Sectarian Actors in Foreign Policy Making: 2006 Lebanese War Revisited

Murat TINAS

Assist. Prof. Dr., Institute of Security Sciences, Turkish National Police Academy

Özlem TÜR

Prof. Dr., Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University

Sectarian Actors in Foreign Policy Making: 2006 Lebanese War Revisited

Murat TINAS

Assist. Prof. Dr., Institute of Security Sciences, Turkish National Police Academy, Ankara, Turkey.
E-mail: muratinas@gmail.com

Özlem TÜR

Prof. Dr., Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.
E-mail: tur@metu.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the role of sub-state sectarian actors in foreign policy making in weakly established states by re-visiting the July War of 2006 in Lebanon. It mainly asks how sub-state sectarian actors behave as foreign policy actors in countries where society is divided along sectarian identities and how sectarian identities matter in terms of the definition of the self and the other and the ally and the enemy in weak states. By doing so, the paper analyses the emergence and the consolidation of foreign policy orientations, preferences and behaviour of the Maronite, Sunni, Shi'a and Druze communities in Lebanon, with a specific emphasis on the role of Hezbollah during the war. Building its main findings on various fieldworks in Lebanon, interviewing leaders of major sects; this study concludes that in the absence of a cohesive foreign policy stance in a weak state, the role of sectarian identity in defining self and other becomes central for understanding the foreign policy choices of sectarian actors.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Sectarian Identity, 2006 Lebanese War, Lebanon

Dış Politika Yapımında Mezhepsel Aktörler: 2006 Lübnan Savaşı'na Yeniden Bakış

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, 2006 Lübnan Savaşı'nı tekrardan ele alarak zayıf devletlerde devlet-altı mezhepsel grupların dış politika yapım süreçlerindeki rolünü incelemektedir. Esasen toplumları mezhepsel kimlikler etrafında bölünmüş devletlerde mezhepsel grupların devlet-altı dış politika aktörü olarak nasıl davrandıklarını ve mezhepsel kimliğin zayıf devletlerde aktörlerin kendisini ve diğerini, dolayısıyla dostunu ve düşmanını tanımlamada nasıl rol oynadığını sorgulamaktadır. Böylece bu makale, Lübnan'da Maruni, Sünni, Şii ve Dürzi liderlerin dış politika yönelimlerinin, tercihlerinin ve davranışlarının ortaya çıkışı ve konsolidasyonunu analiz etmektedir. Temel bulgularını Lübnan'da gerçekleştirilen saha çalışması ve liderlerle yapılan mülakatlara dayandıran bu çalışma, zayıf bir devlette bağlayıcı bir dış politika duruşunun yoksunluğunda, mezhebi liderlerin dış politika seçimlerinin anlaşılabilmesinde mezhebi kimliğin, aktörün kendisini ve diğerini tanımlamada merkezi bir rol oynadığını iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dış politika, Mezhepsel Kimlik, 2006 Lübnan Savaşı, Lübnan

Introduction

This article analyses the role of sub-state sectarian actors in foreign policy making in weak states. By re-visiting the July War of 2006[1] in Lebanon, it questions how sectarian communities perceived and reacted to the foreign policy events, how they framed their policies and how sectarian identity shaped alliances. In doing so, this article, based on several interviews and many informal conversations in Lebanon, scrutinizes how foreign policy decisions are being taken in weak states and argues that in such cases, sub-state actors are able to act as quasi-state actors. On 12 July 2006, a Hezbollah attack on Israeli targets resulted in the deaths of three Israeli soldiers and the kidnapping of two, followed by an Israeli rescue operation which resulted in the deaths of an additional five soldiers.[2] The Israeli government described the attack as an act of war and initiated a full-blown military response. Casualties of the 33-day war included an estimated 1,200 Lebanese, most of whom were civilians, and nearly 140 Israelis, among whom 43 were civilians, as well as 4,000 injured and around a million displaced. In addition to the humanitarian casualties, most of the infrastructure of southern Lebanon was either damaged or destroyed; some 15,000 homes and 900 factories, markets, farms, shops and other commercial buildings were wrecked.[3]

What is striking from the perspective of foreign policy studies about 12 July is that Hezbollah launched a cross-border attack that triggered a war between two states. In other words, it acted as a sovereign and independent player that took a very real foreign policy action as a sub-state actor – a foreign policy action that a sovereign actor, namely Israel, responded to as if Hezbollah had been the legitimate and notified drawee in Lebanese territory. Thanks to the existing studies on the July War, there is now a fairly good understanding of causes and consequences of the war from different perspectives. However, this study argues that the existing studies still fall short in explaining the role of sectarian actors in Lebanese foreign policy making, their perceptions of and identities in this war, and their positions *vis-à-vis* each other and that of the Lebanese government.

In addition to its contribution to the existing literature on the July War, this study also aspires to address a void in foreign policy studies regarding the role of non-state actors. Although there is ample research on the proliferation of actors, which underlines a shift from realist, state-centric perspectives,[4] the role of sectarian actors as sub-state actors is understudied. Especially in countries where society is divided along sectarian identities and sectarian groups play significant roles in politics, understanding their role in foreign policy making needs further elaboration. By taking Lebanon as a case study, this

---

1   The war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006 is variously named like the 2006 War, the 2006 Israeli-Lebanese War, the Sixth Arab-Israeli War, the July War, the 33-day War or the Second Lebanon War.

2   Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Israel-Hezbollah Conflict: Summary of Events", http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/terrorism/hizbullah/pages/israel-hizbullah%20conflict-%20summary%20of%20events%20july-aug%202006.aspx, (Accessed on 5 March 2016).

3   International Crisis Group, "Israel/Hizbollah/Lebanon: Avoiding Renewed Conflict", *ICG Middle East Report*, No.59, 1 November 2006, p.1; Alfred Prados, "Lebanon", *CRS Report for Congress*, RL33509, 23 November 2007, p.20.

