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## Islamist Actors from an Anti-system Perspective: The Case of Hizbullah

### This is the author's manuscript

*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/155516> since 2016-07-12T14:00:59Z

*Published version:*

DOI:10.1080/21567689.2014.934360

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## **Abstract**

Hizbullah is an important case through which one can examine Islamist actors. Created as a religious-oriented movement during the eighties with a clear Islamic agenda, it gradually shifted towards a more pragmatic position, entering Lebanese political life in 1992. In its early days, Hizbullah strongly criticized the consociational Lebanese system and the international order, adopting a clear anti-system posture.

By comparing three key moments of the political evolution of the movement, the article analyses the strategy of Hizbullah from an anti-system perspective. The goal is to demonstrate how playing as a dual anti-system actor (as social movement and Party) on two interrelated levels (domestic and external) is a strategic and informed political choice.

Hizbullah has been able to juggle these positions animating or silencing, over the years, its domestic anti-system attitude to the benefit of the external one. To have a differentiated anti-system attitude has allowed it to maintain a double (but always coherent) position in the different systems it plays, adapting its anti-system posture to the political circumstances, to its goals and to the international context.

**Keywords:** Hizbullah, anti-system theory, consociational democracy, Lebanon, Islamist actors.

## Introduction

Hizbullah - the 'Party of God' - is one of the main actors on both the Lebanese and regional political scene. Created as a religious-oriented movement the 'Party of God' has been able to juggle its radical inclinations and the need for pragmatism. The analysis of the oscillation between the 'religious' and the 'political' characterized earliest studies of the party. On the one hand are those who have analyzed its more 'revolutionary' aspects, concentrating on Islamic militancy and its consequences at the regional and international levels (Ranstorp 1997, Jaber 1997, Gjourayeb 2002). The focus of these studies was mainly on the movement's politics of violence and on its 'proxy' dimension, namely its connections with Syria and Iran. On the other hand are those who have focused on the transformations that have led Hizbullah to play an active role in Lebanese political life, arguing that such changes have altered the project of the movement, namely the creation of an Islamic State in Lebanon and the fight against 'Western' intrusion in the country (Picard 1993, Zisser 1997, Norton 2007). According to this scholarship the political vein of the movement prevails over the religious one over time both at the domestic and international levels. There is also a third cluster of studies emphasizing the choices of the 'Party of God' as dependent on circumstances and never genuinely in opposition to its ideology and religious nature (Hamzeh 1993, 2000, 2004, Alagha 2006, 2011b). Hamzeh in particular focuses on the local dimension of Hizbullah's political activities, arguing that for Islamists the functions and power of local governments are the new tools for the Islamization of all aspects of society. Alagha (2001b) for its part concentrates on how Hizbullah has transformed and will transform its identity according to internal and external factors but always keeping in mind the guidelines of Islamic fixities (*thawabit*). This shifting identity is the element that has allowed Hizbullah to find a compromise between its religious and political natures.

series of studies, focused on Hizbullah's character as social movement, emerged (Karagiannis 2009, Saouli 2011, Salamey & Pearson 2007).

Karagiannis, in particular, uses a framing analysis to understand how the Party communicates its goals and mobilizes support within its Shiite basis and in Lebanese society. On the one hand Kargiannis offered a theoretical analysis of the Party, which has been traditionally studied more descriptively. On the other hand, he shows how Hizbullah has succeeded in finding successful frames that resonate with the local culture and the current political and economic realities as perceived by a large fraction of the Lebanese population (p.366).

The social networks and the different structures built by the party in Shiite-majority areas have been therefore examined (Flanigan 2009, Mervin 2008, Harb 2004). Within these networks the role of specific groups such as women or young people has been brought to light (Deeb 2006, Lefort 2007). Other scholars still have focused on the political skills of Hizbullah, in particular through the analysis of local political power management (Harb 2009) or the party's use of propaganda and awareness campaigns (Chaib, 2009, 2011) and the media (Chaib 2007; Lambloum 2009).

In general however, all these studies are too descriptive and tend to separate the domestic dimension - namely the relationship of the party with its Shiite basis and with the Lebanese political system - from the international one. Many of them, in addition, tend to concentrate on its religious dimension ignoring the political one.

In this article, instead, the focus is on an element that has been overlooked: Hizbullah's anti-systemic attitude. The understanding of this aspect is crucial because it provides an innovative frame to account for Hizbullah's political strategy both at domestic level and at the international one. If, often, the anti-systemic posture is seen as a threat for democracy and for politics more broadly, in the case of Hizbullah this attitude is an evident

political choice.<sup>1</sup> What does it mean, operationally, to be anti-systemic for an Islamic actor such as Hizbullah? And to what extent this aspect is relevant to understand its political behaviour? To be anti-systemic is generally assumed to be against democratic arrangements, but the term can be stretched. Thus, might relate to a definition of anti-system that is a function of the system against which the anti-systemic actor is fighting. To this regard substantial differences exist if the anti-systemness is considered through theories of political parties or social movements. According to Sartori's parties theory the anti-systemness could be relational (the anti-systemness could be referred to the other parties or the system of parties) or ideological (the anti-systemness is build against the system of government). According the theory of social movements, instead, the anti-systemness is seen as a means to fight against the system world.

