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Hezbollah's Identities and their Relevance for Cultural and Religious IR

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Hezbollah's Identities and their Relevance for Cultural and Religious IR

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ABSTRACT (ENG)

This working paper analyses the role of religious and resistance identities in Hezbollah's transformation and foreign relations. It argues that this Islamist movement has privileged material concerns over the religious dogma when both factors have not been coincidental. To do so, it uses a theoretical framework that presents the main characteristics of the anthropological and political interpretations of the role of culture and religion in defining the behaviour of international actors. In the chapter dedicated to Hezbollah, close attention is paid to the domestic and regional levels of analysis. When assessing Hezbollah's religious identity, this paper argues that the salience of the pan-Islamic religious identity in Hezbollah's origins has been replaced by an increased political pragmatism. It also argues that the fight against Israel represents Hezbollah's *raison d'être* and that its resistance identity has not suffered major transformations and has been easily combined with religious rhetoric. Linking Hezbollah's case study with the theoretical framework, this paper argues that political conceptions of cultural and religious identities provide the best analytical tool to understand the evolution of this Islamist movement.

Keywords: Hezbollah, Cultural and religious identity, Lebanon, Israel, Middle East security, Islamic movements

ABSTRACT (CAT)

Aquest estudi analitza el paper de les identitats religiosa i de resistència en la transformació de Hezbollah i les seves relacions internacionals. Defensa que aquest moviment islàmic ha privilegiat interessos materials per sobre del dogma religiós quan ambdós factors no han coincidit. El marc teòric estudia les principals característiques de les interpretacions política i antropologista en la influència de la cultura i la religió en el comportament d'actors internacionals. El capítol dedicat a Hezbollah fa especial referència als nivells d'anàlisi nacional i regional. Pel que fa a la seva identitat religiosa,

l'estudi conclou que el pragmatisme polític ha substituït les premisses panislàmiques pròpies dels orígens del moviment. També s'analitza la lluita contra Israel com a raó de ser de Hezbollah i s'argumenta que la identitat de resistència d'aquest moviment no ha sofert transformacions significatives al llarg del temps i s'ha combinat fàcilment amb la retòrica religiosa. La unió del marc teòric i l'estudi de cas permeten arribar a la conclusió que la concepció política de les identitats culturals i religioses en relacions internacionals esdevé la millor eina per a entendre l'evolució d'un actor com Hezbollah.

Paraules clau: Hezbollah, Identitat cultural i religiosa, Líban, Israel, Seguretat a l'Orient Mitjà, Moviments Islàmics

ABSTRACT (CAS)

Este estudio analiza el papel de la identidad religiosa y de resistencia en la transformación de Hezbollah y sus relaciones internacionales. Defiende que este movimiento islámico ha privilegiado intereses materiales por encima del dogma religioso cuando ambos factores no han sido coincidentes. El marco teórico analiza las principales características de las interpretaciones política y antropologista en la influencia de la cultura y la religión en el comportamiento de actores internacionales. El capítulo dedicado a Hezbollah hace especial referencia a los niveles de análisis nacional y regional. En cuanto a su identidad religiosa, el estudio concluye que el pragmatismo político se ha sobrepuesto a las premisas pan-islámicas propias de los orígenes del movimiento. También se analiza la lucha contra Israel como razón de ser de Hezbollah y se argumenta que su identidad de resistencia no ha sufrido transformaciones significativas a lo largo del tiempo y ha sido compatible con la retórica religiosa. La unión del marco teórico y el estudio de caso permiten concluir que la concepción política de las identidades culturales y religiosas en relaciones internacionales representa la mejor herramienta para el estudio de la evolución de un actor como Hezbollah.

Palabras clave: Hezbollah, Identidad cultural y religiosa, Líbano, Israel, Seguridad en Oriente Medio, Movimientos Islámicos

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

The aim of this working paper is to assess the role of religious and resistance identities in Hezbollah's² transformation and foreign relations. It brings together Hezbollah's religious identity and its material interests and argues that this Islamist movement's role in domestic and regional politics has not privileged the religious dogma but rather its materialistic concerns when both factors have not been coincidental. To do so it uses a theoretical framework based on the resurgence of cultural and religious identities in International Relations (IR). Identity is conceived here in Wendt's terms, that is 'a property of intentional actors that generates motivational and behavioural dispositions [and which is] rooted in an actor's [subjective] self-understanding' (Wendt, 1999, 224). At the same time, an international actor's religious identity is considered to be part of its cultural identity which, in turn, is part of its subjective, self-understood broader identity.

On a less theoretical basis, the public discourse of an Islamist movement such as Hezbollah can also be considered to reflect its own identity. This discourse can put more or less emphasis on different aspects of the identity of the movement depending on the international context it interacts with. This paper analyses Hezbollah's religious and resistance public discourses, whose salience has depended over time on regional and national contexts. The literature on the resurgence of cultural and religious identities is divided into two distinctive conceptions of the role of these factors in defining the behaviour of international actors. After scrutinizing the distinctive features of both schools of thought, this paper argues that the political interpretation of cultural and religious identities is more useful to understand the behaviour

1. A previous version of this paper was submitted to the Department of International Relations of the London School of Economics (LSE) in fulfilment of the requirements of the Master of Science in International Relations. The author would like to thank Maria Pallares for her support in all stages of writing, fellow students and professors at LSE who commented on previous versions of this paper, and participants of a seminar held at the International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP) for their valuable input. The author would also like to thank the ICIP and particularly its President, Rafael Grasa, for publishing this work.

2. The most common spelling of Hezbollah will be used throughout this paper, although other denominations such as Hizbullah or Hizballah have been preserved in quotes and bibliographic references.

of international actors such as Hezbollah. This interpretation highlights the need to account for cultural and religious identities together with their objectivist concerns, for example, material interests or geostrategic ambitions.

A core assumption in this paper is that Hezbollah provides an appropriate case study to validate the preference for political understandings of cultural and religious identities in IR. Hezbollah has long been considered the most successful case study in the exporting of the Iranian Revolution³ and a paradigmatic example for successful Islamist movements. Its origins remain the pan-Islamic premise undertaken by Iran in 1979. So if Hezbollah's transformation and relations with external powers have followed pragmatic and objectivist considerations instead of the religious dogma, as will be argued, this case study provides evidence in support of the political interpretation of cultural and religious identities in IR.

In the chapter dedicated to Hezbollah, close attention is paid to the domestic and regional levels of analysis. When studying Lebanon from an IR perspective one of the main challenges is to assess the influence of foreign powers in domestic politics. Hezbollah is no exception, and regional powers have played a crucial role in its birth and evolution. Hezbollah's domestic features will be studied here together with regional developments that have influenced its transformation from an Iranian-backed pan-Islamist movement to a mainstream political party with an armed wing. Likewise, regional developments such as the transformation of Iranian foreign policy or Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon will be analysed as affecting Hezbollah's *raison d'être*.