4   Although the very early studies in foreign policy analysis started from state-centric view, the idea of discarding nation-state and focusing on decision making and domestic actors in foreign policy processes became substantial shift in the literature. For further reading, see C. S. Richard *et al.*, *Foreign Policy Decision Making: An Approach to the Study of International Politics*, New York, Free Press, 1962; G. T. Allison, *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Glenview, IL., Scott, Foresman, 1971; D. Skidmore and V. M. Hudson (eds.), *The Limits of State Autonomy: Societal Groups and Foreign Policy Formulation*, Boulder, CO., Westview Press, 1993; V. Kubalkova, (ed.), *Foreign Policy in a Constructed World*, New York, M.E. Sharp, 2001, C. Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003; A. Mintz and K. DeRouen, *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

article aims to highlight the role of sectarian groups as sub-state foreign policy actors and thus to contribute to the literature in this context.

Questions of whether Lebanon has a coherent foreign policy, who makes it, and how decisions regarding war and peace are made emerge as interesting research areas. Particularly in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring, a study on the July War that bears these questions in mind seems more current than ever as sectarian consciousness is degenerating into sectarian enmities at the regional level. Lebanese society is deeply divided along sectarian lines, with a weak government organized through a confessional system. Although eighteen religious groups are officially recognized in Lebanon – and this study assures that sectarianism is a flexible and heterogeneous identity system shaped by circumstances – considering the period under study, this study focuses on the perceptions of the four most populous and influential sectarian communities through representatives of the mainstream opinion of each: Saad Hariri and the Future Movement for Sunnis, Hezbollah under the leadership of Hassan Nasrallah for Shi'as, Patriarch Sfeir and the Patriarchate for the Maronite and Walid Jumblatt for the Druze.

The Breakdown of the Unspoken Agreement in the Delicate Regional Context

Despite previous conflicts and ongoing struggles, the border between Israel and Lebanon remained relatively quiet after the establishment of Israel till the late 1960s. The main reason for the clashes were the armed conflicts between Israel and Palestinian groups that had been forced to settle in Lebanon in 1970.[5] Israel had invaded Lebanon twice: first in 1978, and then more seriously in 1982. Up to the present day, the border issue between these two countries has been affected by many factors, including but not limited to the activities of armed Palestinian groups, Israeli historical claims, access to water, the enhancement of defensive capabilities, the long occupation of southern Lebanon by Israel, Hezbollah's arsenal, and cross-border violations. One of the key actors in Israeli-Lebanese relations has been Hezbollah, which had been established under the conditions of the 1982 Israeli invasion when Shi'as became further marginalized.[6] Immediately after its establishment with Iranian support, Hezbollah began organizing continuous attacks on both sides of the border, which resulted in Israel's withdrawal in 2000. This did not end the conflict, however, as both sides continued to launch cross-border attacks.

The Israeli-Lebanese border was frequently violated by both sides between the 2000 withdrawal and the 2006 war, although most of these violations could be considered minor. Although Israel declared that it had completed its withdrawal from Lebanese territory in May 2000, Hezbollah and the Lebanese government did not confirm this statement, arguing that the withdrawal could only be completed after the Israeli Army left Shebaa Farms, Ghajar village and Kfarshouba Hills, which were to be Lebanese territory. Especially Hezbollah persisted in its claims that the withdrawal of the Israeli Army from Lebanon had not been completed which provides a kind of legitimization for

---

5   David Hirst, *Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East*, New York, Nation Books, 2010, p.86-92.

6   Ibid., p.86-92; Henrietta Wilkins, *The Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy: Understanding the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, Oxford, Routledge, 2013, p.53.

Hezbollah to remain armed, and continued its cross-border attacks.[7] The ongoing violations of the Israeli-Lebanese border during this period followed unwritten rules, as Hezbollah targeted Shebaa Farms and Israel shelled Hezbollah outposts, yet both sides avoided attacking civilians, and none of the incidents escalated into a major clash. That is, until the Hezbollah attack of 12 July 2006, which occurred outside the disputed Shebaa Farms.[8]

Hezbollah's attacks might not have become the *casus belli* for Israel if not for geopolitical transformations during the 2000s which substantially reconfigured broader inter-Arab relations and regional alignments. The 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent developments polarized the region, with a US-backed alliance of Sunni Arab states at one hand and an Iranian-Syrian-Hezbollah axis at the other. After the 2005 election of hard-line president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, relations between the US and Iran witnessed a dramatic turn. In addition to the nuclear issue, Iranian officials also changed their attitudes towards the country's near geography thanks to regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq. The fall of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein presented a good opportunity for Iran to expand its influence, while the occupation of Iraq and the failure to maintain stability there eroded American prestige.[9]

The power struggle in Iraq after the fall of Hussein manifested itself as a bloody sectarian war, out of which new alliances led by Saudi Arabia and Iran emerged. Iran found room for manoeuvre as a regional power, strengthening its relations with Syria and Hezbollah and positioning its anti-Israel discourse at the centre of its regional policies. Meanwhile, concerns over the rise of Iran as a Shi'a power brought Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, most of the Gulf States and the United States, as well as Israel, into alignment. Notwithstanding the interests of major Middle Eastern powers and international actors, non-state actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah and other fundamentalist groups used this struggle to alter the regional balance according to their own interests.