If we consider Hizbullah's evolution according to these two theoretical frameworks, we have a useful tool to read the Party's strategy both from the domestic perspective - relationship between the Party and the Lebanese political system - and the external one - relations between the Party and the international context. Both frameworks allow for a novel interpretation of Hizbullah's role in the democratising Lebanese system and this double theoretical framing centred on the notion of anti-systemness is the innovative contribution of this research.

Consequently the aim of this article is to demonstrate how playing as a dual anti-system actor (as social movement and a Party) on two interrelated levels (domestic and external) is a strategic and informed political choice that has had a crucial impact on Hizbullah's policies. The hypothesis advanced here is that a calculated use of anti-system's labels at domestic and international levels has allowed Hizbullah to maintain its religious followers and, at the same time, promote the policies necessary to its political survival and its

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of Islamic movements/parties considered anti-systemic, then, this aspect appears particularly relevant because it is one of the arguments of those who support the thesis of the incompatibility between Islam and democracy.

national levels.<sup>2</sup> Hizbullah demonstrated, in fact, an extraordinary ability to separate an internal anti-system dimension from an external one.

This has permitted the juggling of these positions, modulating its domestic anti-system attitude to the benefit of the external one. Specifically, Hizbullah has worked hard on maintaining its external anti-system posture, especially when the domestic anti-system vein has become less pronounced. The adaptation of the party to Lebanese consociational democracy might have had a negative impact on the Shiite base, but having a differentiated anti-system attitude domestically and externally has allowed Hizbullah to maintain a double and always coherent position in different systems.

Methodologically the above mentioned hypothesis is examined by comparing three key periods of the movement's political history, using Party's documents, declarations, commentaries, secondary sources and a series of interviews conducted in Lebanon between 2010 and 2012. The paper is divided in two main sections: in the first one Islamist actors are considered in the frame of anti-system theory; in the second section the case of Hizbullah is analyzed in three crucial periods of its political life. The first period considered starts with the official foundation of the party in 1985 and goes until the end of the civil war (1989-1990). In this time Hizbullah clearly adopted a social movement anti-system attitude both at the domestic and external levels. The second period begins in 1991 and ends in 2005 with the Hariri assassination. In this period the Hizbullah's transformation from anti-system social movement to anti-system party is evident at the domestic level but not at the international one. The third moment begins just after the Hariri assassination and goes until the 2009, year of the publication of the new Hizbullah's political Manifesto. In this period the positions of the previous period, both at the domestic and international levels persist, even if some relevant changes occurred.

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<sup>2</sup> Historically the Shiite community, considered a non-qualified minority inside the Lebanese State, was deemed unable to participate to political life. This was due not only to the labels put on them over the years (poor, communists, etc.), but to the fact that they had a very strong religious connotation. (Hazran 2010).

## Islamist groups and democracy: an anti-systemic perspective

Islamist movements have been increasingly influential in the Arab world since the late 70s and they have consolidated their presence since the beginning of the 90s. This revival (Nasr 1995) has coincided, more generally, with a worldwide Islamic resurgence. Considering their increasing political relevance, in recent years a significant part of the literature concentrated on the Islamist movements' role as actors of political mobilization rather than on their religious aspects (Rivero & Kotzé 2007, Volpi 2009, Shehata 2012). In contrast with previous studies, some scholars have argued that Islam is not necessarily an obstacle to democracy and democratization, but it could be analysed as one of the variables in a dialectical relationship (Jamal 2006, Schwedler 2007).

In this article, it is emphasised that a significant (and underestimated) element that needs to be considered in analysing the relationship between Islamist actors and the State, is whether they have an anti-system attitude or not. Playing the 'anti-system card' is an informed choice that is often used by Islamist parties to their own advantage and for a very punctual political strategy. To this regard this informed choice is influenced by the surrounding environment Islamists operate in because it affects their political choices.

Anti-system actors can be analysed from different perspectives. The anti-system label, in fact, has been used to describe non-democratic parties or groups (Daalder 1966); parties or groups that support their ideals through non-conventional, illegal or violent means (Zimmermann 1989); or parties that were particularly isolated from other political actors (Bille 1990). In the social sciences two dominant approaches emerge. The first one is that of the anti-system party, included in political parties' theory. The second one is within the theory of social movements. Even if the latter is relevant for the case of Hizbullah between 1985 and 1989 the focus here is mainly on the anti-system parties' theory because it is crucial to understand Hizbullah transformations in recent years.

...y began with the works of Sartori (1966, 1976). In his definition, an anti-system party is a party that would change not the government but the system of government. The concept, at least initially, was applied to two distinct fields of analysis: on the one hand to the study of party systems and on the other to empirical studies of democracies, their legitimacy and their consolidation. In Sartori's theory of party systems (1976), the anti-system party attitude is due to the party's ideological character. According to Sartori, the anti-systemness attitude could be relational, depending on the ideological differences between one or more parties and the other parties and the system. More frequently, however, the property of anti-systemness is ideological, namely it is given to a party on the basis of its ideology and not in relation to their distance from the other parties. Accordingly, an anti-system party could be seen as a threat for the whole system and for democracy itself (Capoccia 2002).

The hard core of the concept is singled out by noting that an anti-system opposition abides by a belief system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates. According to the strict definition, then, the anti-system parties represent an extraneous ideology – thereby indicating a polity confronted with a maximal ideological distance (Sartori, 1976, 133).