Although Syria's involvement in Hezbollah will be briefly acknowledged, this working paper will focus on the Iranian influence in this Islamist movement. Two main reasons lie behind this decision. On one hand, Iran is Hezbollah's ideological and religious mentor. This movement's political program derives from the Iranian Islamic Revolution, whose cadres provided the financial, political, and logistical support for the establishment of Hezbollah (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2001, 14). If the aim of this paper is partly to account for the role of Hezbollah's religious identity, it is necessary to focus on Iran, a country that

3. This thesis is suggested in Kramer, 1990; Jaber, 1997; Alagha, 2006; and Norton, 2007a.

has established a transnational ideological-strategic alliance with Hezbollah instead of the political-strategic partnership between this movement and Syria (Alagha, 2006, 188). Crucial events affecting Hezbollah such as Syria's involvement in Lebanese politics since the end of the civil war, its withdrawal in 2005, or its role since the assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri will only be mentioned en *passant*.

On the other hand, the Syrian-Iranian alliance and its regional geostrategic concerns in the Middle East can be considered stable enough to focus only on the foreign policy of one of the partners (Goodarzi, 2006). According to this author, both countries aim at neutralising American influence and Israeli offensive capabilities in the region. As a consequence, Damascus and Tehran's interests towards Hezbollah have been complementary rather than distinctive over time (Goodarzi, 2006, 7-8). Due to the coincidental aims of both actors in the power politics of the Middle East, this working paper will focus on the role that Iran has played in shaping Hezbollah's religious and resistance identities.

Finally, a temporal caveat in the framework of this paper: several of the developments analysed here refer to events that took place in the 1990s. This is the case for Hezbollah's incorporation into Lebanon's political system, the change in Iran's foreign policy since the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the formation of a rejectionist front against Israel. However, these events provide valid trends to understand current phenomena. Hezbollah still participates in national and local elections and actually strengthened its involvement in Lebanon's political arena by joining the national government for the first time in 2005. Similarly, its relations with Iran do not seem to have changed significantly in the last decade. Nor has Hezbollah's struggle against Israel, which continues to draw the world's attention since the 2006 Lebanon war.

To develop this analysis, the paper will be structured as follows. It will first present the debate on the resurgence of cultural and religious identities as a broader effort to include ideational factors in the discipline. Here it will analyse the main tenets of the two understandings of cultural and religious identities - the anthropological and the political - and will claim that only the second interpretation should be used in the theoretical debates of the

discipline. After introducing the main elements that depict the Middle East a good case study for the influence of these identities, this paper will present the case study of Hezbollah. After a brief review of this movement's most significant characteristics and developments, the third chapter will be divided into two subsections looking at Hezbollah's identity. Firstly, Hezbollah's religious identity will be considered to have evolved towards pragmatism and to have adapted to this movement's national concerns. Secondly, Hezbollah's resistance identity will be regarded as being its perennial feature. The interaction between these two identities will set the stage for a concluding section which will link this working paper's theoretical assumptions with the findings revealed in the case study and will introduce some hints for further research.

2. BRINGING CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES INTO IR

In the last two decades a fair amount of literature in IR theory has been devoted to the role of culture and religion in contemporary international politics. As part of a wider effort to include ideational factors into the study of the discipline, several authors have challenged mainstream theories with what Stephanie Lawson has named the 'cultural turn' (Lawson, 2006). Yet inserting culture into IR has generated an intense debate between those authors arguing for an anthropological view of the role of cultural and religious identities in IR and those adopting a political interpretation. The theoretical framework of this working paper will outline the main differences between these arguments and will conclude that the political interpretation of these identities is more useful to understand current developments in international politics, and particularly the case study presented in the second part of this paper.

Once the theoretical framework has been introduced, this paper will apply this debate to the Middle East. Raymond Hinnebusch (2005) has used the distinction between constructivists and utilitarians to assess the role of these

identities in the international relations of the Middle East. His political conception of the impact of these factors in Middle Eastern international relations will be considered to strengthen our previous conclusion that prioritises the political view of cultural and religious identities. This discussion will set the stage for the assessment of Hezbollah's religious and resistance identities in its transformation and foreign relations.

Before outlining the main theoretical arguments surrounding the impact of culture and religion in this context it is worth reviewing the main developments that led several scholars to turn their attention to a previously separated and almost absent field of study in IR (Halliday, 2000a). Several reasons have been emphasized to explain the marginalization of these factors in the agenda of IR theory⁴. The western-centric nature of the discipline, its Westphalian presumptions and its commitment to a positivist epistemology stand as the main reasons leading authors such as Thomas (2005) and Fox and Lander (2006) to bring culture and religion back into the study of IR.

The end of the Cold War acted as a trigger which challenged traditional assumptions and the schools of thought built upon them. Mainstream theories such as neorealism were blamed for being unable to predict and understand peaceful change in international relations (Ned Lebow, 1995). This was considered to be a direct consequence of their state-centric ontology and their focus on materialist power politics. Together with the demise of realism as the mainstream theory of IR, two other theoretical developments contributed to the return of cultural and religious identities in the discipline.

On one hand, the rise of constructivism as the 'new orthodoxy'⁵ enhanced the study of socially constructed identities, which opened the field to the study of cultural factors. Alexander Wendt's work on the construction of state identities and interests through intersubjective rather than material factors can be considered a starting point of the assessment of identity and

4. Lawson reminds us that the neglect of culture during the Cold War period is not true of all schools of thought in IR. For example, she cites the work of Hedley Bull and other scholars of the English School to exemplify how these issues were included in the IR theory agenda (Lawson, 2006, 68). However, it is also fair to say that culture occupied a secondary position in the literature during a historical period when international politics were dominated by power politics and the discipline's orthodoxy was neorealism.

5. Although critical with this concept, the expression is borrowed from Kratochwil's work (Kratochwil, 2000).

ideational factors in the study of world politics (Wendt, 1996, 1999)⁶. The end of the Cold War facilitated the emergence of an agenda that encompasses alternative theoretical and methodological approaches in the study of IR (Lawson, 2006, 2). In this sense, constructivism can be taken as a critical example on the need to bring ‘culture’s ship’ back into the discipline of IR (Lapid, 1996).

On the other hand, a more normative concern regarding the role of culture and religion in the post-Cold War era was revealed with Samuel Huntington’s controversial ‘Clash of Civilisations’. His article, published in the early 1990s, advocated that ‘the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic [but] cultural’, being the ‘fault lines’ between civilizations –defined mostly in religious terms in the case of the Islamic civilization- the ‘battle lines of the future’ (Huntington, 1993, 22).

The rise of constructivism and Huntington’s thesis can be regarded as an effort to understand events in international politics since the end of the Cold War which asked called for wider theoretical approaches. The sudden emergence of new separatist nationalist movements, the disintegration wars of the former Yugoslavia, the Rwandan ethnic conflict and the rise of religious extremism pushed IR scholars to broaden the scope of their research agenda to include identity, culture and religion as key factors behind the behaviour of international actors. More recently, events carried under the banner of Islam such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 or the impact of globalisation on cultural identities have only consolidated the interest of IR scholars in these issues⁷.