This region-wide polarization was constructed through the rhetoric of Sunni-Shi'a division. As a mirror of the Middle East, these developments had direct repercussions on Lebanese politics. Following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in early 2005, and suspicions about the possible involvement of Hezbollah and some Syrian officials into this tragic event, Hezbollah and Amal mobilized approximately half a million people to show their support for the presence of Syria in Lebanon on 8 March. In response, Syria's opponents, including Saad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt and traditional Christian leaders, organized the largest demonstration in Lebanon's history with the participation of around one million supporters on 14 March.[10] These demonstrations led to the establishment of the anti-Syria March 14 Alliance and pro-Syria March 8 Alliance, which still constitute the main pillars of contemporary Lebanese politics. Indeed, the coalition of Lebanese sectarian leaders mirrored the composition of the warring regional camps as well, with the March 8 Alliance – led by the Shi'a

---

7   Jeremy Sharp *et al.*, "Lebanon: The Israel-Hamas-Hezbollah Conflict", *CRS Report for Congress*, RL33566, 15 September 2006, p.8.

8   Timur Göksel, Former Spokesman of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, Beirut, December 2015, personal interview; Özlem Tür, "The Lebanese War of 2006: Reasons and Consequences", *Perceptions*, Vol.12, No.3, 2007, p.115-116.

9   Vali Nasr, "Prepared Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations", 17 January 2007, https://www.cfr.org/report/prepared-testimony-senate-committee-foreign-relations-0 (Accessed on 10 March 2016).

10   William Harris, "Lebanon's Roller Coaster", Barry Rubin (ed.), *Lebanon: Liberation, Conflict, and Crisis*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, p.63-82.

Hezbollah – as the manifestation of the Iranian-Syrian coalition and the Sunni-dominated March 14 Alliance representing the US-led regional alliance.

Hezbollah's Perception and Initiating a War

Why did Hassan Nasrallah decide to launch a sudden attack on Israel which triggered Israel's disproportionate response compared to those of previous attacks?[11] There is a significant amount of literature on the underlying causes behind Hezbollah's behaviour, which seems to fall into two broad categories: one which considers Hezbollah as a proxy for Syria and Iran, and another which considers it to be an independent sub-state actor. The first group of scholars support their view by pointing to Hezbollah's relations with Syria, and particularly with Iran. These scholars generally affirm that the planning and the execution of the attack was the product of a series of meetings held in Damascus between Iran and Syria.[12] This perception was shared by Israeli officials; as Deputy Foreign Minister Gideon Meir asserted, "Syria and Iran support these groups, not only because they support their ideology, but also because they provide Damascus and Tehran with a tool to strengthen the influence of their own regimes and to divert attention from other issues."[13] However, despite the depth of the alliance between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, and although it makes sense that Hezbollah would confer with its regional allies, it would be too simple to characterize Hezbollah as merely carrying out the orders of its patrons.

The second group of scholars argue not only that the first approach is too simplistic, but that it overestimates Iranian influence and ignores the evolution of Hezbollah into an entity with considerable autonomy.[14] This being the case, Hezbollah's actions can be understood instead as the product of its own perspective on regional developments, which in turn is linked to its view on the Palestinian issue. The border issue between Israel and Lebanon has never been independent of the Arab-Israeli issue. Along these lines, Prados suggests that Hezbollah launched its attacks as a gesture of solidarity with Hamas, which had begun fighting Israel in Gaza two weeks before.[15] According to Hirst, Nasrallah was trying to show his party's solidarity with the Arab cause and its support for Palestinians, in contrast to the silence from Arab regimes.[16] Faced with this division in the literature, this study recognizes both the independent agenda of Hezbollah and the Iranian influence on the organization.

Within the context of Lebanese domestic politics, the war came at a time of rising tension between the March 8 and March 14 Alliances over the issue of disarming Hezbollah, which unlike other militia groups of the Lebanese Civil War had been able to preserve its arsenal thanks to Syria's patronage in the post-Taif period, and due to Hezbollah's assertive discourse of Resistance. After

---

11 The 2006 campaign by Israel included a total land, sea and air blockade, as well as a full-scale bombing campaign targeting Lebanon's infrastructure and officially differentiated the Lebanese government from Hezbollah. See Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Press Briefing by FM Tzipi Livni", 23 July 2006; "Statement by FM Tzipi Livni to the Knesset", 8 August 2006.

12 Michael Bell, "Get Real, Get Smart on Lebanon," *The Globe and Mail*, 10 August 2006.

13 "Opening Statement by FM Deputy DG Gideon Meir", 13 July 2006, http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2006/Pages/Statement%20by%20Foreign%20Ministry%20Deputy%20DG%20Gideon%20Meir%2013-Jul-2006.aspx, (Accessed on 10 March 2016).

14 Emile Al Hokayem, "Hezbollah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship" *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.30, No.2, 2007, p.36-44.

15 Prados, *Lebanon*, p.17.

16 Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, p.331.

the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon in 2000, however, Hezbollah's legitimacy was called into question, and a trans-sectarian opinion emerged that it should be disarmed. In response, Nasrallah vigorously affirmed that Hezbollah constituted Lebanon's Resistance against Israel, and that its arsenal was at the heart of its power. Hezbollah had entered the Lebanese government in 2005, in part with the aim of securing a formal statement of assurance that the Resistance was a 'sincere and natural expression of Lebanese people's right to defend [their] land and dignity in the face of Israeli aggression, threats, and ambitions'. This argument was dismissed by other factions, and the issue of Hezbollah's disarmament continued to serve as a substantial source of internal division. Al Hokayem argues that the underlying reason for the kidnapping was to justify its *raison d'être* as a military resistance force,[17] and thus to avoid disarmament.[18] A successful prisoner exchange might have achieved this from Nasrallah's perspective.[19]

Within the context of regional politics, the attack was also timely, as Iran was facing growing pressure over its nuclear program. Although Nasrallah continuously employed the discourse of the Lebanese Resistance, it may be that Hezbollah decision makers feared the deterioration of its ally Iran's regional influence; to that end, some have argued that the kidnapping was intended to divert international attention from Iran's nuclear program. Wilkins also argues that Hezbollah's decision to strike Israel was a strategic calculation from a Shi'a perspective, dispersing political tensions just as international pressure on Iran was reaching a critical level.[20] To sum up, an approach that considers both Hezbollah's autonomy and the role of its regional alliances would provide a more complete and better contextualized assessment of Hezbollah's perspective, and on the actions leading to the July War. It is more likely that Hezbollah was motivated by a combination of domestic and regional tactical calculations intended not only to strengthen its position within Lebanese politics but also to divert attention from the controversies surrounding both the party and its historical ally.

