon.

By the early 1990s, the Taif Agreement had introduced a new political framework in Lebanon, encouraging previously armed movements to engage more actively in formal politics. Jama'a al-Islamiyya, which had already taken early steps toward political engagement in the 1970s, began to prioritize its political activities more openly. Figures like Fathi Yakan played a pivotal role in shaping this transition, bridging the movement's political and social roles.³⁴ Meanwhile, Hezbollah maintained its dual focus on military resistance and political participation, refusing to disarm while expanding its influence within Lebanon's political institutions. The post-war period saw the increasing involvement of external actors in Lebanon's internal affairs, further complicating the relationship between Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah. This diversification of external influences not only altered Lebanon's political dynamics but also introduced new challenges for both movements. Over time, these pressures contributed to occasional tensions within their relationship, reflecting the evolving and often unpredictable nature of Lebanese politics.

3.2. Shifting Alliances and Emerging Divisions (1990–2005)

Between 1990 and 2005, Jama'a al-Islamiyya's relationship with Hezbollah evolved from a strategic partnership rooted in anti-Israel resistance into a more distant and cautious association.³⁵ The shared goal of resisting Israeli occupation initially strengthened ties between the two movements. However,

30 Abdul Ghany Imad, "A topography of Sunni Islamic organizations and movements in Lebanon", *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 2/1 (March 2009), 144.

31 Amaia Goenaga-Sánchez, "Lebanon: Islamism, Communities and Spillover of the Arab Spring", *Political Islam in a Time of Revolt*, ed. Ferran Izquierdo Brichs etc. (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 65.

32 *Al Manar*, "قوات الفجر. تاريخ من مقاومة العدو من 1982 إلى 2024" (July 22, 2024).

33 Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 13-15.

34 Robert G. Rabil, "Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyah and Fathi Yakan: The Pioneer of Sunni Islamic Activism in Lebanon", *Religion, National Identity, and Confessional Politics in Lebanon: The Challenge of Islamism*, ed. Robert G. Rabil (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 35-37.

35 Chafic Choucair, "الجماعة الإسلامية في لبنان: نموذج مشرقى على التحول في الدور والهوية", *Al Jazeera Centre For Studies* (February 1, 2019).

internal changes within Jama'a and Lebanon's shifting political context, shaped by external influences from Syria and Saudi Arabia, gradually drove a wedge between them. The 1992 parliamentary elections marked a critical juncture for Jama'a. The movement secured political representation for the first time, electing three candidates to parliament, including its leader, Fathi Yakan.³⁶ While this was a political breakthrough, it also exposed fault lines within the movement.

Following Yakan's decision to step down from leadership after the elections, Jama'a's political strategy began to shift under its new leadership. While Yakan had always advocated for maintaining a clear distance from external political influences, the new leadership saw opportunities to align with Rafik Hariri's bloc. This pragmatic turn created deep divisions within Jama'a. Yakan was firmly opposed to any cooperation with Hariri, whom he viewed as aligned with the Zionist-American project.³⁷ For Yakan, collaboration with Hariri represented a departure from Jama'a's original principles and a betrayal of the resistance cause. Despite his strong objections, other factions within Jama'a considered Hariri a valuable ally due to his growing political and financial influence in Lebanon.

This internal struggle gradually weakened the movement's unity and effectiveness. Jama'a's electoral fortunes declined sharply after 1992. While it managed to retain one parliamentary seat in the 1996 elections, by 2000, it failed to win any representation.³⁸ This electoral defeat triggered widespread frustration, leading to mass resignations from its political bureau and key leadership positions.³⁹ Meanwhile, Jama'a demonstrated strength at the local level, winning significant municipal victories in the 1998 elections, particularly in Sunni-majority cities like Saida and Tripoli. Despite these local successes, Jama'a's influence at the national level continued to diminish.

On the military front, coordination between Jama'a's Fajr Forces and Hezbollah remained strong until Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. Fajr Forces had played an important role in resisting the Israeli occupation, collaborating closely with Hezbollah throughout the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁰ However, after 2000, Fajr Forces gradually faded from the scene, and the relationship between Jama'a and Hezbollah became increasingly defined by political dynamics rather than shared military objectives. This shift exposed the growing political divergence between the two movements.