This paper will now examine how the discipline has incorporated cultural and religious identities in its research agenda. Two main schools of thought will be identified. First, the anthropological conception of cultural and religious identities will presuppose these factors to have an essentialist and determinant nature. Second, the political interpretation will understand that

6. It is worth noting that theories such as postmodernism, critical theory, and feminism had already included the study of identity in IR theory before the rise of constructivism, although possibly less successfully (see Lawson, 2006; Thomas, 2005).

7. See, for instance, the works by Thomas (2005), Fox and Sandler (2006) and Tomlinson (2003).

they interact with material structures. We will advocate the utilisation of the second interpretation of cultural and religious identities in IR, assuming that their interaction with material factors is the most reliable way of assessing their influence in world politics.

This paper will use Verweij et.al.'s definition as conceiving culture as 'any interpersonally shared system of meanings, perceptions and values' (Verweij et.al., 1998, 2). This definition, framed under a constructivist view that 'identities and interests are not a given but socially constructed' (Wendt, 1996, 48), will enable the comparison between anthropological and political conceptions. While the anthropological understanding of culture and religion places most of its emphasis on the nature and essence of these 'meanings, perceptions and values', the political one highlights their 'shared' and interactive condition.

2.1. THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONCEPTION

Stephanie Lawson has written that 'there is always a danger of falling victim to the power of our own constructions' (Lawson, 2006, 34). The sentence can be applied to those authors that have emphasized the role of cultural and religious identities but who, by doing so, have turned these elements into an absolute. They have thus accepted their independent existence and aprioristic nature. The "essence" of international actors becomes a self-explanatory factor of their behaviour, which implies that the relative weight of these identities, vis-à-vis material interests or geostrategic concerns, cannot be evaluated.

This understanding of the role of cultural and religious identities will be named *anthropological*, in so far as it conceives culture to be 'an integral part of human nature (...), in fact, constitutive of human nature' (Jahn, 2000, xii). According to this school of thought, international actors organize their social relations, their conceptions of honour and blame or their way of dealing with conflict according to a perennial cultural background (Verweij et.al., 1998, 6). No wonder then that 'since the discipline of International Relations does not provide a satisfactory definition of culture it makes sense to go searching

for it in that discipline which concerns itself (...) professionally with culture: cultural anthropology' (Jahn, 2000, 3).

The anthropological view of culture and religion in IR can be considered an evolution of the work of scholars like Edward Said. His work on *Orientalism* has had a remarkable impact on Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of civilizations', who sees culture and religion as the main factors defining a world divided into seven or eight civilizations (Huntington, 1993). Said and Huntington's converging views of the Islamic and Arab world are striking.

As Halliday reminds us, the Orientalist body of writing is based on several broad premises on the Middle East that allow us to classify it within the anthropological conception of cultural and religious identities. Among these premises, Orientalism understands Islam as an independent variable, an explanatory factor of most developments in the region. Likewise, it considers these developments to be rooted in an atemporal Islamic identity which presupposes the impossibility of change, particularly towards liberal and secular political systems (Halliday, 1996, 202-203). Both aspects allow us to consider Orientalism as a background work for those authors who consider culture and religion to have an aprioristic nature and determinant existence. Even more recent works well grounded in the field of IR seem to belong to the anthropological conception of cultural and religious identities. For instance, Scott Thomas asks: 'What if there are multiple paths to being modern, keeping with the cultural and religious traditions of societies rooted in the main world religions?' (Thomas, 2005, 11).

As argued before, the anthropological conception of culture and religion in IR does not leave room to evaluate their relative incidence in the behaviour of international actors. The nature of these identities is absolute, and their impact in these actors' behaviour, determinant. As we will see in the second part of this paper, it is imperative to evaluate the role of Islam as only *one* of several identities influencing the transformation and foreign relations of Islamic movements such as Hezbollah. If our aim is to account for the influence of religious identities in the Middle East, we can only do so by considering the religious factor alongside material interests or geostrategic concerns, and not through essentialist premises.

2.2. THE POLITICAL CONCEPTION

Against this ‘new cultural reductionism’, as Fred Halliday has named it (Halliday, 2000a), a second conception of the role of cultural and religious identities can be identified. It is what might be called a *political* interpretation, which views culture and religion as one of many variables defining the behaviour of international actors. Their existence is not independent from social, political and economic factors, even if cultural and religious identities may become powerful variables for establishing alliances, determining the geostrategic position of international actors or defining their foreign policies. This interpretation also recognises that each actor’s priorities can change over time, and that religious or cultural affiliations do not prevent these changes from happening.

Therefore, culture can be defined as ‘the force or group of forces that determines a predominant self-identity of a specific and sizeable collective of people’ (Shaffer, 2006, 2). This definition enables us to elaborate on cultural identity as a variable that can be measured alongside others. Assessing the role of cultural and religious identities reveals what Shaffer considers to be ‘the main dichotomy of interests’, that is material versus non-material cultural and ideological interests (Shaffer, 2006, 2-3).

This second use of culture and religion stands closer to the constructivist paradigm of IR. Scholars such as Yosef Lapid have suggested that new approaches to culture and identity should account for the socially constructed nature of these factors, against primordially given conceptions. He also contends that their relevance should be understood as having dynamic and optional features rather than static or deterministic ones (Lapid, 1996, 7). Likewise, Wendt has pointed out that identities and interests must be treated as ‘dependent variables endogenous to interaction’ (Wendt, 1996, 53). This observation suggests that identities –including cultural and religious- and interests must be evaluated as two interactive variables of an international actor’s behaviour. The relative weight of these variables is subject to evolution, which differs from their supposed stability according to the anthropological conception. Of course, that is not to say that identities are insignificant for

the behaviour of these actors, but that cultural and religious identities must be considered as only two of many factors influencing an actor's conduct in international relations and that their relevance is flexible according to time and national and international contexts. This method will be applied in the analysis of Hezbollah's transformation and foreign relations. As will be argued, the Islamic identity of this movement has evolved over time according to a pragmatic decision to participate in the Lebanese elections as well as in relation to its resistance identity and regional geostrategic position.

This leads us to highlight that cultural and religious identities are 'context-dependent' (Lawson, 2006). Contextualism is defined as 'the study of the way in which contexts explain, or is the view that explanation is impossible or seriously incomplete unless context is taken into account' (Lawson, 2006, 37). In this sense, certain political contexts may facilitate the resurgence of culture and religion as discursive forces while others may lead to a diminished relevance of these factors vis-à-vis pragmatic or material interests. This idea will be used in the analysis of the transformation of Hezbollah during the 1990s. As we will see, the regional context after the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini led to a notable shift in the Iranian foreign policy which, in turn, affected Hezbollah's position within Lebanon's post-civil war political system as well as the formation of a rejectionist front against Israel.

2.3. CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East has often been considered a good case study for testing the influence of cultural and religious identities in the politics of the region (Dalacoura, 2000; Hinnebusch, 2005; Telhami and Barnett, 2002). Political Islam and transnational identities such as Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism provide adequate elements for assessing the role of identity factors in defining the foreign policy of Middle Eastern states and the position of non-state actors.