What is also important within the framework of this study is that, by launching its cross-border attack into a neighbouring country and kidnapping two of its soldiers, Hezbollah acted as a sovereign and independent player, taking very real foreign policy action – starting a war with Israel – without consulting or informing the government of Lebanon. Moreover, Israel responded to this attack as if Hezbollah had been the legitimate and notified drawee on Lebanese territory. First, as a formal participant in Lebanon's political process with two ministerial seats, Hezbollah had been obliged to inform the government of plan with foreseeable international repercussions. Beyond that, both the use of force and the taking of decisions relating to war and peace fall within the sphere of the state's political monopoly, and can be interpreted as a direct expression of state sovereignty.[21] Indeed, a few hours after the raid, Nasrallah explained Hezbollah's actions as an

---

17 Al Hokayem, "Hezbollah and Syria", p.44-45.

18 In one of his speeches Nasrallah states, "If anyone, anyone, thinks of disarming the Resistance, we will fight them like the martyrs of Karbala [and] cut off any hand that reaches out to grab our weapons because it is an Israeli hand." A Hezbollah official elaborated on this by saying that this warning was necessary to prevent Lebanese people from telling them to disarm. See International Crisis Group, "Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm", *ICG Middle East Report*, No.48, 5 December 2005.

19 Joseph Alagha, "The Israeli-Hizbullah 34-Day War: Causes and Consequences", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol.30, No.2, 2008, p.1-22.

20 Wilkins, *Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy*, p.56.

21 Ohannes Geukjian, "Which State for Lebanon in the Aftermath of the Hizbullah-Israeli War of July-August 2006? A Critical Analysis", *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.17, No.2, 2008, p.138.

ordinary statesman, holding a press conference to announce that Hezbollah wanted not to start a war but to negotiate a prisoner exchange, but also asserting that it would not hesitate to face Israel if it wanted a confrontation.[22]

To conclude, Hezbollah as a sub-state actor maintains its own domestic and regional interests independently of the Lebanese state. When it launched its cross-border attack into Israel it was serving both its own domestic interests – diverting attention from the issue of its arsenal – and the interests of its regional ally – diverting attention from the Iranian nuclear issue – independent of the Lebanese state, and seemingly without regard to the consequences the country as a whole would bear as a result. The onset of the war clearly demonstrates the Lebanese government's inability to control the activities of its sub-state actors as Hezbollah seized on its capacity to act as a quasi-state foreign policy actor.

Foreign Policy Orientations and the Lebanese Government as Battlefield for Sectarian Leaders

The confessional system in Lebanon is based on largely unwritten historical codes requiring the composition of the cabinet and other administrative positions to conform to sectarian considerations. Therefore, it is important to understand the composition of Fuad Siniora's government before analysing its policy with regard to the war. The 24-member cabinet was composed of 15 members affiliated with the March 14 Alliance, six members affiliated with the March 8 Alliance including for the first time in Lebanese history two members of Hezbollah and three independents. As will be shown in the following discussion, it would have been almost impossible for Siniora's government to behave as a unitary actor, especially on controversial security-related issues.

After Hezbollah initiated its cross-border attack and Israel responded, the Siniora government was faced with two immediate options: supporting Hezbollah and fighting Israel by deploying the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), or distancing itself from Hezbollah and claiming neutrality. Despite its official stance condemning the Israeli invasion, the Siniora government chose the second option and did not take responsibility for Hezbollah's actions because Nasrallah had not kept his promise not to provoke Israel against Lebanon. Indeed, Hilal Khaskan has asserted that although Siniora publicly blamed Israel for the invasion, he hoped in secret that Israel would bring Hezbollah down.[23]

What is more important than which option was preferred by the government is that the Lebanese government found itself in an awkward situation. In the first cabinet meeting after the attack, Siniora criticized Hezbollah for dragging the country into the war. With the full support of Druze leader Jumblatt, Siniora proposed including a statement in the ministerial declaration reading, 'The government was not informed of this operation and does not approve of it.' Hezbollah members opposed this statement, considering it biased. A weaker declaration was ultimately released by the government, which read, "The government is not responsible for what is happening and for what has

---

22 Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, *34 Days: Israel, Hezbollah, and the War in Lebanon*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p.83.

23 Hilal Khashan, Professor of Political Studies at American University of Beirut, Beirut, February 2016, personal interview.

happened."[24] Therefore, although the war had been started by a sub-state sectarian actor – one which was also a member of the government whose territory had been attacked – the Lebanese government could do nothing stronger than deflect responsibility for the escalating situation. In other words, the central authority was forced to acknowledge that it had been left out of the decision-making process, and that it had no recourse but to criticize both sides of the dispute.