With the onset of the 2000s, Jama'a's leadership moved closer to Hariri's bloc. This growing alignment raised concerns both within the movement and beyond. Rumors began to circulate about some senior Jama'a figures engaging with Saudi Arabia, which fueled further internal discontent. For Fathi Yakan, who had built much of Jama'a's earlier identity around a cross-sectarian alliance against imperialist powers, these developments were deeply troubling. Yakan viewed the growing proximity to Hariri as a dangerous compromise that undermined Jama'a's core principles. Ultimately, these tensions led to Yakan's resignation from Jama'a,⁴¹ marking a significant rupture in the movement's history and further weakening its relationship with Hezbollah. By the time of Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005, the political and ideological distance between Jama'a and Hezbollah had become substantial. Jama'a's gradual shift toward an anti-Syrian stance, fueled by growing Saudi influence, further distanced it from Hezbollah. While their earlier partnership had been based on shared resistance goals, the new political realities after 2005 pushed the two movements into increasingly divergent paths.

3.3. Fragmentation and Recalibration Amid Regional Upheaval (2005–2022)

After Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005, his son Saad Hariri founded the Future Party (Tayyar al-Mustaqbal), aiming to consolidate Sunni political power under the 14 March Coalition. While Hariri's rhetoric often emphasized Sunni unity and portrayed the party as a protector of Sunni interests in

36 Duman, "Lübnan: Müslüman Kardeşler ve El-Cemaat'ul İslamiyye", 259.

37 El Helwe, *Shifting Ideological Commitments and Political Practices in Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya*, 39.

38 Omayma Abdel-Latif, "Lebanon's Sunni Islamists—A Growing Force", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (Accessed January 11, 2025).

39 El Helwe, *Shifting Ideological Commitments and Political Practices in Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya*, 39.

40 Özlem Acar, "Lübnan Direniş Tugayları'nın Sünni Kanadı: Fecr Güçleri", *Ortadoğu Etütleri* 16/1 (July 2024), 55.

41 El Helwe, *Shifting Ideological Commitments and Political Practices in Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya*, 31.

Lebanon, the reality was more nuanced. The Future Party primarily operated as a secular political movement with a pragmatic approach focused on economic development and state rebuilding rather than religious goals. Despite this, Hariri's emphasis on Sunni identity served as a counterbalance to Hezbollah's growing influence, positioning the Future Party as the de facto representative of Lebanon's Sunni community.⁴² However, this narrative did not resonate with all Sunni factions. Some groups remained independent or aligned with opposing political blocs, revealing the fragmented and complex nature of Sunni politics in Lebanon. Jama'a al-Islamiyya initially aligned with Saad Hariri's coalition,⁴³ seeing it as an opportunity to counterbalance Hezbollah's expanding influence. However, this alliance was fraught with tension. While the leadership sought to capitalize on the Future Party's growing prominence, other figures within Jama'a criticized the move, viewing it as a deviation from the movement's core principles of resistance and independence.

The 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel further strained Jama'a's internal dynamics. Despite the ongoing political differences, Fajr Forces fought alongside Hezbollah during the war.⁴⁴ However, shortly after the July War, Fathi Yakan formally established the Islamic Action Front (Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami),⁴⁵ presenting it as a platform for those who opposed the 14 March Coalition's alignment with Western and Saudi-backed interests. Yakan criticized the coalition for including parties like the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb Party, whom he accused of representing American and Zionist agendas.⁴⁶ The Islamic Action Front aligned itself with the 8 March Coalition, positioning itself as an alternative Sunni voice alongside Hezbollah and other anti-Western factions. Yakan's departure caused a significant fracture within Jama'a, especially since Abdullah Teriaqi, the leader of Fajr Forces, also sided with Yakan for a period.⁴⁷ This led to widespread speculation that Fajr Forces were operating independently of Jama'a. However, these rumors dissipated following Yakan's death in 2009. After that, Fajr Forces became a more passive entity under Jama'a's control, refraining from direct military engagement until the 2023 Al-Aqsa Flood operation.