Olivier Roy defines Islamism simply as a political ideology based on the Islamic religion and integrated into all aspects of society. As such, it accounts for the unification of the religious and the political into the same sphere and aims to establish an Islamic state through political action (Roy, 1996). The study of religious foundations is superseded by a selective reinterpretation of the religious belief and directed towards the major goal of determining politics in Muslim countries (Halliday, 2000b). As a corollary, Islamist movements reject the secular concept of the nation-state. They deem it illegitimate in so far as it does not embrace the principles of Islamism (Dalacoura, 2001).

Links between Muslim societies at a supranational level are created through ideologies like Pan-Islamism, the roots of which come from the concept of the *ummah* or the entire community of Muslim believers. The *ummah* links societies and Islamist movements bypassing national governments and states, which represents a challenge to the nation-state in both ideological and political senses (Dalacoura, 2001, 236). According to Islamist movements, the solution to the fragmentation of Muslim countries in different nation-states lies in the restitution of Islamic governments uniting in a single pan-Islamic political entity. This political program, even if abandoned in practice, is included in Hezbollah's foundational documents.

The rise of Islamism as a transnational ideology reached a peak during the 1970s. Portrayed by Roy as a new form of a Third World movement (Roy, 1996, 1), it became a legitimising political counter-ideology able to mobilise Muslim populations around the world against ruling regimes (Hinnebusch, 2005, 156). The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 drew the world's attention when it succeeded in establishing a political project under the banner of Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini's claim on 'neither East nor West' but only a 'true Iran' based on the legitimacy of Islam called for a pan-Islamic project for the Muslim world (Maloney, 2002). As a consequence, the export of the revolution became one of Iran's most prominent foreign policy aims⁸. This has led some authors to argue that the events of 1979 represent the first official commitment by a state to implement political Islam (Fuller and Rahim Francke, 1999).

8. See Ramazani (1990) for a discussion on Iran's foreign policy aim to export the Islamic Revolution.

According to Halliday, the impact of the Islamic upheaval in the Middle East has been substantial as it has shaped political behaviours in the region and has boosted Islamist political consciousness (Halliday, 2000b, 135). However, in line with what has been analysed before, it is worth considering whether such impact should be read mainly through ideological and religious or political lenses. Several policies of Khomeini's government can be considered to have benefited the interests of the state over those of religion, as it is the case for the revocation of *sharia* (Islamic law) agreements in revolutionary Iran when these were considered contrary to the interests of the country or its people (Halliday, 2000b, 139-140). This example shows that even in the most paradigmatic case of a state following the precepts of religion, the influence of religious identity must be evaluated alongside material interests. The same can be done with Iranian foreign policy –as Maloney (2002) or Ehteshami (2002) have studied- or to Hezbollah's transformation and its relations with the Islamic Republic. Raymond Hinnebusch has analysed the role of identity in defining the international relations of the Middle East. His framework includes the distinction between the constructivist and the utilitarian schools of thought, the first putting more emphasis on the role of identities than the second one, which focus on the material interests of Middle Eastern states. Without denying the role that cultural and religious identities play in the Middle East, Hinnebusch understands that the most important is to assess how much identities (or discourses) matter as opposed to material structures (Hinnebusch, 2005, 152). It is worth noting that under his categorisation between constructivists and utilitarians lies a political conception of the role of culture and religion in IR, as previously defined. In contrast to those whom he names "primordialists", Hinnebusch understands the domination of a certain identity to be a product of a 'complex interaction of ideational and "objective" factors' (Hinnebusch, 2005, 152). His conception of ideational factors is thus distinct from the anthropological view of culture and religion in IR, in so far as he opts for a formula that encompasses these kinds of factors together with material and objectivist ones.

Hinnebusch's framework will be used here to discuss the case study of Hezbollah and the role that its religious identity has played in its transformation and foreign relations. Hezbollah's religious identity will also be compared with a resistance identity born out of its struggle against the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon –an identity constructed around material and objectivist purposes. This case study will enable us to conclude that cultural and religious identities cannot be considered as independent and explanatory variables but that they need to be evaluated alongside material factors and national and regional contexts. As Dalacoura has noted, 'Islam does play a role in international relations. (...) But the contribution of Islam to politics is not "independent"' (Dalacoura, 2000, 886-887). Hezbollah's pragmatic adaptation to Lebanon's political system and the predominance of material interests in its foreign relations –especially with Iran- will be considered as arguments supporting this understanding of the influence of cultural and religious identities and discourses in IR.

3. THE CASE STUDY OF HEZBOLLAH

3.1. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF HEZBOLLAH

Olivier Roy has defined Hezbollah as an Islamist movement encompassing three levels. Firstly, it is a community-oriented party representing an important part of the traditionally marginalized Shi'a population in Lebanon. Secondly, it is a Lebanese nationalist party fighting against the Israeli occupation of the country. Finally, it is part of an axis allying Syria and Iran, which renders it a crucial actor in the Middle East (Roy, 2008, 103).

In the communitarian level of analysis, Hezbollah has traditionally been the defender of the Shi'a rights in Lebanon. The Muslim Shi'a are the

largest sectarian community in the country, accounting for the 55% of the population (Alagha, 2006, 26). However, their political, social, and economic status allows them to be portrayed as the 'oppressed, despised, isolated, and marginalized community' in Lebanon (Fuller and Rahim Francke, 1999, 203). Their political representation in Lebanon's institutions was accorded on the basis of the 1932 census, which recognised the Shi'a as the third largest confessional group. The National Pact of 1943 agreed on giving the Shi'a the third post in terms of political representation, which is the speaker of the parliament. Since then, the Shi'a have felt excluded from Lebanon's political institutions and have considered themselves as being 'third-class citizens' vis-à-vis Maronites and Sunni Muslims (Alagha, 2006, 23). Yet their formal recognition in the Lebanese confessional political system empowered the Shi'a demands for social and political equality (Fuller and Rahim Francke, 1999, 210), a tool that has been used by Hezbollah since its origins.

The Shi'a also suffer from major social inequality in comparison with their Lebanese counterparts. They have traditionally lived in Southern Lebanon, although the growing presence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and their violent clashes with Israel in this area forced many Shi'a to move to the suburbs of Beirut. Also, the effects of Lebanon's civil war brought about the concentration of many impoverished Shi'a in the southern suburbs of the capital.