Hezbollah's unexpected foreign policy action deepened the Lebanese administration's internal divisions. President Emile Lahoud defended Hezbollah while members of March 14 openly criticized it for taking a unilateral action that had created a threat to Lebanon.[25] Similarly, Saad Hariri characterized the action as "the execution of an Iranian and Syrian plan of which Hezbollah is merely an instrument."[26] Indeed, this cross-border operation was regarded by many in Lebanon as a virtual coup designed to impose Hezbollah's agenda on the country.[27] For this reason, some segments of the Sunni and Christian communities, as well as Jumblatt, were hoping Israel would teach Hezbollah a lesson, and so did not immediately call for a ceasefire on international platforms. This was taken as tacit consent for Israel's response to Hezbollah's provocation.[28]

In terms of regional responses, Saudi Arabia acknowledged on the night of the kidnapping that "there is a difference between legitimate opposition and reckless adventurism perpetrated by elements in the state working without the government's knowledge."[29] Unsurprisingly, Saudi Arabia sided with Siniora's government, in line with its allegiance to Hariri, but the wording of the statement, and the open condemnation of a group targeted by Israel is worth noting. The general response from the Arab capitals was not shaped within the framework of Arab-Israeli struggle; rather, it was representative of the new sectarian posturing around the region. In other words, Arab states calculated that Israel's military superiority over Hezbollah would lead to the weakening of Iran's regional position, leaving Saudi Arabia as the sole axis of power.[30]

Jumblatt's and Hariri's Strategies to Counter Hezbollah

Sectarian divisions and interests continued to shape the Lebanese agenda even as the war between Hezbollah and Israel became more destructive. The war was asymmetrical because, although there had been discussions about deploying the LAF, it had not been ordered into combat. The first reason for this is LAF's insufficient military capacity to engage with the Israeli army. More importantly, however, was the possibility that the army might disintegrate along confessional lines, as it is composed of various sectarian groups whose primary loyalty is to their sectarian leaders rather than to the state. Lastly, members of the March 14 Alliance did not allow the LAF to be used in the hope that Israel would incapacitate Hezbollah, and the latter would not be able to maintain its previous level

---

24 Wilkins, *Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy*, p.113-114.

25 Fuad Siniora, "Prime Minister Fuad Siniora's Address at the Rome Conference for the Support of Lebanon", 25 July 2006, http://www.fuadsiniora.com/page/1602, (Accessed on 10 January 2016).

26 Tür, "Lebanese War of 2006", p.121.

27 Nadim Shedadi, "Riviera vs Citadel: The Battle for Lebanon", *Open Democracy*, 13 July 2007.

28 Göksel, personal interview; Daniel Steinvorth and Volkhard Windfuhr, "Interview with Christian Leader Cardinal: We Don't Want a Proxy War in Lebanon", *Spiegel*, 11 August 2006.

29 Harel and Issacharoff, *Israel, Hezbollah, and the War*, p.102-103; Nasr, "Testimony before the Senate".

30 Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War: The 2006 Lebanon Wat and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide", *Middle East Report*, No.242, 2007.

of influence. Indeed, the wait-and-see approach of the March 14 leaders was an open secret in Beirut during the war.[31]

It was well known even before the war that Jumblatt, the outspoken leader of the anti-Syrian camp, opposed Hezbollah, and he had repeatedly accused it of being driven by the Iranian-Syrian rather than the Lebanese agenda; as he put it in one interview, "They are a tool in the hands of the Syrian regime and for Iran's regional ambitions."[32] Regarding Hezbollah's unilateral action, Jumblatt described it as irresponsible, citing Hezbollah's lack of consultation with other Lebanese leaders.[33] The senior media officer of Jumblatt's party, Rami Al Rayess, explained the Druze position: "in order to draw the attention to somewhere else other than its weapons, Hezbollah gave the pretext to regional powers to use Lebanon as a battleground for their own ambitions."[34] From the beginning, Jumblatt criticized Hezbollah, stating, "The time has come for Hezbollah to say loud and clear if its decisions were made by the Lebanese people or if it was carrying out Syrian and Iranian instructions that Lebanon paid the price for. … What's happening now in Lebanon is, among other things, Tehran's answer to the international community on the Iranian nuclear issue."[35] According to the Druze leader, the July War was the result of Hezbollah acting as a state within a state, in the capacity of Shi'a proxy, in order to relieve international pressure against Iran over the nuclear issue.

WikiLeaks documents shed more light on Jumblatt's position. During a meeting with US Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman on 16 July, for instance, Jumblatt explained that "even though March 14 should call for a cease-fire in public, it is hoping in private that Israel proceeds with its military operations until it destroys Hezbollah's military capabilities." In addition, when he was asked his opinion about Israel's military strategy, he responded that Israel should continue until it had cleared Hezbollah out of southern Lebanon, but refrain from committing civil massacres. He went on to say that the LAF could replace the IDF once a ceasefire had been reached, but that if there was a ceasefire before Hezbollah was cleared, Hezbollah would win the war, at least in the eyes of the people.[36] In another leaked cable, Jumblatt expressed his regrets that Israel had failed to assess Hezbollah's operations on the ground, and that the conflict had turned to Hezbollah's advantage.[37] In addition, Druze leader believed that Hezbollah could be disarmed neither by domestic groups nor by the LAF, but by Israel alone. Jumblatt saw Israeli attacks as an opportunity to both disarm Hezbollah, and stem Syrian and Iranian influence over Lebanese affairs. In his interview with Tottem, he clarified that

---

31 Khashan, personal interview; Bassel F. Salloukh, Assoc. Professor of Political Sciences at Lebanese American University, Beirut, January 2016, personal interview.

32 David Makovsky and Jeffrey White, "Lessons and Implications of the Israel-Hizbollah War: A Preliminary Assessment", *Policy Focus*, No.60, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2006, p.20.

33 Walid Jumblatt, Druze Leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, Beirut, March 2016, personal interview; Nassir Zeidan, Professor of History at Lebanese University, Beirut, March 2016, personal interview.

34 Rami Al Rayess, Senior Media Officer of the Progressive Socialist Party, Beirut, February 2016, personal interview.

35 Harel and Issacharoff, *Israel, Hezbollah, and the War*, p.98.

36 US Department of State, "Lebanon: Larsen to Propose Handover of Israeli Soldiers to GoI; Jumblatt and Hamadeh Concur", 06BEIRUT2403, 17 July 2006.