On the other hand, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 marked a critical turning point. While Jama'a had previously maintained a cautious distance from Hezbollah, the war deepened the political and ideological divide. Hezbollah's intervention in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime was perceived by Jama'a as a betrayal of the oppressed people. This development pushed Jama'a closer to Saudi Arabia, with its leadership advocating for increased Saudi involvement in Lebanon's Sunni political landscape. By 2016, Jama'a actively participated in the "Uniting the Sunni House" initiative alongside Saad Hariri and Najib Mikati, a project supported by Saudi Arabia to strengthen Sunni representation in Lebanon.⁴⁸

Despite Jama'a's efforts to strengthen its relationship with Saudi Arabia, the situation changed with the rise of Mohammed bin Salman as Crown Prince in 2017. The broader regional dynamics, particularly the Qatar crisis and the Gulf's hardening stance against the Muslim Brotherhood, indirectly affected the Jama'a. Although Saudi Arabia had historically treated Lebanese and Yemeni branches of the Muslim Brotherhood more leniently, the new regional order created a more challenging environment for Jama'a's political maneuvers. In the 2018 Lebanese parliamentary elections, the Future Party and other political factions, under pressure from Saudi Arabia and its regional allies, distanced themselves from Jama'a.⁴⁹ This move significantly weakened Jama'a's electoral prospects. Adding to the instability, Asaad Harmoush, who was then Jama'a's head of the Political Bureau, refused to run for the elections and publicly welcomed Prime Minister Saad Hariri at his home shortly before the polls. This move was

42 Gary C. Gambill, "Islamist Groups in Lebanon", *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 11/4 (December 2007), 49-50.

43 Acar, "Lübnan Direniş Tugayları'nın Sünni Kanadı: Fecr Güçleri", 56.

44 *Al Manar*, "تقوات الفجر. تاريخ من مقاومة العدو من 1982 إلى 2024".

45 Abdel-Latif, "Lebanon's Sunni Islamists".

46 Imad, "A topography of Sunni Islamic organizations and movements in Lebanon", 147.

47 El Helwe, *Shifting Ideological Commitments and Political Practices in Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya*, 59.

48 Ridwan Akil, "السعودية مهتمة بترتيب البيت السنّي في لبنان", *Al-Nahar* (June 9, 2016).

49 El Helwe, *Shifting Ideological Commitments and Political Practices in Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya*, 54.

widely perceived as tacit support for Hariri's candidate in Tripoli, creating confusion and weakening Jama'a's official campaign strategy.⁵⁰

During the early years of Azzam al-Ayoubi's leadership, Jama'a maintained its critical stance toward Hezbollah while striving to preserve its relationship with Saudi Arabia. In a 2016 interview, Al-Ayoubi openly criticized Hezbollah's refusal to integrate its weapons into a national defense strategy, arguing that this approach deepened divisions among Lebanese factions. He also condemned Hezbollah's involvement in regional conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, which he viewed as contributing to growing sectarian polarization under Iranian influence. Al-Ayoubi expressed disappointment with Iran's failure to overcome historical Sunni-Shia divisions, asserting that Iran's actions had ultimately exacerbated these divides.⁵¹

Despite this disillusionment, changing circumstances and the decline of Saudi support pushed Jama'a to adopt a more pragmatic approach to Lebanon's evolving political landscape. By 2020, Hamas played a mediating role, facilitating dialogue between Jama'a and Hezbollah after years of strained relations. Al-Ayoubi's participation in meetings with Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, mediated by Ismail Haniyeh, marked a cautious but notable step toward rebuilding trust.⁵² While Jama'a did not fully realign with Hezbollah, this engagement reflected an attempt to recalibrate its strategy and adapt to shifting regional and domestic realities. By this time, Jama'a also began reconsidering its long-term political posture. The growing complexity of the regional context prompted a shift away from rigid sectarian frameworks toward a broader, more inclusive approach. This recalibration hinted at a return to principles reminiscent of Fathi Yakan's earlier vision, signaling the movement's desire for a more ideologically coherent strategy. Although still in its early stages, this transition laid the groundwork for deeper changes that would unfold in subsequent years.