As a consequence of the lack of state investment in infrastructures and social institutions in highly Shi'a populated areas and their economically deprived status (Palmer Harik, 2005, 83), Hezbollah has built an extended network of welfare and social services. These have been delivered mostly to the Shi'a but not exclusively, often 'as a means of underlying and enhancing [Hezbollah's] legitimacy as a bona fide Lebanese political party rather than as a means of challenging Lebanon's pluralist system' (Palmer Harik, 2005, 81). The social work undertaken by this movement includes schools, hospitals, clinics and many basic governmental functions not provided by the state such as garbage collection or potable water delivery in highly-populated suburbs. Moreover, Hezbollah has always been aware that its resistance against Israel has involved 'considerable burden' to the civilian

population, which has forced it to increase its rehabilitation efforts as a means to ensure the support of the populace and avoid major social unrest against Hezbollah's cause (Qassem, 2005, 86; Palmer Harik, 2005, 81)⁹. Hezbollah has shared its role as a protector of the Shi'a with the Amal Movement, a militia group founded by Imam Musa al-Sadr in 1975. Amal was born with the mission of liberating Southern Lebanon from the Israeli troops established there to fight the PLO. Al-Sadr's aim to defend the southerners was combined with the help to the Palestinians against Israeli hostilities. However, once Israel established its Security Zone in southern Lebanon a gap between the Shi'a and the PLO started to develop (Alagha 2006, 30-31). A divided Shi'a elite –empowered by the success of the Iranian Revolution and more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause- led to a schism in Amal with the result of the founding of Hezbollah. Differences between both organizations have occasionally resulted in violent clashes. The most noteworthy were the combats in 1988-89 that aimed at imposing hegemony in the South (Norton, 2007a, 43). As Palmer Harik has studied, Hezbollah's victory led to the virtual elimination of Amal in several Shi'a populated areas, particularly in the suburbs of Beirut (Palmer Harik, 2005, 51). Recent developments in Lebanese politics such as the coalition formed between Amal and Hezbollah for the 2005 parliamentary elections have led to a rapprochement between both organizations (Alagha, 2005, 61). The national level of analysis in Hezbollah is represented by this movement's fight against Israel and its participation in Lebanon's elections since 1992. Israel entered Lebanon for the first time in 1978 to halt the launch of PLO rockets reaching the north of the country, though it was its second invasion in 1982 that triggered the founding of Hezbollah. Israel's occupation proved successful in uprooting the PLO from Lebanon (Alagha, 2006, 32), but as former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak admitted 'when we entered Lebanon (...) there was no Hezbollah. We were accepted with perfumed rice and flowers by the Shia in the south [as a consequence of the end of hostilities

9. For instance, Hezbollah's financial support to those families having lost their home as a consequence of the 2006 war against Israel arose to \$10,000-\$12,000 (Norton, 2007a, 140). This support did not have predominately religious motivations, as it benefited families affected by the war regardless of their religious affiliations.

between the PLO fighters and the Israeli army]. It was our presence there that created Hezbollah' (quoted in Norton, 2007a, 33). The guerrilla tactics and 'low-tech Jihad' launched by Hezbollah (Palmer Harik, 2005, Ch.9) forced the complete withdrawal of Israel from the Security Zone in 2000¹⁰. Before that, several "rules of the game" emerged between Hezbollah and the Israeli army, which involved a *de facto* recognition of Hezbollah's right to defend Lebanon against the occupying force (Norton, 2007a, 83-88). The period ranging from 2000 to the 2006 Lebanon war only accounted for periodic episodes of violence, mostly in relation to the Shebaa farms. As we shall see, Hezbollah's focus on this issue –and its alliance with Syria- is considered a strategic choice to preserve its resistance identity and bolster its credibility, as was the capture of two Israeli soldiers that led to the eruption of the 2006 war¹¹.

Parallel to Hezbollah's resistance activities, this movement has become a mainstream political party. The implications and reasons behind its transformation will be explored in detail in the following section. It must be acknowledged, though, that Hezbollah's decision to participate in Lebanon's political system has not undermined its resistance activities. In fact, the first article in all its parliamentary elections programs since 1992 has referred to the need to preserve Hezbollah's resistance identity (Alagha, 2006, 60).

The regional level of analysis, especially Hezbollah's relations with Iran, will be analysed in the remainder of this chapter. As Saad-Ghorayeb has illustratively pointed out, 'even by Hizbullah's reckoning, it would have taken an additional 50 years for the movement to score the same achievements in the absence of the Iranian backing' (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2001, 14). As for the role of Syria in this regional axis, Norton has studied how Damascus' relations with Hezbollah have traditionally followed the principles of *realpolitik* (Norton, 2007a, 35). This has involved the support of Hezbollah's resistance actions against Israel as a means to advance Damascus' agenda over the Golan Heights (Norton,

10. The Security Zone, once Hezbollah's attacks obliged Israel to reduce its military presence for the first time in 1985, covered some 10% of the Lebanese territory (Norton 2007a, 81).

11. These actions can be considered a miscalculation in so far as Israel's reaction involved the total destruction of some of Hezbollah's strongholds (Norton, 2007a, 136). This might have proven counter-productive for Hezbollah's reputation in Lebanon, but it has also enabled this movement to maintain its resistance identity (Leenders, 2006).

2007a, 82). At the same time, Syria's involvement in Beirut's politics since its withdrawal in 2005 has also affected Lebanon's political spectrum, divided today between the 'Cedar Revolution' -an alliance formed by Sunnis, Druze and Christians that aims to confront Syria and Iran and their Lebanese allies, mainly Hezbollah- and the 'March 8 Group' -borrowing its name from the march organised by Hezbollah and Amal 'to thank Syria for its supposed role in maintaining peace in the country' (Norton 2007a, 153; also see Leenders 2007, 972-973).

3.2. HEZBOLLAH'S RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Hezbollah emerged with the motto the 'Islamic Revolution in Lebanon' printed on its flag. Yet over time its religious identity has been diluted while its goals have been increasingly nationalised. This section will first analyse the salience of the religious identity in Hezbollah's origins, closely linked to the Iranian leadership. Then it will explore the decreasing relevance of this identity once Hezbollah published its foundational document in 1985 and especially since it entered the Lebanese political game in 1992. These processes will be examined with reference to the political context born out of post-civil war Lebanon and the changing priorities of Iranian foreign policy following the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. This section will conclude by examining how the salience of Hezbollah's religious identity has been replaced by an increased political pragmatism. Likewise, the focus on national interests will be considered to have affected both Hezbollah and Iran simultaneously, which has involved a reduced identity dependence of this Islamist movement towards Tehran.

Following the triumph of Khomeini and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran dispatched 1500 Revolutionary Guards to the Biqa' Valley in Lebanon in 1982 at the time of the Israeli invasion in a bid to export its Islamic Revolution (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2001, 14). The 'saliency of Hizbullah's religious ideology' covered the period from 1978 until 1985, the formal year

of the constitution of this Islamist movement through the publication of its Open Letter (Alagha, 2006, Ch.2).

During this period, Iran provided the political, financial and logistical support to create an Islamic movement which would advance the Iranian foreign policy goal of establishing a great Islamic state (Kramer, 1990, 106). In return for Iranian backing, Hezbollah would follow the religious authority of Iran and pay allegiance to the religious and political leader of the ummah, Ayatollah Khomeini (Alagha, 2006, 112). The strategy behind an Islamic Republic in Lebanon, to be imposed through a top-down process, accounted for a larger regional project based on the instauration of multiple Islamic republics in adjacent lands. The influence of a transnational religious identity in the foundational period of Hezbollah is reflected in this movement's commitment to a Pan-Islamic project and not just an Islamic one. Pan-Islamism was well reflected in Hezbollah's foundational document, which stated that its members considered themselves 'the sons of the ummah'. Hezbollah did not constitute an organized and closed party in Lebanon nor was it a tight political cadre and its members were linked to the Muslims of the whole world, whether in Afghanistan, Iraq or the Philippines 'by the solid doctrinal and religious connection of Islam'¹².