37 US Department of State, "Lebanon: Jumblatt and Hamade on Two-Phase Solution", 06BEIRUT2540, 6 August 2006.

"Nobody in Lebanon said or believed it was possible to disarm Hezbollah by force, but as a Lebanese I don't accept a state within a state."[38]

Jumblatt was not the only one who anticipated the demise of Hezbollah as a result of the Israeli invasion, and was in regular contact with the US Ambassador. WikiLeaks documents confirmed that Saad Hariri was also in regular contact with the embassy. During a meeting, Hariri made a commitment that once the Lebanese army had "some teeth and some morale", it would "smack Hezbollah down".[39]

From Druze and Sunni perspectives, Hezbollah's growing arsenal was considered as a direct threat to their existence, and it was thought the party might use its militia to take Lebanon by force and establish a Shi'a state. Based on this perception, a possible defeat of Hezbollah in the July War was considered as an opportunity to balance domestic politics. In another country, the information leaked in these cables might have constituted treason, but within the Lebanese context the revelations were not even considered surprising. Instead, they exemplify the various sectarian communities' divergent visions for Lebanon and the complex web of foreign relations and alliances maintained through informal transnational links. This is how Lebanon's community leaders play politics, so it is unsurprising that the country lacks a coherent Lebanese identity or a cohesive foreign policy.

Maronite Spiritual Leader Patriarch Sfeir

Regarding Hezbollah's unilateral foreign policy action, the positions of Christians in general and Maronites in particular did not differ much from those of the Sunnis and the Druze. Christian interviewees commonly characterized the July War as an Iranian-Israeli war being contested in Lebanon, and Christians had no role in it other than providing humanitarian assistance for those from southern Lebanon whose villages had been bombarded or invaded by the Israeli army.[40]

Just a few days after the war began, a Maronite group sent an open letter to the Israeli prime minister expressing its support of Israel in the conflict and urging it to hit terrorist infrastructure hard.[41] It was revealed in another US cable that Minister of National Defence Elias Murr, an Orthodox Christian, admitted that Christians had supported Israel during the war, and had been hoping for Hezbollah's destruction until Israel began to bomb Christian neighbourhoods.[42] This clearly demonstrates the depth of the divisions between sectarian communities, which led one faction to support an external military attack on its own soil in the hopes that the other faction's destruction

---

38 Michael J. Totten, *The Fatima Gate: The Beirut Spring, the Rise of Hezbollah, and the Iranian War Against Israel*, New York, Encounter Books, 2012, p.212-213.

39 US Department of State, "Lebanon: Hariri Wants Lebanese Marshall Plan", 06BEIRUT2680, 21 August 2006.

40 Elie Elias, Instructor at American University of Beirut, Beirut, December 2015, personal interview; Elias Salibi, Member of the Advisor Board of Lebanese Forces, Beirut, December 2015, personal interview.

41 "An Open Letter to Ehud Olmert from the Lebanese Foundation for Peace", 14 July 2006, http://saveisraelcampaign. com/atad/Articles.asp?article_id=8463, (Accessed on 8 March 2016).

42 US Department of State, "Lebanon: Mindef Worried That Hezbollah War with Israel Imminent", 08BEIRUT372, 11 October 11 2008.

would strengthen its own domestic power base. What is more interesting is that this dynamic is understood as normal by an official responsible for the highest levels of national defence.

Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir actively involved in developments during the war. He criticized Nasrallah's unilateral decision and the fact that Hezbollah's actions had opened the country to the possibility of Israeli occupation. In an interview published in *Spiegel*, he declared, "Our country must not serve as the one that makes its territory available as a proxy rallying ground and battleground for other states. Neither the conflict over Iran's nuclear program nor any other Iranian issues concern the Lebanese." He also expressed concern over the increasing outward migration of Lebanese Christians, who were being forced to leave by the war.[43] It is striking that the Maronite spiritual leadership perceives any conflict as an existential threat to the Maronite community in this region.[44] Additionally, during his visit to the US in July 2006, not only did he condemn Israel's retaliation, he also called on Hezbollah to lay down its arms to reach a political solution. In other words, according to Patriarch Sfeir, the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers did not constitute just cause for the dismemberment of a whole country. However, he also criticized Hezbollah for its irresponsible behaviour, and demanded that a truly sovereign Lebanese government exert its sole authority over the whole of the Lebanese territory.[45] Upon his return, he asked for assurances of a ceasefire under reasonable and acceptable conditions, and with the utmost support of the US.[46] This statement indicates that the Patriarch's position was in accordance with those of Maronite political leaders, and with that of the March 14 Alliance. Like other Maronite politicians, while he criticized Israel, he also stressed that Hezbollah's disarmament would be a condition of finding a permanent solution to Lebanon's problems.

The Lebanese Government in line with Hezbollah's Discourse towards the End of the War

The Lebanese government pursued a foreign policy agenda with two major aims: first, achieving a ceasefire; and second, securing regional and international support for its domestic policy agenda, including strengthening the government's sovereignty and pacifying Hezbollah through disarmament. This foreign policy choice, Wilkins argues, was taken as a green light for the Israeli attacks, which in time significantly weakened the position of Sunni leaders and gave Siniora a negatively connoted reputation as "Bush's man in Lebanon" or "friend of Israel".[47] On 25 July, Prime Minister Siniora participated in an international conference aimed at bringing an end to the war in Lebanon, and presented his Seven-point Plan. The plan, in brief, sought the release of the Lebanese and Israeli prisoners and detainees, withdrawal of the Israeli army behind the Blue Line, the official border between Lebanon and Israel declared by the UN in 2000, extension of the Lebanese government's

---

43   Steinvorth and Windfuhr, "Interview with Cardinal".

44   Murat Tınas, *Sectarian Groups as Sub-State Foreign Policy Actors? The Case Study of Lebanon*", PhD Thesis, Ankara, Middle East Technical University, Institute of Social Sciences, 2016, p.207.