One of the consequences of this view is that the system against which the anti-system party is opposed to changes according to the two definitions: the relational and the ideological. In the relational case the system considered is the parties system (and system of government), while in the ideological dimension the system against which the struggles is carried out is that of power arrangements in liberal democracies. If the anti-systemness is relational, anti-system parties do not cooperate with government coalitions because they do not recognize the principles within which these coalitions work. At the same time they tend to



acting as an 'irresponsible opposition' (Sartori 1976).  
 Consequences of this are the polarization of the political spectrum and its delegitimization.  
 Frequently anti-system parties use the instruments of the 'anti-political-establishment parties'  
 (Mastropalo 2012). According to Schwedler (1996), in its modern form, an anti-political-  
 establishment party is characterized by certain key variables. It is, generally a party that  
 refuses to be a part of a system that it does not recognize; it is a party that refuses other  
 political parties (and coalition with them) because they are not able to represent the  
 population: it presents itself as 'new' (ideological distance with other parties); it is a party that  
 is guided, often, by charismatic figures and / or leaders; and it is a party that uses a rhetoric of  
 populism to attract attention on the inefficiencies of the system.

Turning to the anti-systemness from the perspective of the theory of social movement,  
 the situation partially changes. In this framework, the system against which groups or  
 movements (national or international) advance claims is the 'world-system' and its pre-  
 established rules (Wallerstein 1989, Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997). The main element of this  
 position is that 'movements repeatedly proclaime[d] themselves to be 'revolutionary' that is,  
 to stand for fundamental transformations in social relations' (Wallerstein 2002, 30). Groups  
 stand against the established system of power's relations and their economic assets according  
 the so-called two-step strategy: first gaining power within the state structure and then  
 transforming the world (Wallerstein 2002, 30). According to the literature two typologies of  
 movements are identified: social and national (Arrighi et al. 1989).<sup>3</sup> They largely present  
 common characteristics: they have strong and clear structures, well defined strategies and  
 know very well the world system's power structures.

The outlined theoretical frameworks provide useful lenses to analyse the relationship  
 between Islamist actors, democracy and the State. One can assume that a calculated use of

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<sup>3</sup> In the case of Hizbullah, the notions of social and national tend to overlap. To simplify, in the course of the discussion, 'social movement' instead of 'social/national movement' will be used.

movement) could allow Islamists actors to maintain their religious followers and, at the same time, promote the policies needed for their political survival. A part of the literature on Islamist actors is based on the assumption that this type of parties/movements is a threat for democracy because Islamic values are anti-systemic (in the sense of anti-democratic) by definition. However the relationship between Islamic parties/movements, democracy and the State is more complex than that and it is therefore necessary to look beyond the party's ideological values to see how this ideology is operationalized in the system the party is active in.

In shorts, in order to analyze an actor from an anti-system perspective it is necessary take into account the following characteristics:

- An anti-system actor stands out for its opposition to a system. We have seen that this system changes depending on whether we are talking about anti-system parties or anti-system movements. The domestic dimension seems to have a predominant role in the case of anti-system parties because, generally, they stand against the State system of power because it embodies values that the anti-system parties do not share or against (State) democracy itself. In the case of anti-system groups/movements, instead, the system to subvert or to resist is the world-system because of its dominant liberal values or of its neo-liberal economic arrangements. Here the international dimension prevails.

- An anti-system actor, then, is characterized by the tools it uses to carry on its fight against the system. These instruments can go beyond the merely political. An interesting point of this discussion is related to the use of violent tools (in the case of anti-system parties, often only at the symbolic level) but also about de-legitimization strategies. Independently from the adopted instruments, changing the rules of game requires, for the party or the movement, a strong internal discipline and organization, shared rules, explicit goals and strategies.

should be analyzed for its mobilization abilities that are crucial elements for both cases and that are strictly linked to the adopted strategies and tools.

With the domestic and external anti-system levels in mind, in the following pages, these characteristics will be combined (in each of the identified periods) with Hizbullah's anti-system posture (as party or movement), with its position against the system, the adopted strategies and tools, and the weaknesses or strengths of the Lebanese system. This attempt, far from being a purely theoretical exercise is relevant to explain why Hizbullah's pragmatism at the domestic level, often underlined in the literature, is part of a calculated strategy necessary for the party to accredit itself at the international level as anti-systemic. This anti-system international posture, in turn, is crucial for the Party in order to maintain a strong Shiite basis.

## **Hizbullah as anti-system actor -in practice-**

### ***1985-1990***

The sectarian nature of the Lebanese political system is something Hizbullah had to confront since its creation. It is a consociational system that has remained in place even after the end of the Lebanese civil war, finding new legitimacy in the Doha Agreement signed in May 2008.<sup>4</sup> In order to function, it is necessary that all actors share the same rules of the game and that all segments of society accept the consociational model (Dekmejian 1978, Fakhoury 2009, Di Peri 2012).

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<sup>4</sup> National Pact of 1943 is considered, with Taif Agreements (1989) one of the two founding moments of Lebanese socio-political life. These two pacts outlined the political and social framework of the country, designed as temporary but becoming entrenched.