Official documents published by Hezbollah during this period avoid thus referring to Lebanon or Iran as sovereign states, as this would involve denying their status as provinces of a greater Islamic entity. National states were considered artificial creations not allowing the only ties that bind, those of Islam, to fully operate in the region (Kramer, 1990, 118). As this author has put it 'if Khomeini's authority as the just jurisconsult knows no limits, then any frontier that artificially impedes the exercise of that authority is illegitimate' (Kramer, 1990, 117).

Since 1985, though, Hezbollah started to give signs of a more moderate stance regarding its politico-religious agenda. Hezbollah's Open Letter did not ask for the imposition by coercion of an Islamic state in Lebanon. It called for the 'implementation of an Islamic order on the basis of direct and free choice as exercised by the populace' (quoted in Alagha, 2006, 228).

12. See, in this respect, Alagha, 2006, Ch. 2

The prominence of Hezbollah's political program rested in its fight against 'the oppressors', represented by 'the imperialists', the United States, and 'the Zionists', Israel (Alagha, 2006, 133). The call for an Islamic system responded to the belief that this was the best way to achieve the main goal of halting external presence and intervention in Lebanon. However, the means to achieve this goal could not rely on the imposition of an Islamic state, as this would be contrary to Hezbollah's commitment to fight oppression. This is why Hezbollah recognised 'the right of self-determination by freely choosing the form or system of government [the Lebanese population] deem fit based on mutual agreement' (Alagha, 2006, 119). Thus, the salience of the religious identity was in practice superseded by the nationalisation of Hezbollah's goals, which involved backing a freely adopted political regime in Lebanon and the end of foreign intervention.

The increasing moderation of Hezbollah's views reached a peak with its decision to participate in Lebanon's elections. This process, called *lebanonisation* by several authors, has led to an increased pragmatism in Hezbollah's political program (Hamzeh, 1993; Ranstorp, 1998) and has involved Hezbollah's transformation 'from a radical militia to a mainstream party' (Palmer Harik, 2005), although with an armed wing.

Hezbollah's decision to participate in Lebanon's political contest did not go without internal criticisms. As Hamzeh has suggested, this decision involved tensions between some leaders arguing for the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon regardless of the post-civil war environment and others advocating for participating in Lebanese politics. The second faction emerged victorious, which resulted in the undermining of extremist factions of the party (Hamzeh, 1993, 323-324). As a result, Hezbollah has never advocated the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon in its political programs, no matter if they have always reflected Hezbollah's Islamic identity (Alagha, 2006, 183).

Hezbollah's transformation cannot be understood without a reference to the context born out of Lebanon's post-civil war period. The Ta'if agreements signed in 1989 ended 15 years of civil conflict and formalized a confessional political system that accorded political privileges to each of the

sectarian communities in Lebanon. Hezbollah, even if critical with political confessionalism since that day (Norton, 1998), has accepted the new rules of the game and has understood that the best way to enhance its power in Lebanon is by participating in its political institutions. As Hamzeh has put it:

“When Hizbullah took its decision to participate, it was clearly admitting not only the realities of the Lebanese system but also that the road to Islamic state could be a model of participation in elections rather than the revolutionary approach. Thus, evolutionary and not revolutionary approach has become the main feature of Hizbullah’s new policy”. (Hamzeh, 1993, 325)

The salience of political pragmatism in Hezbollah described by Hamzeh needs to be qualified with a caveat on this movement’s ideological basis. Hezbollah is, and will continue to be, committed to an Islamic ideology. Even if its religious identity is not likely to disappear, neither it is likely to prevent further adjustments to the political status quo in Lebanon. As shown by its *de facto* acceptance of post-war political system, Hezbollah has engaged in a more pluralist discourse on the role of religion, aware that religious ideological dogma can be counterproductive to gain popular support. In this respect, Hezbollah ‘has been forced by political experience to put less emphasis on moral and religious issues and discourse, and as a matter of political expediency to concentrate on worldly affairs that concern the general public’ (Alagha, 2006, 212). Examples of these concerns include Hezbollah’s role as a resistance movement against Israel, as will be analysed below, and its large network of social and welfare services offered to the Lebanese society.

Together with the Lebanese context of the 1990s, the developments in Iranian politics had a remarkable impact in the increased pragmatism of Hezbollah’s religious identity. As already studied, the prospects for establishing an Islamic order in Lebanon must be considered together with the broader pan-Islamic project upheld by revolutionary Iran. Yet with the Iranian defeat against Iraq in 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the foreign

policy of the Islamic Republic suffered a major turn. As Chehabi has noted, under the Rafsanjani presidency, ‘Iranian foreign policy was to serve Iran’s national interest rather than to export the revolution’ (Chehabi, 2006, 288). The revolutionary Islamist fervour decreased and was replaced by more “earthly” considerations related to Iran’s position in regional power politics. Previously, Iran’s acceptance of UN Resolution 598 that put an end to its war against Iraq was considered by Khomeini as ‘drinking a bitter chalice of poison’ (quoted in Maloney, 2002, 109). This decision involved abandoning the project of establishing an Islamic Republic in Iraq (Chehabi, 2006, 295), which consequently provoked a major setback for the instauration of this form of government in Lebanon.

Hezbollah was thus forced to adapt to this new regional situation. If Iran’s interests had turned inwards and its pan-Islamic project was losing strength as a foreign policy tool, ‘Hizballah’s cause did not seem quite so fantastic’ (Kramer, 1990, 120). As a result, this Islamic movement’s religious identity suffered a double transformation. On one hand, Hezbollah’s identity dependence towards Tehran decreased. No matter if this was due to internal dynamics within Hezbollah or to regional developments, Hezbollah has been increasing its manoeuvre vis-à-vis its ideological mentor since the 1990s. Several authors have argued that even if Hezbollah and Iran will always enjoy a privileged political-strategic alliance, Hezbollah will continue to take its own decisions without the Iranian tutelage (Kramer, 1990; Palmer Harik, 2005; Alagha, 2006; Norton, 2007a). This has been especially relevant regarding the Islamic Republic’s position as a religious authority for Hezbollah. For instance, while in 1992 the decision to participate in Lebanon’s elections for the first time was dependent on the Iranian religious authorities, in 2005 Hezbollah decided not to ask for the approval of these authorities when the movement decided to join the Lebanese government (Alagha, 2006, 192-193). This trend is not likely to change even if Iran’s presidency is not held by reformers such as Rafsanjani or Khatami but by a prominent conservative such as Ahmadinejad (Alagha, 2006, 193).

On the other hand, and more central to the focus of this working paper, the religious identity in Hezbollah has lost relevance since the last decade.

As is also the case for Iran, this has been accompanied by an increased pragmatism in the relationship between domestic politics and the pan-Islamic discourse. While the internal political situation in Lebanon has had a remarkable impact upon Hezbollah's transformation, Iran has seen how previous forces such as transnational religion have confronted the limit imposed by material interests in national politics (Shaffer, 2006, 4-8). The result has been a diminished salience of religious identities in favour of more pragmatic considerations, which has been demonstrated here through the study of the transformation of Hezbollah's national goals and the regional context surrounding these developments.