4. Factors Enabling Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah's Collaboration in the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation

The collaboration between Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah during the October 2023 Al-Aqsa Flood operation was enabled by a convergence of external pressures and internal organizational transformations. The most immediate and overarching factor was Israel's military actions in Gaza, which served as a unifying threat that overrode historical political divisions. However, the foundations of this cooperation were laid by a series of organizational and leadership changes within Jama'a al-Islamiyya that created an environment conducive to alliance formation.

4.1. The Israeli Threat, Saudi Influence, and the Changing Landscape of Resistance in Lebanon

Israel's repeated invasions and continued occupation of Lebanese territory have entrenched it as a persistent threat, shaping resistance across ideological and sectarian divides. The 1982 invasion and prolonged control over southern Lebanon led to the emergence of Hezbollah as a dominant military force. However, resistance was not exclusive to Shi'a factions.⁵³ Palestinian groups, leftist parties, and Sunni Islamists, including Jama'a al-Islamiyya, also positioned themselves against Israel. The withdrawal of Israeli forces in 2000 reinforced the belief that armed struggle was an effective means of reclaiming occupied land. Israel's continued occupation of Shebaa Farms and Kfar Shouba Hills has ensured that anti-Israel resistance remains a unifying cause, often overriding sectarian and political divisions. Despite growing political fragmentation in the post-2005 period and the increased polarization between some Sunni and Shi'a factions following Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict, Israel's continued occupation and periodic military campaigns have preserved its status as a unifying adversary. The 2006 war exemplified this dynamic, as Jama'a al-Islamiyya fought alongside

50 Mohamad Fawaz, *Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya in Post-War Lebanon: Political Appeal and Performance* (Beirut: Lebanese American University, School of Arts and Sciences, Master's Thesis, 2023), 59.

51 Al Jazeera Arabic, "لقاء اليوم | الجماعة الإسلامية وأحداث المنطقة العربية | الأمين العام للجماعة الإسلامية في لبنان", *YouTube* (March 11, 2016), 00:07:49-00:08:31.

52 Qasem S. Qasem, "حماس تجمع حزب الله والجماعة الإسلامية", *Al-Akhbar* (June 17, 2021).

53 Rawia Altaweel, "Gaza War 2023–2024 and Reactions from Neighboring Countries: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria", *Gaza Nakba 2023–2024: Background, Context, Consequences*, ed. Hiroyuki Suzuki - Keiko Sakai (Singapore: Springer, 2024), 153.

Hezbollah, demonstrating that under conditions of external threat, ideological divides could be subordinated to strategic necessity.

This logic resurfaced in 2023 when Jama'a al-Islamiyya reactivated its armed wing, the Fajr Forces, in response to Israel's simultaneous military operations in Gaza and southern Lebanon. The group's leadership justified its re-engagement as both a national defense measure and a moral obligation, with Secretary-General Takoush stating that the decision was driven by "a national, religious and moral duty" to protect Lebanese villages and to support "our brothers in Gaza."⁵⁴ Although Jama'a al-Islamiyya has historically diverged from Hezbollah over issues such as the Syrian war and Iran's regional influence, both organizations have constructed parallel threat narratives that position Israel as an existential adversary. This shared perception has enabled a form of cooperation that is not rooted in ideological alignment but in the strategic imperative to respond to a common threat. Takoush's assertion that Israel harbors expansionist ambitions "not only in Palestine but in Lebanon too"⁵⁵ underscores the extent to which Israel's actions are interpreted as threatening national sovereignty, thereby providing the political and discursive justification for collaboration with Hezbollah.

The coordination observed during the 2023 conflict extended beyond rhetorical alignment. Takoush acknowledged that "part of the attacks [on Israel] were in coordination with Hamas, which coordinates with Hezbollah,"⁵⁶ suggesting a triangular operational relationship shaped by mutual battlefield objectives rather than formal alliance. Other Jama'a officials echoed this position. Deputy political chief Bassam Hammoud described the group and Hamas as "two sides of the same coin"⁵⁷ in the fight against Israel, while political officer Ali Abu Yassin stated that "all forces operating in the South are coordinating with each other."⁵⁸ Such statements indicate that the immediacy of the Israeli threat has functioned as a practical enabler of cross-sectarian cooperation, allowing for coordination among groups with divergent worldviews. In this context, the persistence of Israeli occupation has not only legitimized but, at times, necessitated tactical collaboration with Hezbollah, reinforcing resistance as a unifying narrative capable of transcending Lebanon's enduring political and sectarian cleavages.