Godø officially set forth its political Manifesto (the Open Letter) that well summarized the characteristics of the movement, reflecting the reality on the ground.<sup>5</sup>

The Open Letter is strongly imbued with the message of the Iranian Revolution and stands in contrast with the West and with its world view. It emphasizes how only Islam is a viable solution to bring out mankind from darkness and ignorance<sup>6</sup>. The document stresses that not only the West but also the Soviet Union deviate from the correct interpretation of the world and society. The Letter also contains a war message against France due to its support for the Lebanese Maronite community and for its arms sales to Iraq.

The central idea of the Letter is that compromise and mediation cannot be an answer to the problem of how to liberate the Arab region from foreign intrusions. According to Hizbullah, where, in the Arab world, governments have resorted to such practices, this has produced a Western imperialistic intrusion, creating disunity in the *umma*. The only possible solution is, therefore, a revolutionary armed struggle in the name of Islam with the objective of accelerating the departure of the imperialistic powers from the Arab region (and from Lebanon in particular) and the destruction of Israel for the liberation of Palestine. The universality of the Quranicø message is the only one able to cut across class, cultural and religious cleavages to achieve the objective.

It is interesting to note that the Open Letter lacks a specific political program for Lebanon. This omission is highly unusual if we consider Hizbullahø struggle against the Lebanese political system, believed to be unable to preserve the country from foreign invasions.

øThe Lebanese crisis has proven that confessional privileges are one of the principal causes of the great explosion which ravaged the country. It also

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<sup>5</sup> After the expulsion of the PLO from the country, the combatant groups, and among them the Shiites groups, took control of the military operations against Israel in the south of the country.

<sup>6</sup> The text of the Open Letter is reported in Norton (1987, 167-187).

The only reference is the statement that when Lebanon will be freed of foreign occupation, its citizens would then freely choose Islam: “We are committed to Islam, but we do not impose it by force.”<sup>8</sup> The Letter does not specify the type of political system the movement wished to build but it can be deduced that the Iranian Islamic Republic would be the most plausible model.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, Hizbullah does not hide its alliance with Iran and, more generally, its support for the Islamic Shiite resurgence after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. It should however be emphasized that the early years of Hizbullah were marked by chaos and disorganization, especially because the movement had to deal, almost daily, with Israeli attacks. In this context, the watchword was: resistance.

At least initially, therefore, it is possible to affirm that Hizbullah presents anti-system social movement’s characteristics both at the domestic and international levels. On the domestic front, criticism against the Lebanese confessional system and the Lebanese State as a whole was very strong. Hizbullah’s political ideology supported the end of “political Maronism”, rejecting any participation in Lebanon’s confessional political system (Alagha 2006, 23). The consociational system (and consequently the State as an expression of it) had been unable to avoid the outbreak of civil war and to find a solution to it. In addition, it could not protect its territorial integrity. In this phase, the domestic anti-system objectives were pursued mostly through rhetoric rather than concrete actions. The chaotic situation of the Lebanese civil war and the consequent absence of meaningful political life prevented Hizbullah from operating directly on the ground to modify Lebanese political arrangements.

<sup>7</sup> Text reported in Norton (1987).

<sup>8</sup> Open Letter section 9 in Norton (1987).

<sup>9</sup> The contrasts on this point were relevant: a part of the movement, guided by Mohammed Zartir, indeed, called for a stronger and less pragmatic approach and the establishment of an Islamic State in Lebanon (Alagha 2011b, 17).

to achieve this end. After the PLO departure in 1982, Hizbullah called on Lebanese to fight against Israel and to overthrow the oppressive confessional system (Qassem 2010, 178). It was uncompromising with respect to any possible mediation.

Moving to analyze the international anti-systemness posture, it is possible to argue that this was very strong both rhetorically and in practice. In this early period the external anti-system posture was violent and was conducted through a top-down approach. Through the Islamic Resistance, Hizbullah led a violent and very aggressive campaign against Western powers in Lebanon throughout the course of the 80s (Ranstorp 1997). During this period kidnappings were carried out as well as hijackings and attacks on foreign military positions, particularly American and French. Hizbullah advocated the right to conduct against them the smaller military *jihad* (defensive).<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Hizbullah was far removed from the gradualist vision of the Imam Musa al Sadr<sup>11</sup> and from his exhortations that violence should not be the only tool of activism. However, instead of damaging its image, this strategy contributed to give credit to the party on the Lebanese scene as an alternative to Amal (Abukhalil 1990).

The discussion above demonstrates Hizbullah's anti-system posture both at domestic and international levels. The movement wanted to emerge as a novel force in Lebanon, championing resistance without losing sight of its clear religious affiliation. This attitude stood in clear contrast with the outdated and oppressive Lebanese confessional system. Hizbullah also clearly demonstrated knowledge of the rules of the game and understood the weakness of the 'world system' of which the corrupted Lebanese State was an expression. Being an anti-system social movement, thus, appears to be a distinctive feature at this stage.

<sup>10</sup> In The Open Letter Hizbullah justifies the use of the violence as the only tool, even if in the frame of the Islamic rules.

<sup>11</sup> Since his arrival in 1950, Musa al-Sadr began to urge Shiites to react to their condition of oppression and poverty building a 'story' a new narrative for the community (Ajami 1986). In 1974, he founded the Movement of the Disinherited that, in 1975, was converted into an armed organization, Amal.