3.3. HEZBOLLAH'S RESISTANCE IDENTITY

In the early 1990s, when Hezbollah entered the Lebanese political game, the motto on its flag no longer read the 'Islamic Revolution in Lebanon' but the 'Islamic *Resistance* in Lebanon' (Norton, 2007a). Another identity, a resistance identity, seemed to be taking precedence over the pan-Islamic one. In line with the reduced salience of the religious identity analysed in the previous section, this chapter will study the continued *raison d'être* of this Islamic movement: its resistance to the Israeli occupation of Lebanese territories (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2001, 112).

The main argument here will be that Hezbollah's resistance identity has been the backbone of its existence and that since this identity has never contradicted the political considerations of the movement, it has been easily combined with religious rhetoric. In so far as the *leitmotiv* of Hezbollah endured, this movement has not been forced to abandon its resistance identity in favour of more pragmatic considerations. Moreover, it has succeeded in presenting its resistance to the Israeli occupation as a *national* goal and not just an Islamic one. This section will first analyse how Hezbollah's resistance identity has always been considered a national goal even if masked under the banner of an Islamic resistance. As in the last chapter, this identity will be put into the context of post-civil war Lebanon in the national level, and into Iran's foreign policy in the regional one. The formation of a rejectionist front against Israel

will be used here as an example of the regional dimensions of Hezbollah's resistance identity.

As Saad-Ghorayeb reminds us, Hezbollah's resistance identity remains its 'fixed and invariable dossier' (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2001, 112). As such, while Hezbollah's ideology and religious identity has evolved over time, its resistance identity has remained unchanged. Since the second Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon in 1982, Hezbollah has presented its resistance both as a religious obligation and a national duty. Hezbollah's goal, as stated in its Open Letter, was to launch 'a veritable war of resistance against the Occupation forces' (quoted in Alagha, 2006, 226), among whom it identified mainly Israel, but also France and the United States. It called for 'wiping [Israel] out of existence' as a way to 'insist and stress the Islamic character of [Hezbollah's] Resistance, which is concomitant with its nationalist-patriotic nature' (quoted in Alagha, 2006, 231).

The Ta'if Accords of 1989 called for the disarmament of all Lebanese militias, including Hezbollah. However, Hezbollah's alliance with Syria, who retained the political custodianship of the country, allowed this movement to retain its arms in southern Lebanon to continue the national goal of fighting Israel (Saad-Ghoyareb, 2001, 52-53). This situation implied a *de facto* recognition of Hezbollah's role as the guardian of Lebanese sovereignty vis-à-vis the occupying force. Since then, Hezbollah has stressed its resistance identity in order to appeal to a broad constituency of the Lebanese society. The link between the national and religious duty that the fight against Israel represents has fulfilled two goals: it has broadened its support among the Shi'a population in Lebanon and has also gained sympathy among large sectors of the Lebanese voters, irrespective of their religious affiliations or political orientations. This equilibrium has allowed Hezbollah to become a mainstream political party with an armed wing, postponing *sine die* its disarmament.

The Israeli withdrawal of May 2000 posed a great challenge for the maintenance of Hezbollah's resistance identity. After an intense debate on whether to focus only on Lebanon's political scene or to maintain a resistance posture, Hezbollah's leadership decided that the task of liberation remained

incomplete (Norton, 2007b, 479). Its focus on the Shebaa farms (a small area located in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights) served the purpose of maintaining Hezbollah's resistance identity and thus its legitimacy within the Lebanese constituencies. By linking its resistance identity to an area not necessarily linked to Lebanon's territory¹³, Hezbollah has made it clear that its resistance identity is a 'strategic choice' (Alagha, 2006, 214). This choice fulfils two purposes. On one hand, reminding Israel that the Shebaa farms remain an unfinished struggle allows this Islamist movement to still present itself as a nationalist-patriotic movement. On the other, it allows Hezbollah to maintain its leading position within the rejectionist front and consolidate its strategic alliance with Syria and Iran. Analysis of the regional context affecting Hezbollah's resistance identity is thus what will follow here.

Since the 1979 Revolution, the Iranian regime's hostility towards Israel has been consistent. According to Menashri, 'this [has been] one of the rare issues on which the revolutionary ideology and the national interests (...) seem to coincide' (Menashri, 2001, 262). This has allowed Iran to justify its fight against Israel as a religious duty, in so far as material interests and religious dogma have overlapped over time. As argued above, this is also the case with Hezbollah's religious and resistance identities.

With the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Iran's foreign policy started to view Israel as the main enemy in the region after its defeat against Saddam Hussein. In addition, Iran's pan-Islamic foreign policy gave way to more pragmatic considerations. According to Trita Parsi, previous links between Israel and Iran on the basis of their common rivalries with Arab regimes gave way to an open rivalry between both countries, competing this time for a major share of the region's balance of power (Parsi, 2007). Geopolitical considerations during the first half of the 1990s led Iran to become a front-line opponent of the Jewish state, which led both countries 'to portray their fundamentally strategic conflict as an ideological clash' (Parsi 2007, 2). The victory of the coalition led by the US and the UK over Iraq in the Gulf War only increased fears in Israel of a resurgence of the Iranian influence in the region.

13. According to Norton, the Shebaa farms are one of the numerous anomalies along the Lebanese-Syrian border, where the limits are either ambiguous or unsettled (Norton, 2007b, 479).

The formation of a rejectionist axis and its use of the Palestinian conflict is particularly illustrative of how religious identities and discourses have aimed at consolidating geostrategic influence. The Islamic Republic's stance on Palestine –and also Hezbollah's– has usually seen the liberation of Palestine as a religious duty involving the fight against the 'oppressor Zionist entity' (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2001; Alagha, 2006). In this sense, both actors have traditionally opposed the peace processes between Israel and the Arab leaders. Particularly in the 1990s, when the Middle East was involved in the peace processes held in Madrid (1991) and Oslo (1993) Iran promoted diplomatic alliances to unite all movements opposing the Arab-Israeli talks on Palestine. Especially representative is the 'Solidarity Conference with the Muslim Peoples of Palestine' organized in Tehran in 1991 to condemn the Madrid peace process and to provide support for the Palestinian Islamist movements (Roy, 1996, 122; Menashri, 2001, 283-284; Parsi, 2007, 151-156).

These initiatives consolidated the formation of a rejectionist front involving Shi'a Iran and Hezbollah, Sunni Palestinian movements such as Hamas and, to a certain extent, Syria. More than a common religious identity, this axis is characterised by its rejection of the Israeli state as well as its opposition to foreign encroachment in the Middle East, particularly that of the United States. As Khalili has noted, the shared identity of this axis based on a common enemy has enabled the formation of a durable alliance on the basis of solidarity (Khalili, 2007, 279-80). These actors' differing religious identities have not prevented this alliance to endure and feed a 'symbolic capital' based on their common resistance identity (Leenders, 2007)¹⁴.