45   "Statement of His Eminence and His Beatitude Nasrallah Peter Cardinal Sfeir, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East", *PR Newswire*, 13 July 2006.

46   Youssef Hourany, "Maronite Bishops Call for Ceasefire, Humanitarian Corridors and Solidarity", *AsiaNews*, 22 July 2006.

47   Wilkins, *Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy*, p.87.

authority over its territory through its own legitimate armed forces, and enhancement of the UN international force in the south.[48]

Although Siniora presented his plan as the official plan with the consent from the government, it should be regarded as Siniora's foreign policy document and another phase in the domestic battle between 8 March and 14 March.[49] First, the call from Siniora threatened Hezbollah's weapons by affirming that the Lebanese government demand international support to maintain its monopoly of force and authority over the country. Second, several provisions called for the establishment of a UN jurisdiction in disputed areas in order to strip Hezbollah of its pretext for retaining arms.

Not surprisingly, Siniora's initiative was criticized by Nasrallah and supported by members of March 14. The Maronite Patriarch acknowledged his support, stating that Hezbollah would no longer have the right to maintain an army as a state within a state with Iranian help, and calling for the disarmament of all Shi'a militias as soon as the two sides exchanged prisoners and Shebaa Farms was returned to Lebanon. In contrast, President Lahoud criticized Siniora for not first obtaining the consent of the cabinet or coordinating with him. He also criticized Siniora's unconditional commitment to the disarmament of Hezbollah and the establishment of UN provisions in Shebaa Farms.[50]

Siniora's controversial Seven-point Plan is significant in certain respects for understanding the diverse perceptions of Lebanese leaders regarding both foreign and domestic policy matters. First, although the plan was presented by the prime minister at an inter-governmental conference, it was soon understood that what was called a "Lebanese" proposal was an expression of the interests of the particular group that held power at the time. In other words, when the representatives of sectarian groups take governmental power, they may pursue a particular foreign policy path with the intent of gaining leverage against their domestic competitors. In this case, Siniora's proposal was designed to highlight Hezbollah's aggressiveness in order to delegitimize its armed presence in accordance with the interests of March 14. Second, the plan disclosed the government's domestic and international inefficacy, and its reliance on external actors. In other words, the leaders of March 14 were seeking international support to both implement Siniora's plan and realize their domestic agenda.

Nasrallah was more successful than Siniora at cultivating nationalist rhetoric during the war, presenting Hezbollah as the true defender of the nation in order to legitimize its arsenal. To illustrate, at the very beginning of the war, Hezbollah articulated the following demands: immediate Israeli withdrawal behind the Blue Line, international guarantees that Israel would respect the integrity of Lebanese borders, a halt to Israeli intrusions into Lebanese airspace, the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israel. In brief, Nasrallah framed Hezbollah's foreign policy through a nationalist discourse based on anti-hegemonism or anti-imperialism. In the meantime, contrary to the hopes of Hezbollah's rivals, the party cultivated a strong image of resistance to whatever the Israeli retaliation was, thanks to substantial military aid from Iran and Syria. Based on this military success, Hezbollah received strong trans-sectarian support from around the Middle East. Hirst states that, according to public opinion polls towards the end of the war, 87% of Lebanese accepted Hezbollah as the Resistance

---

48   Siniora, "Address at the Rome Conference".

49   Sawsan Khanafer, "Foreign Policy Battles in Post-Syria Lebanon: The Case of the 2006 War", MSc Thesis, Beirut, Lebanese American University, 2013, p.66.

50   Steinvorth and Windfuhr, "Interview with Cardinal".

against Israeli aggression.[51] His reputation enabled Hezbollah to consolidate its domestic power, and it emerged as the quasi-state foreign policy actor during the war. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, for instance, negotiated mainly with Nabeh Barri on behalf of Hezbollah, rather than with the prime minister.[52] Thanks to his popularity, Nasrallah also managed to shift the centre of gravity in the Lebanese politics towards Tehran.[53]

The considerable success of Hezbollah also increased sectarian concerns and deepened the rift between Shi'as, on one side, and Sunnis and Christians on the other. Possessing a very strong military capability relative to most non-state actors, Hezbollah was perceived as an existential threat by other confessional groups; that is, Christian, Druze and Sunni leaders realized that if Hezbollah had the military capacity and ability to fight Israel, that force could also be turned against them (as did indeed occur in May 2008). Since their foreign policy agendas were shaped by this perception, they tried to convince their regional and international partners to put pressure on the issue of disarmament. This is why Siniora, Hariri, Jumblatt and Patriarch Sfeir all continuously raised the issue of Hezbollah's weapons in their meetings, speeches and interviews; according to Jumblatt, Hezbollah had failed to offer this victory to the Lebanese, thereby deepening concern among the other sectarian communities over Hezbollah's arsenal.[54]

After almost a month, it was understood that although the Israeli army had carried out heavy airstrikes, it would not be possible to eliminate Hezbollah completely. On the other side, while Hezbollah's forces had mostly remained intact and continued its combat in southern Lebanon, it had no concrete real gains either. The need for a ceasefire became increasingly urgent as the humanitarian situation deteriorated; to that end, Washington and Paris proposed a resolution on 5 August, but it was rejected by the Lebanese government as a whole after Hezbollah vetoed it. Hezbollah had rejected the resolution because the draft had not proposed an Israeli withdrawal before the ceasefire, but with the benefit of certain amendments, UN Resolution 1701 was accepted by the Security Council on 11 August 2006.