The civil war was devastating and extremely polarizing for Lebanon. Thus, the end of the fighting necessitated a heavy dose of compromise and mediation.

From Hizbullah's perspective, a first change in its strategy occurred just at the end of the 1980s due to two interconnected events. On the one hand, the fratricide struggle between Hizbullah and Amal for the ideological conquest of the south of the country, which led to a slowly marginalization of Amal.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the change in Iran after Khomeini's death in 1989 led to a redefinition of the strategies and policies of the Islamic Republic both at home and abroad. The new President Rafsanjani opposed the fighting between Shiites in Lebanon and strongly condemned both movements (Faksh 1991). In addition, the new international environment, with the end of the Cold War and the creation of the UN-sanctioned international coalition against the occupation of Kuwait, forced Iran to reconsider its position in the global and regional balance of power.

In 1989 when the Taif Agreements were signed, Hizbullah and the Maronites refused to accept them.<sup>13</sup> The agreements, and the system they perpetuated, represented everything Hizbullah had fought against over the years, namely the consociational system and its patronage practices. Even if the movement had started to change slightly its perspective, at the beginning of 1990s the anti-system vein of Hizbullah as social movement still prevailed.

However, on the eve of 1992, the date set for the first elections after the civil war ended, Hizbullah partially changed its tack, accepting the Taif Agreements and deciding to participate in Lebanese political life. Why did it begin this process of 'Lebanonisation' (Ranstorp 1998; Qassem 2010)? There are many reasons that prompted Hizbullah to nuance

<sup>12</sup> At that time Hizbullah considered Amal a too secular and moderate movement.

<sup>13</sup> The Taif agreements gave rise to a cross veto system between the three highest offices of the state (the so called *troika*), which represented the three main communities (Maronites, Sunnis, Shiites) which, with the aim of reconciling the forces in the field, made the making of political decisions very difficult, incentivizing practices of clientelism and corruption (Bahout, 1996, p. 28; Hanf and Salam, 2003; Hudson, 1999).



ian balance alteration that Agreements brought in. The balance of power between communities had changed during the civil war as well as the demographic weight of each of them. The Shiite community was able to obtain greater visibility and bargaining power. According to Wörn (2009), Hassan Nasrallah, the General Secretary of the Party elected in 1993, believed that the inclusion of Hizbullah in the political process was the price that had to be paid in order to continue to legitimize itself as a resistance force capable of defending the country from Israel. On this point, it is relevant to note that Nasrallah never talked about ‘Lebanonisation’ which implied an acceptance of the Lebanese confessional political system, but, rather, of *infitah* (opening), a much more nuanced term that allowed Hizbullah to maintain the pretense of an impartial role and distinguish itself from other parties. Nasrallah’s position, according to Qassem (2010, 223), was strongly criticized by many within the Party and there were intense debates on this choice leading, for instance, to the expulsion from the party of al-Tufayli.<sup>14</sup> Secondly the new Iranian leadership of Rafsanjani had promoted a much more pragmatic and less militant foreign policy. This affected Shia factions in Lebanon (Hamzeh 2000, 743).<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, the rise of Syrian influence in Lebanon literally ‘pushed’ Hizbullah to cooperate with the Lebanese government. Hizbullah, conscious of the fact that Syria would take advantage of this situation to strengthen its presence in the country, made the best of a bad situation, accepting the Taif Agreements. For its part, Syria took advantage of the Shiite movement as a proxy in the fight against the state of Israel.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, the Taif Agreements implicitly legitimized the presence and the action of Hizbullah. Its refusal, *de facto* approved by the government, to give up weapons like the other militias, as the Agreements set out, with the argument that they

<sup>14</sup> Subhi Al -Tufayli was the first General Secretary of Hizbullah. He strongly criticized the changing attitude of Hizbullah towards the Lebanese political system.

<sup>15</sup> From a religious point of view Hizbullah is linked to the ideology of the *velayat-e faqih*, which is considered the authority entitled to change the strategy of the movement according to internal and external circumstances.



eli occupation, put the Party in an anomalous and privileged position (McEvlin 2006, Qassem 2010).

The party's change of position emerges clearly in the analysis of its electoral programmes<sup>16</sup> and from the decisions taken during its political meetings - the conclaves.<sup>17</sup> At the domestic level Hizbullah gradually but inexorably shifted from being an anti-system social movement to anti-system party, trying to preserve its Islamic and anti-establishment identity, and at the same time, working within the confines of the Lebanese political system. The interesting point is the attention it dedicates to the Lebanese confessional system. In the 1992 electoral program we can read:

“The first duties of Hizbullah's nominees are to follow up the efforts, in cooperation with all friends and loyal ones, to abolish it [political sectarianism], during the first constitutional cycle of the new parliament” (p. 66).

In the 1996 electoral program, an entire section is entitled “Achieving Equality and Establishing the Just State”. Here the focus is the establishment of a “just” State and one of the tools to do so is to abolish the confessional system, with the party committed to:

“the abolition of political sectarianism that represents the central flaw in the Lebanese political system and its social structure” (p. 71).