Another external factor, though less central than Israel, was Saudi Arabia's changing relationship with Jama'a al-Islamiyya. While the group maintained close ties with Riyadh after 2005, this dynamic gradually shifted following the Gulf crisis in 2017, when Saudi Arabia adopted a more assertive posture against Islamist movements perceived as aligned with Qatar or the Muslim Brotherhood. Throughout the early 2010s, Jama'a actively sought to position itself as part of a proposed regional triangle involving Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Morsi-era Egypt to counterbalance Iran's influence in the region. The group's leadership saw Saudi Arabia as a vital pillar in preserving Sunni stability in Lebanon and participated in direct diplomatic outreach, including a 2013 delegation visit to Riyadh led by MP Imad al-Hout. During this period, Jama'a's messaging emphasized Arab unity, the protection of Lebanon's Sunni community, and the need for regional cooperation against perceived Iranian expansionism.⁵⁹

Despite ideological divergences, Jama'a maintained a pragmatic stance toward the Kingdom, frequently reaffirming the "Arab depth" of Lebanon and expressing support for Saudi security interests, as seen in a 2021 meeting between the group and the Saudi ambassador in Beirut.⁶⁰ However, as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman consolidated power, Saudi policy shifted toward a blanket rejection of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements. The increasingly securitized Saudi approach to Islamist movements marginalized Jama'a, particularly as Saudi-backed Lebanese Sunni factions such as the Future Movement remained dominant in formal politics. This marginalization reduced Riyadh's

54 *Naharnet*, "Head of Jamaa Islamiya says coordination with Hezbollah vital to fight Israel" (March 26, 2024).

55 *Naharnet*, "Head of Jamaa Islamiya says coordination with Hezbollah vital to fight Israel".

56 *Naharnet*, "Head of Jamaa Islamiya says coordination with Hezbollah vital to fight Israel".

57 *Mena Research Center*, "The Gaza War Strengthening the Muslim Brotherhood in Lebanon?" (September 9, 2024).

58 *Mena Research Center*, "The Gaza War Strengthening the Muslim Brotherhood in Lebanon?".

59 Chafic Choucair, "الجماعة الإسلامية في لبنان: نموذج مشرقى على التحول في الدور والهوية".

60 *Al Jamaa*, "الجماعة الإسلامية تزور السفير السعودي وتؤكد على العمق العربي للبنان" (August 21, 2021).

influence over Jama'a's strategic calculus, allowing the group greater autonomy in redefining its alignments. In this context, Hezbollah emerged as a viable partner in the face of a shared adversary. The declining relevance of Saudi patronage removed a critical constraint that had previously limited overt cooperation with Hezbollah. While Israel remained the principal driver of tactical alignment, regional shifts rendered this cooperation politically less costly and more feasible. By 2023, Jama'a no longer operated within the boundaries of Saudi political expectations, facilitating its re-engagement in military operations through its revived Fajr Forces and enabling direct coordination with Hezbollah and Hamas in southern Lebanon. Thus, the erosion of Saudi support did not initiate the alliance between Jama'a and Hezbollah, but it significantly lowered the political cost of such collaboration, clearing the way for a form of resistance-driven strategic cooperation that transcended former red lines.

4.2. Leadership Transition in Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Organizational Reorientation

The leadership transition within Jama'a al-Islamiyya in 2022 marked a turning point in the group's political and military strategy, deepening its military alliance with its armed wing, Fajr Forces, and Hezbollah. This shift reflected an ideological transformation within the organization, led by figures who embraced a cross-sectarian approach in the tradition of Fathi Yakan.⁶¹ Mohammad Takoush's leadership marked a return to a more rigid ideological discourse. The 2022 political vision adopted a more jihadist approach to the Palestinian cause, directly echoing Yakan's foundational principles. This ideological orientation also revived Yakan's vision of a pan-Islamic resistance movement uniting Sunni and Shi'a initiatives. As Yakan predicted in 2009, a "resistant Islamic project" grounded in education, preaching, and jihad would emerge to confront the American and Israeli presence in the region.⁶² Takoush's discourse and strategic alignments positioned Jama'a firmly within this broader axis of resistance. The new leadership prioritized dialogue over hostility with Hezbollah and Iran, enabling functional cooperation despite ongoing disagreements, particularly regarding Syria. This transition was largely facilitated by Hamas,⁶³ particularly through its Lebanese branch, strengthening the faction favoring engagement with Hezbollah while sidelining those advocating closer ties with Saudi Arabia.