The "Palestinianisation" of Hezbollah's aims provides a good example of the current role of the rejectionist front in Middle Eastern politics. Often portrayed as a religious duty, this Islamist movement has traditionally used the Palestinian cause as a means to advance its own anti-Israeli

14. What is identified here as the rejectionist front has been studied by several authors as a 'Shi'ite Axis' (see in particular Nasr, 2007 and Roy, 2008). However, the former label is preferred in so far as it does not emphasise an alliance based on shared primordial identities but on a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of the region (see Leenders, 2007, 974). Moreover, the term rejectionist front enables the inclusion of Sunni groups such as the Palestinian Islamist movements and Syria.

agenda (Khalili, 2007, 287). Hezbollah has provided training, intelligence and logistical support to several Palestinian groups such as Hamas or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. This has favoured 'Hizbullah's championing of the Palestinian cause and promotion of an agenda of armed struggle for the Palestinians [which] reproduce and bolster Hizbullah military struggle against Israel' (Khalili, 2007, 296).

The rejectionist front against Israel also stands for the broader regional goal of preventing American encroachment in the region. The 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah is particularly representative of the consolidation of this strategic alliance on the basis of its shared resistance identity. On one hand, the war was portrayed by several authors as a proxy war between Iran and the US (Schiff, 2006; Fuller, 2006-07), upgrading this local conflict into part of what Leenders has called a 'regional conflict formation' in the Middle East (Leenders, 2007). On the other, the war has provided Hezbollah with the opportunity to 'regain his cause' (Leenders, 2006) and present itself as the vanguard of the rejectionist front. Its achievements during the war have reinforced its links with Palestinian groups, who have united their fate to Hezbollah's resistance identity.

This section has demonstrated that Hezbollah's resistance identity should be considered as a cornerstone of the movement since its origins. Hezbollah has presented its resistance against Israel as a national goal, which has allowed this movement to maintain its military capabilities. Moreover, no apparent contradiction between Hezbollah's religious identity and its national goal of resisting foreign occupation has arisen. This has facilitated Hezbollah's preservation of a discourse encompassing both identities, which in turn has allowed the broadening of its popular support. At a regional level, Hezbollah has been a key piece of the rejectionist front against Israel and the United States' involvement in the region. In this case, geostrategic concerns and material interests have been predominant within the alliance. Religious differences between Sunni Palestinian movements and Shi'a Iran and Hezbollah have been overcome by a mutual resistance identity against a common enemy. Both levels of analysis, national and regional, lead us to conclude that Hezbollah's resistance identity must be considered at least as

important as its religious identity, which recalls the need to consider cultural and religious identities together with objectivist factors when assessing their influence in IR.

4. CONCLUSION

The starting point of this working paper was a research question on whether Hezbollah's religious identity should be considered a determinant factor behind its transformation and foreign relations or if, on the contrary, it should be seen as just one element influencing this movement's *raison d'être*. A core assumption was that Hezbollah's identity has multiple dimensions and that religious and resistance identities must be given equal treatment in the study of this movement. Thus a second enquiry emerged to assess the role of religious identity vis-à-vis material considerations that enhance Hezbollah's influence at national and regional levels.

The findings of this paper reveal that the salience of Hezbollah's religious identity has diminished when it has clashed with its national goals. Hezbollah's former refusal of the Lebanese state in favour of a pan-Islamic political system has given way to a pragmatic adaptation to the Lebanese political system and its participation in national and local elections. According to Shaffer, policy dilemmas between material and cultural interests force actors that identify with transnational ideologies such as Islam to take crucial decisions which often prioritise material considerations (Shaffer, 2006). If this is a common feature of transnational movements, the case study presented in this working paper suggests possible comparisons between Hezbollah's evolution and one of the other Islamist movements such as the Palestinian Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Iranian context following the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini also affected the Islamic Republic's foreign policy priorities and, as a consequence, Hezbollah's relationship with Tehran. This period witnessed the nationalisation of both actors' interests, forcing

Hezbollah to give up its former pan-Islamic project. The abandoning of Hezbollah's commitment to impose an Islamic order in Lebanon through a top-down process, and this movement's acceptance of the Lebanese right to freely express their political priorities provide good examples of these processes. Since it entered the political game, Hezbollah has acknowledged that focusing on national concerns is the best way to increase its popular support, which has resulted in a reduced emphasis on moral and religious issues.

While Hezbollah's religious discourse has lost weight over time, its resistance identity has remained unaffected. The Lebanonisation process undertaken by Hezbollah in the 1990s overlapped with this movement's image as the defender of the Lebanese state against the Israeli occupation. No apparent contradiction between Hezbollah's national goal and its religious duty of fighting the oppressor has facilitated the preservation of this Islamic movement's religious rhetoric. Moreover, the formation of a rejectionist front at the regional level has allowed Hezbollah to put its resistance identity at the forefront of its rationale. Its popularity among Palestinian Islamist movements has helped to form an alliance against the common enemy, Israel, superseding religious divisions between Sunni and Shi'a Islam.

Following the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, Hezbollah has made it clear that its struggle has become a strategic choice. At the national level, Hezbollah's pro-Syrian alliance with heterogeneous political groups such as Michel Aoun's Christian party and Amal has enabled Hezbollah to maintain strategic goals in Lebanon superseding religious allegiances. The material interest of fighting Israel has persisted and, at the regional level, so has the rejectionist front. The use of a religious rhetoric in this alliance's fight against Israel has also remained, but this does not invalidate the core claim of this working paper that religious identities must be examined together with material considerations and domestic and regional contexts.

Therefore, Hezbollah's religious identity is not derived from its essential nature nor has determined the movement's transformation and foreign relations. Rather it has been put forward when it has "suited" Hezbollah's interests. Hezbollah's Islamic rhetoric has adapted to domestic and regional

circumstances but the Islamic nature of this movement has not determined its national and international behaviour. Its religious identity must thus be taken into account when studying this Islamist movement, but it must not be considered a determinant factor of its role in Middle Eastern politics.

This analysis leads us to agree with Hinnebusch on the need to bridge the gap between constructivism and utilitarianism or the interaction between identities and material structures (Hinnebusch, 2005, 169-170). The political interpretation of cultural and religious identities studied in the first part of this paper is the only that enables the bridging of this gap, in so far as it does not consider religious identities to be a permanent and essential characteristic of international actors. Hezbollah's abandonment of core elements of its religious identity in the late 1980s and its Lebanonisation process hint at another aspect that is worth further research: the adaptation of core ideological premises of political movements, whether Islamist or not, when they become players of national political systems and the importance of identity factors in processes of co-optation.

The analysis of Hezbollah's transformation from a radical militia to a mainstream political party and its foreign relations has thus provided a good case study for defending a political interpretation of cultural and religious identities in IR. Departing from strong Islamist convictions, this movement's evolution has followed pragmatic and materialist considerations instead of religious dogma. As a consequence, and in so far as Hezbollah's religious identity has not experienced any determinant impact, political conceptions of cultural and religious identities provide the best analytical tool to understand the transformation of Hezbollah's identities and discourses.

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