In the 2000 electoral program the reference to the Lebanese system is contained in section four where, again, the emphasis is on “the development of political life and the

<sup>16</sup> 1992, 1996 and 2000 were legislative elections; 1998 and 2004 were municipal elections. The electoral programs of 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004 are reported in Alagha (2011a).

<sup>17</sup> A synopsis of the main decisions taken during the conclaves are presented in Alagha (2011a).

ing all the Lebanese without any discrimination; the building of a stable country» (p. 17).

Hizbullah decided that the «fight» could be waged by participation and that its presence in Parliament (and from 1998 in Municipal Councils) and the role that it could play as an opposition party would stimulate Lebanese political life. This new way of conceiving the fight, according to Qassem (2010), is defined as «political *jihad*». At the symbolic level the use of this label was strategic for Hizbullah because it made it possible to maintain solid roots with the religious basis and the Islamic welfare network through the use of the label *jihad* and, at the same time, play the card of its «politicization». The religious and political ideology of Hizbullah continues to promote the establishment of an Islamic state but the party claims that this is not viable as a political programme because of the confessional and sectarian nature of Lebanon and the opposition of the majority of the Lebanese, both Christians and Muslims.<sup>18</sup> However it should be noted that the entry of Hizbullah in Parliament did not mean the Party's acceptance *tout court* of the concepts of full participation and democracy. In this regard, for example, Hizbullah refused at the time to enter government<sup>19</sup> and it rejected political offices that provided for the management of money or too wide decision-making responsibilities. According to the new *infatah* strategy, during the 1990s the party entered in a sort of «post-Islamist phase». The focus was increasingly on the construction of an Islamic social order from below through concrete activities at the grassroots level rather than an Islamic political order (Alagha 2011b). The party widened its presence across the Lebanese territory, constructing the so-called «society of resistance» through the consolidation of the system of welfare services offered to the population that overlapped the State's ones.

The growth and legitimacy of the party had its apotheosis with the success in the municipal elections of 1998 and then in 2004 (Harb 2009). These victories were built on

<sup>18</sup> This appears clearly from the incipit of the 1992 and 1996 electoral programs.

<sup>19</sup> Decision taken only in 2005.

based on the principles of honesty and reliability to ensure benefits for all, regardless of confession. The activities of the party at the municipal level helped to strengthen its image among the population, marking a clear difference with municipalities operated by other parties.<sup>20</sup>

Specific Islamic themes that could have kept away sectors of the electorate were set aside but, at the same time, Islam was presented as a guardian of poor people (regardless of the confession) and human rights (Alagha 2006, 167) and, ultimately, of democracy. This also facilitated Hizbullah in forging alliances with a number of parties that had always opposed it.<sup>21</sup>

In order to continue its resistance activity Hizbullah needed a peaceful and democratic environment. A compromise to bring stability to Lebanon became a necessary condition to continue with resistance. In the words of Mohammed Fneish, a Hizbullah representative in Parliament: "The entry of Hezbollah in Parliament is a form of resistance at the political level. Members of the resistance need to have a political base of support, a political assistance for their armed resistance."<sup>22</sup>

At the domestic level the party was not officially and explicitly against the democratic system. It maintained its anti-system party stances as opposition party within a political system that it does not recognize using tactics of system's delegitimization in the frame of irresponsible opposition. However, it deviates from the classic Sartori's definition for its alliances with other parties. These alliances were, generally, limited in time and functional to the elections. The sole exception is the partnership with Aoun's Party (Christians), which persists until now. If we look instead at the grassroots level, Hizbullah adopted the typical instruments of a social movement in order to legitimate its political activities. So in this

<sup>20</sup> Author's interviews realized in Tyre in 2010. Ali el-Ezzedine, Association pour le Développement Rurale (1st of February), Clementine Laratte, SDTAL, (3 of February), Yousra el Ghorayeb, UNDP, 1st of February.

<sup>21</sup> As the Kataeb Party, Amal, the Lebanese Forces and the Party of Hariri. This choice was justified by the need to maintain a sectarian balance in favor of the Shiites who otherwise would not be guaranteed (Hamzeh 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Personal communication with Mohamed Fneish, Tyre, 15/02/ 2010.

which mixed some stances typical of anti-system social movements and anti-system parties. However, it needs to be noted how Hizbullah is not perceived, and it does not represent itself, as a party in the traditional meaning of the word. The party, in fact, attracts people more because it is considered a symbol of resistance and a bulwark of the faith rather than a classical political party (Karagiannis 2011).

This last point allows us to connect with the other level of Hizbullah's anti-systemness, namely the international one. Hizbullah's legitimation as political actor through the 'Lebanonization' process was likely to have a negative impact on the Shiite base. Although it may seem like a paradox, the need to maintain an anti-system posture at the international level required a transformation of the domestic anti-system attitude: to have a peaceful internal environment is the basis to be anti-system outside.

The motivation that drove Hizbullah to 'Lebanonisation' was the opportunity to play the role of the champion of resistance against Israel. At the same time, Hizbullah perceived and presented itself as the champion of the fight against imperialism, the capitalist system and as the defender of the *umma*. This pan-Arab posture is recurrent both in the electoral programs and in Nasrallah's speeches of that period (Nasrallah 2000, Noe 2007, 244-255; 314-317). At the international level the anti-system posture was evident and Hizbullah did not hesitate to use violence to fight against the system that it identified with Israel and its allies, namely the USA. In 2000 electoral program, just after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 we can read:

«[...] This will lead to inflicting a «retreat» on the US-Israeli project, which aims at imposing their hegemony on the region and imposing their dictates, forcing its people to grant them concessions» (76).