A clear indicator of this change is the organization's evolving discourse on Hezbollah and Iran. A search on Jama'a al-Islamiyya's official website for the term "Hezbollah" reveals that between 2016 and 2022, ten of the thirteen results reflected a critical stance, particularly through statements by MP Imad al-Hout. However, following Takoush's election in 2022, six results documented meetings and cooperative engagements with Hezbollah, all in a neutral or positive tone, marking a significant departure from past rhetoric. A separate search for "Iran" on the same website shows a similar trend. Before 2022, only two results appeared: one negative and one neutral. After 2022, four new results emerged: three reporting visits by Iranian delegations to Jama'a's leadership and one offering condolences for a helicopter crash in Iran.

The events of October 7, 2023, served as a catalyst for deepening ties between Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah. Although the organization initially framed its involvement in the conflict through a strictly anti-Israeli lens, avoiding any explicit reference to coordination with Hezbollah, this cautious rhetoric soon gave way to more assertive signals of collaboration. As Hezbollah emerged as a central actor in the military front against Israel, Jama'a increasingly emphasized the need for a united resistance axis. By late 2023, the leadership had begun articulating a narrative that aligned both discursively and operationally with Hezbollah's role, culminating in a high-profile meeting between Jama'a Secretary-General Takoush and Hezbollah leader Nasrallah. This transition extended beyond strategic considerations and began to resonate in the religious and communal domains, reinforcing new forms of inter-communal engagement. A particularly striking development occurred on July 11, 2024, when Sheikh Takoush delivered a speech in a major Ashura commemoration organized by the Supreme

61 El Helwe, *Shifting Ideological Commitments and Political Practices in Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya*, 59-60.

62 El Helwe, *Shifting Ideological Commitments and Political Practices in Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya*, 71-72.

63 Suohayb Jawhar, "Quwwat al-Fajr and Hezbollah: Unlikely Allies Against Israel", *Sada* (June 11, 2024).

Islamic Shiite Council, an institution closely aligned with Hezbollah.⁶⁴ Invited by the Council's vice president, Ali al-Khatib, Takoush's participation in the ceremony reflected a growing convergence around the politics of resistance. His presence, at a time when Jama'a members were being directly targeted by Israeli strikes, also conveyed a powerful message of solidarity and defiance. The symbolism of a Sunni leader engaging in a traditionally Shia religious space marked a significant departure from conventional sectarian boundaries, signaling a strategic willingness to transcend sectarian rituals in pursuit of a shared political cause. Importantly, this move received backing from key figures within Dar al-Fatwa, including Sheikh Ali Ghazzawi and Sheikh Amin al-Kurdi, whose public support shielded Jama'a from criticism voiced by Hezbollah's Sunni opponents.⁶⁵ The participation of Sunni clerics and community members in funerals for Jama'a fighters further reinforced the idea that this realignment had begun to generate resonance at the grassroots level.

These developments illustrate how Jama'a's post-2023 trajectory cannot be dismissed as an isolated anomaly but rather represents a case of strategic reconfiguration under conditions of acute external pressure and evolving leadership. Instead of signaling a deep-rooted sectarian split, the alignment between Jama'a and Hezbollah underscores the instrumental and contextual nature of sectarian boundaries. Drawing on the framework of sectarianization, this shift demonstrates that sectarian identities are not immutable markers of political allegiance but are instead shaped and reshaped by specific historical moments, organizational transformations, and leadership decisions. In this instance, a shared resistance imperative, amplified by Israeli aggression and facilitated by changes within the organization, created the space for a cross-sectarian coalition that challenges essentialist readings of Sunni-Shia relations in Lebanon.