The resolution proposed that the LAF would be deployed primarily south of the Litani River; it also put forward the expansion of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the reinforcement of Lebanese sovereignty over its own territory. However, it did not resolve core issues like the prisoner exchange and Hezbollah's weapons.[55] The issue of deploying the LAF in the south has always been a subject of dispute between the different sectarian groups; therefore, the decision to do so in the resolution prompted discussion in the cabinet. Members of March 14 argued that the deployment of the LAF was an indispensable necessity to strengthen the state's sovereignty and prevent sub-state actors from unilaterally taking over the role of Lebanese State security. Unsurprisingly, ministers representing the March 8 Alliance initially opposed the proposal, but Nasrallah also ultimately agreed to the deployment.[56] For the government, this was a success because, for the first time in many years, the Lebanese government controlled its entire territory, at least on paper. The

---

51 Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, p.357.
52 Wilkins, *Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy*, p.108.
53 Michael Kerr, "Before the Revolution", A. Knudsen and M. Kerr (eds.), *Lebanon: After the Cedar Revolution*, London, C. Hurst & Company Ltd, 2012, p.28.
54 Jumblatt, personal interview.
55 UNSC Resolution 1701, 11 August 2006.
56 Wilkins, *Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy*, p.111.

expansion of the LAF and UNIFIL was at least a symbolic challenge to Hezbollah's dominance over the south.[57] March 14 also backed Siniora on the resolution because it implicitly called for Hezbollah's disarmament; the deployment of the LAF and UNIFIL would also limit Hezbollah's freedom of movement in southern Lebanon. The process of enacting Resolution 1701 thereby shows how Siniora and Hariri used government capabilities and international conjuncture to put pressure on Hezbollah, and to boost their own positions within Lebanese politics.

Although the UN Resolution was not ideal for Nasrallah – he criticized it as favouring Israel – he did not need to oppose it outright, as Hezbollah emerged from the war with a clear sense of victory, having successfully resisted a far superior military force, albeit not without major losses of human life and assets.[58] Hezbollah also influenced the final draft of the resolution, which was more supportive of Hezbollah's interests than either Siniora's plan or the first draft resolution. In this regard, as Salloukh argues, the differences between these texts not only exhibit the rifts in foreign policy objectives between Siniora's government and Hezbollah, it is also an explicit example of how a sub-state sectarian actor became able to shape policy with the consent of the Lebanese government.[59] Indeed, the initial intention of both Siniora and the US Administration was to issue a resolution under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. This would have authorized the use of force, says Göksel, who was consulted during the preparation of the resolution. However, he continues, this was not possible due to an anticipated reaction from Hezbollah, and Siniora was finally convinced to present a more moderate text which considered Hezbollah's sensitivities.[60] For instance, there is no direct reference of disarming Hezbollah in UNSCR 1701. Neither was it a pre-condition for ceasefire, in contrast to the Seven-point Plan. This exemplifies Hezbollah's capacity to meet its political objectives, even on international platforms. The resolution "emphasizes the importance of the extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory. … for it to exercise its full sovereignty, so that there will be no weapons without the consent of the Government of Lebanon and no authority other than that of the Government of Lebanon", meaning that the issue of disarmament was left to the discretion of the government. Since Hezbollah is represented in the government, it is difficult to imagine it would consent to any such proposed governmental measure. Mahmoud Qumati, a member of Hezbollah's political bureau, explained that, with two posts in the cabinet where unanimity is necessary, Hezbollah was able to put off the issue of disarmament to be discussed internally in time.[61]

Conclusion: Sub-state Sectarian Actors as Foreign Policy Actors

The political order in Lebanon is based on confessional divisions, which has resulted in a weak institutional structure that reinforces sectarian identities. The weak nature of the Lebanese state prevented it from presenting a cohesive foreign policy stance even when it was faced with an actual invasion. This study has outlined the divergent foreign policy orientations of various sectarian actors, which are heavily shaped by their divergent visions for Lebanon, even in the case of an occupation. The March 14 Alliance faced a dilemma between a desire to end the Israeli invasion and the hope

---

57   Gary Gambill, "Implications of the Israel-Hezbollah War", *Mideast Monitor*, Vol.1, No.3, 2006.

58   International Crisis Group, *Israel/Hizbollah/Lebanon*, p.8.

59   Wilkins, *Making of Lebanese Foreign Policy*, p.119.

60   Göksel, personal interview.

61   International Crisis Group, "Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis", *ICG Middle East Report*, No.69, 10 October 2007.

that it would dampen Hezbollah's military capabilities. The position of the March 8 Alliance, on the other hand, was clearer, as Nasrallah claimed Hezbollah's resistance against the Israeli army was part of a broader scheme including social programs directed at those affected by the attacks. While the Sunni-Shi'a divide constituted the main issue in Lebanese politics, the Maronite Church was mainly concerned with the well-being of Christians, especially those in the south; meanwhile, the Druze leader had his own aspirations.

This study has demonstrated how sectarian identities in Lebanon are diverse and most of the time contradictory, and so too are the sectarian actors' visions for Lebanon. Therefore, during the war, the various sectarian actors framed their foreign policy agendas – and in turn, where possible, the government's foreign policy agenda – according to their perceptions of the domestic and regional balance of sectarian power. In the end, in the absence of a common national identity, and within a weakly established state structure, the Lebanese government becomes vulnerable to external pressures, which sectarian actors respond to by establishing informal relations with foreign partners they believe can help them achieve domestic leverage.

In brief, a study of the July War that focuses on the role of sectarian actors in foreign policy making offers insights into how both domestic and foreign geopolitical dynamics shape Lebanese foreign policy, and how the leaders of confessional groups disagree over even the question of who their enemies and allies are. The multiplicity of foreign policy orientations among autonomous sub-state sectarian actors has each acting in a quasi-state capacity that continues to weaken an already ineffective Lebanese state.