Hizbullah did not hide its anti-systemic vein as the increase of military activities confirms. In that period the party faced two cycles of violence: -Operation Accountability in 1993 and -Grapes of Wrath in 1996. However the unsatisfactory results of the 1996 elections, compared to the great efforts to raise its visibility at social level, pushed Hizbullah to redefine its strategy combining domestic and international levels (Azani 2012). The aim was to stress the commitment of the party as champion of the safety of residents of south Lebanon against the external aggression and this was achieved, for example, through the construction of a propaganda campaign about its role in the Grapes of Wrath Agreement or in underlining its contribution to the reconstruction process. Hizbullah tried to credit the -Resistance as an inheritance of all Lebanese.

The withdrawal of the Israeli forces from Lebanon in 2000 was presented by the party as a victory of the action of the Resistance and allowed it to keep its weapons as a tool to continue its international anti-system posture.

Thus, in this period the transformation of the domestic anti-system attitude from social movement to party was functional to the continuation of the international anti-systemic one. In order to do so, Hizbullah chose to use politics and social activism domestically rather than violence. This decision also helped the party de-construct its image of promoting a -culture of death and sectarianism, which had characterized the first period of its activity (Saouli 2011, 933). As argued earlier, the decision taken by Hizbullah to enter into the Lebanese consociational system - a *sui generis* democratic system - has allowed the -Party of God to continue to use violent tools at the international level. Thus, it has been able to exploit to its advantage the -democratization of the Lebanese system.

## **2006- 2009**

Beginning in 2005 strong political tensions characterised Lebanese political life. The assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri forced Syria, considered responsible

tion in the wake of widespread popular protests. The elections held in the spring of 2005, shortly after the Hariri assassination and the Syrian withdrawal, saw the strengthening of the anti-Syrian coalition in Parliament. Prime Minister Fouad Siniora formed a national unity government that Hizbullah, for the first time, integrated while General Aoun stayed out of it. The government was sorely tested by the electoral compromises that saw the emergence of a renewed alliance between Hizbullah and the -aounist coalition.<sup>23</sup> Siniora had to face a double pressure at political and constitutional levels. On the one hand, he had to handle a difficult co-existence between the parliamentary majority, largely anti-Syrian, and President Lahoud, pro-Syrian. On the other hand, he frequently was in minority in government and this slowed and made more complex the work of the Council of Ministers.

In this political scenario the new Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006 took place. The war was unpredictable in intensity and duration and contributed, in part, to undermine the image of Hizbullah, even if the war was presented by the Party as a -divine victory.<sup>24</sup> Many Lebanese accused the Party of being responsible for the war and for maintaining a pro-Syrian position (ICG 2005). Thus, despite the policy of opening to the other communities, the movement had set limits to its pragmatic approach for fear of losing credibility within the Shiite base, the core of its electorate.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, in order to preserve its role in Lebanese society, both for Shiites and non-Shiites, the Party of God concentrated on its double legitimating strategy. Firstly, the fortification of its pan-Arab Islamic transnational identity, bringing together the fight against the imperialist system (Israel and USA) and the defense of the Arab world from foreign

<sup>23</sup> Text of the Memorandum of understanding between Hizbullah and Free Patriotic Movement available at <http://english.mogawama.org/essaydetailsf.php?eid=4442&fid=25> Accessed 12/02/2013.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Hezbollah Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah, by Al-Jazeera Beirut Bureau Chief Ghassan Bin-Jiddu, on 20 July 2006. <http://www.globalresearch.ca/interview-with-hezbollah-secretary-general-hasan-nasrallah/2790> Accessed 01/02/2013.

<sup>25</sup> Author's interview with Maronite cleric, Sidon, 31/01/ 2010.

stance with the Palestinian one (Nasrallah 2006, 2008). This attitude confirms Hizbullah as a transnational Islamic movement: Islam provides, as a transnational ideology, a supra-state's identity for the people of the region.

Secondly Hizbullah activated an impressive propaganda campaign<sup>26</sup> in order to legitimate itself as the defender of Lebanese integrity which helps the Party to be legitimate at the domestic level, mixing Lebanese, Arab and Islamic elements (Nasrallah 2008). As we have seen Hizbullah entered Government in 2005 and strengthened its welfare-provision activities across Lebanon through its work at the municipal level.

These two stances clearly emerged in the new Hizbullah's political Manifesto, published in November 2009 and in the 2009 electoral program.<sup>27</sup> After the events of 2008<sup>28</sup> and as a consequence of 2009 elections, Hizbullah needed to find new legitimation, especially at the domestic level where the increased sectarian polarisation led to a new political crisis in December 2006. This crisis led to a longstanding boycott of institutional activities, causing the *de facto* paralysis of the Lebanese government and deeply impairing its decision-making process. In the spring of 2008, in a very tense political climate, the decision taken by the Siniora's government to remove men close to Hizbullah from some key positions sparked a strong and violent reaction by the 'Party of God'. The crisis ended after the withdrawal of the decision by Siniora against Hizbullah that led to a difficult confessional compromise, the Doha Agreement (21 May of 2008).