Despite these convergences, the trajectory of Jama'a al-Islamiyya's alignment with Hezbollah is far from settled. Figures from the pre-2022 leadership continue efforts to reverse the realignment, aiming to reinstate the previous leadership.⁶⁶ If they succeed, cooperation with Hezbollah could weaken, and the likelihood of future joint military operations, such as those seen in the recent war, would decrease. While Israel remains an external adversary, Jama'a's alliances are shaped more by leadership perspectives than fixed loyalties. Its current trajectory depends on whether the faction favoring cross-sectarian and strategic engagement maintains dominance or if the organization reverts to earlier divisions.

Findings and Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the military cooperation between Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Hezbollah during the Al-Aqsa Flood operation was driven by both external threats and internal transformations. The immediate trigger was Israel's military aggression, which compelled cross-sectarian coordination despite prior political tensions. However, the deeper shift stemmed from leadership changes within Jama'a al-Islamiyya, particularly the rise of Mohammed Taqoush, whose leadership revived the movement's earlier cross-sectarian tendencies. This transition, facilitated by Hamas, reoriented Jama'a's strategy, reducing hostility toward Hezbollah and Iran. Additionally, the waning influence of Saudi Arabia on Jama'a provided the group with greater autonomy to act against Israel without aligning with Riyadh's broader regional stance. While this collaboration highlights the flexibility of sectarian alliances in response to external pressures, it remains fragile and contingent on leadership dynamics. Should Jama'a's internal balance shift again, future cooperation with Hezbollah could weaken.

These findings contribute to broader debates on sectarianism by challenging essentialist explanations that portray sectarian divides as fixed. Instead, the case supports the concept of sectarianization, illustrating how sectarian identities can be politically instrumentalized and reshaped in response to strategic considerations. As Hashemi and Postel argue, sectarianism is not an inherent

64 Fawaz, "الجماعة الإسلامية تشق مسارها الخاص".

65 Fawaz, "الجماعة الإسلامية تشق مسارها الخاص".

66 Khalil, "هل انتهت مغامرة الإخوان في لبنان؟".

driver of conflict but a tool leveraged by political actors. This perspective aligns with Mabon's emphasis on the role of state actors in constructing and instrumentalizing sectarian identities, as well as Gause's argument that sectarian rivalries often mask broader political and strategic struggles. The Hezbollah-Jama'a alignment exemplifies how external threats and leadership transitions can temporarily override sectarian divisions, thereby reinforcing constructivist and instrumentalist perspectives. Ultimately, this case underscores the adaptability of Islamist movements and the contingent nature of political alliances in Lebanon's shifting geopolitical landscape, demonstrating that sectarian identities are not immutable but are strategically shaped by political and security calculations.

Having established the theoretical implications of this alignment, it is equally important to consider its practical and strategic consequences for the actors involved. The Hezbollah-Fajr Forces alliance may appear as a pragmatic arrangement from which both parties benefit, allowing Hezbollah to bridge the widening gap with the Sunni world while helping Jama'a al-Islamiyya regain its lost prestige and electoral support among Lebanon's Sunnis. However, beyond these immediate gains, the alliance also has the potential to generate significant strategic costs that could undermine its initial advantages. Accordingly, this cooperation should not be reduced to short-term political calculations alone; instead, it must be analyzed within the broader framework of external threats and internal transformations. This study has taken such an approach, situating the Hezbollah-Jama'a realignment within Lebanon's evolving power dynamics rather than viewing it solely as a tactical maneuver.

While a single case cannot be universally applied, examining similar patterns in other contexts is crucial for understanding sectarian-fluid alliances in the Middle East. Yemen's wartime alignments, which are often portrayed as more rigid in sectarian terms, actually reflect a battleground where both Saudi Arabia and Iran are directly involved, with each side possessing strong local representatives. This context offers a valuable comparative avenue for future research. A focused study on Yemen could test the theoretical insights drawn from Lebanon, further refining our understanding of cross-sectarian coalitions in the region's volatile political landscape. Additionally, exploring the evolving dynamics of the Hezbollah-Hamas or Iran-Hamas relationships before and during the Al-Aqsa Flood process could also provide fruitful comparative insights. These cases similarly reflect how shifting leaderships, external threats, and strategic recalibrations influence the permeability of sectarian boundaries. Such comparative analyses would allow for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and constraints of cross-sectarian cooperation in volatile environments.

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