Hizbullah's new political platform focuses on the international anti-system stance. The Manifesto underlines the necessity to continue to fight 'the path of US-Israeli oppression and hegemony, with its various dimensions, alliances and direct as well as indirect extensions'. To this aim, the Islamic Resistance has a key role that transcends the domestic dimension:

<sup>26</sup> Especially with al-Manar Tv coverage of the Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Both documents are available in Alagha (2011a).

<sup>28</sup> In the Spring 2008 the decision taken by the Siniora's government to remove men close to Hezbollah from some key positions sparked a strong reaction by the 'Party of God'. The country saw armed battles between the latter and the army that ended after the withdrawal of the decision by Siniora against Hezbollah. After a difficult mediation a new confessional compromise, the Doha Agreement was signed.



Today, the Resistance has become an international human value, with its model representing a source of inspiration and its achievements a paradigm to be emulated by all those seeking freedom and independence across the world<sup>29</sup>.

This anti-system position is especially addressed against the globalized system, expression of the most brutal form of capitalism. In doing this, Hizbullah borrows many formulas and ideas elaborated by leftist traditions. This is a new master frame of Hizbullah in this period, substantiated also with the participation of the Party to anti-globalization conferences (Karagiannis 2009). According to Hizbullah, the Middle East is one of the most relevant arenas in which the USA plays its hegemonic game.

“American oppression has left our nation and its people with no choice but to resist for a better life, for a more humane future, for brotherly diversity and interdependence, for peace and harmony” (122).

It is however interesting to note how, at the domestic level, Hizbullah refrains from openly calling for the elimination of the confessional political system. The Party clearly decided to use a different language in order to legitimate itself as a party for all the Lebanese, ready to form alliances. This stance needs to be seen as a part of a strategy of moderation with the new Manifesto not mentioning the idea of establishing an Islamic State.<sup>30</sup> In other words, Hizbullah is “marketing moderation” (Khatib 2011).

As in the previous phase, the international anti-system posture was functional to the domestic one with a stronger anti-global perspective. At the same time, at the domestic level, the violent events of 2008, when the party did not hesitate to use its military apparatus,

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<sup>29</sup> See also Paragraph 1.1.

<sup>30</sup> Reported, the latter, in Alagha (2011a).



the rules of the game is always conditional on the preservation of its military and strategic interests.

## Conclusions

The hypothesis advanced in this article is that a calculated use of anti-system labels at domestic and international levels allows Hizbullah to maintain its Shiite base and accredit itself and its strategies at national and international level. Shifting between a domestic and an international anti-system attitude also changes its anti-system posture (see Table 1). As has been argued, the particular position of Hizbullah within the regional and international context has pushed the Party to develop a particular form of anti-system strategy, adapted to the different systems it plays against.

### TABLE 1 HERE

The adaptive policy of Hizbullah worked until the Lebanese system showed credibility and legitimacy. As we have seen, anti-system politics was strong and evident (both at domestic and international levels) in the first phase (1985-1990), when the Lebanese system was weak. In that phase the Party used mainly rhetorical religious tools and *Jihad* to fight against the Lebanese political system and the world system as whole using a top-down approach. At that time a social movement posture prevailed. In the second stage (1991-2005), the Lebanese state gained increased legitimacy and the process of reconstruction markedly improved the economy. In that phase, the anti-system position of Hizbullah was less in the open at the domestic level and was functional to the international one. The decision to create a society of resistance through an Islamic network of services helped Hizbullah to preserve the religious dimension with a more nuanced and bottom-up approach. At the international level the anti-systemness was clear and it was part of the strategy of legitimation of the party

were socio-political at the domestic level and violent at the external one. In the last phase, finally, the new weaknesses of the 'system Lebanon' have once again brought into the open the anti-systemic nature of the Party at the domestic level and, in 2009, the Party sought a new internal legitimation also through a new political Manifesto.

If the institutionalization of Hizbullah and its participation in the Lebanese political system have rendered the Party 'accountable', making it less sensitive to domestic 'anti-system' *dérives*, we have seen how, at the same time, it has not made Hizbullah immune to it, especially at the international level. This tactical repositioning at the two levels provides an original lens through which the relationship between Islamic actors and democracy can be analysed, given the often transnational nature of many Islamist movements and parties.

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or (1985-2009)

		1991-2005				2006-2009	
		Anti-systemic levels					
		Domestic	External	Domestic	External	Domestic	External
Lebanese State	Anti-system posture	Anti-system social movement		Mix of social anti-system social movement and anti-system party	Anti-system social movement	Anti-system party	Anti-system social movement
	Position against the system	Rejecting Lebanese confessional system: creation of an Islamic State	Rejecting the "world-system", the western neo-colonial system (USA, France and Israel)	Entering Lebanese political system as opposition party (Parliament and Municipal Councils)	Rejecting the "world-system", the western neo-colonial order of whom Israel is the avant-garde	Entering government	Anti-globalization stance. Fight against USA and its representatives, namely Israel
	Strategy and tools adopted	Symbolic Violence (indirect)	Violence	Political; symbolic violence (refusal to consign weapons)	Violence	Political tools and "strategic" violence	Violence
		Weak		Gains legitimacy		Loses legitimacy	