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RESEARCH

**Challenging the sponsor-proxy model: the
Iran–Hizbullah relationship**

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This article attempts to demystify the Iran–Hizbullah relationship and to challenge the widespread conceptualisation of this partnership as one between a sponsor and proxy. I argue that the proxy model is not only politically irresponsible but also over simplistic in that it reduces a complex, multidimensional relationship that is bound by ideational and normative factors to a materially-driven, transactional relationship. I begin with a brief survey of the historic and cultural ties between Iran and Hizbullah, and then explore their shared ideology, and strategic culture. Using Bertil Dunér’s proxy theory, and his focus on power, I further assess the relationship against Realist criteria, and highlight Hizbullah’s autonomy from Iran, using several interviews with Hizbullah officials and commanders that I have conducted. Not only does Hizbullah’s independence from Iran defy the proxy label, but I go further to argue that the resistance movement has become a regional power in its own right, based on both Realist hard power criteria and constructivist ideational understandings of power. I conclude that given the organic nature of the relationship between them, and the power modalities Hizbullah offers the partnership, the Iran–Hizbullah relationship is better understood as an interdependent symbiosis between close allies.

key words Hizbullah • Iran • proxy • regional power • alliance • ideology • cultural ties

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Introduction

While Hizbullah has evolved from a local actor and national resistance movement to a formidable armed force and regional power in its own right, its longstanding relationship with Iran – now spanning close to 40 years – continues to be framed by academics, journalists and policy makers alike as one between a sponsor, benefactor or patron as it is variously called, and its proxy or surrogate. This common

misconception is informed by the equally flawed assumption that centuries' old Shia religious networks in the Middle East are the recent outgrowths of geopolitical competition between regional powers. According to this view, the 'regional rivalry' between Iran and Saudi Arabia on the one hand, and Iran and the US/Israel on the other, is being played out by means of 'proxies' like Hizbullah and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). Not only is this view ahistorical in that it erases centuries of cultural, social and political ties and interactions between Shia communities, it miscomprehends the complex ways in which religious authority spreads and influence flows across such 'networks'. None of this is to deny the influence wielded by Shia politico-religious networks on geopolitical regional dynamics, chief among them Hizbullah, or to understate the mobilising role it has played in socialising other Shia actors; by all accounts, Hizbullah has risen to the status of a regional 'model' that other non-state actors have been keen to emulate. But it is important to qualify that Hizbullah's regional influence – and Iran's support for the movement – is one of the causes, rather than the effects, of the US-Israeli-Saudi conflict with Iran. While this regional contest has securitised Hizbullah and other trans-state Shia actors, particularly vis-à-vis Israel and Sunni takfiri-jihadi groups sponsored by the US and Saudi Arabia, this securitisation has been an organic response to perceived existential threats against the military, political and societal sectors in Lebanon and Iraq.

Yet regional observers continue to deny agency to these Shia actors, and to portray them, and Hizbullah in particular, as Iran's geopolitical tools. Andrew Mumford (2013: 54), a scholar and leading authority on proxy warfare, classifies Hizbullah as a non-state 'proxy war actor' in his book *Proxy Warfare*. Other scholars like Christopher Phillips and Morten Valbjørn (2018: 424) seem to suggest that Hizbullah is more easily manipulated than 'mainstream' Sunni Jihadi groups in Syria who are 'sponsored by outsiders but certainly not controlled'. Rather than attribute Hizbullah's intervention in Syria to its strategic calculations and perception of existential threat, Phillips and Valbjørn (2018: 423) allege that IRGC Qods Force commander, Qassem Soleimani, 'requested' it 'step up' its involvement there. Other scholars distinguish between the autonomy of the Iran-supported Houthi movement from Hizbullah's 'proxy capacity to advance the geopolitical interests of [its] regional patrons' (Salloukh, 2018), granting local agency to the former and reducing the latter to an appendage of Iran's.

The sponsor-proxy model is problematic in two ways: first, it is a reductive and conceptually inadequate device for examining a partnership as steadfast and multidimensional as the one between Iran and Hizbullah. Rooted in the Realist tradition of international relations, alliance theory and the sponsor-proxy model provide insufficient and over simplistic explanations for relationships that are to an overwhelming extent bound by ideational factors such as identity, norms, values and discourses, reducing them to crude material considerations like military and economic power and interests. While the more recent iterations of proxy theory since Karl Deutsch's (1964) state-centric, Cold War era definition of proxy¹ have accounted for non-state actors, the power dimension of proxy relations remains largely unproblematised, and when it is conceptualised, a conventional Realist understanding of power is assumed. Non-state actors are generally conceived as the subordinate party in these relationships, both because of the asymmetry in power with their stronger allies and because they are on the receiving end of material assistance. As such, the potential role of these actors as securitising agents, who are not merely powerful

and agentic local actors in hybrid or mediated states but who also wield regional influence with asymmetrical power capabilities of their own, is usually overlooked.

The second shortcoming of the proxy model is that it serves far less as a value-free academic term than a politically charged cudgel used to delegitimise and criminalise one's enemies, in much the same way the terrorism label is used. Not only are proxies deemed 'puppets' of their foreign 'paymasters', but they are also depicted as uniquely menacing for their subservience. Like the concept of terrorism, the term is exclusively reserved for one's enemies, and is similarly complicit in US militarisation and belligerence against its designated enemies. US officials and the media establishment make liberal use of the term proxy when referring to Iran's allies like Hizbullah, the PMU, or the Houthis, but refrain from doing so when describing Lebanon's March 14 movement for example, which receives strong political backing from the US and financial support from Saudi Arabia. Moreover, although President Trump has repeatedly taunted Saudi Arabia for being unable 'to last two weeks without us' (Rampton, 2018), the term 'proxy' has still not been used to qualify the US–Saudi relationship, nor has it been applied to Israel which is even more heavily dependent on US military aid.

The pejorative connotations of the proxy label and its performative effects have not been lost on Hizbullah, whose Secretary-General, Seyyid Hassan Nasrallah (2013a), has repeatedly observed how the 'accusations of being a proxy force to an axis here or there, or to a regional country' constitute 'attempts at demonization and defamation'. In fact, the term 'proxy' has become a signifier for 'terrorism', as demonstrated by the interchangeability between the phrases 'sponsorship of terrorism' and 'sponsorship of proxies' – both of which are used to describe Iran's relationship with its regional allies. The more sinister implications of this labelling were felt in May this year when the Trump administration pre-emptively held Iran responsible for any future attacks by its so-called proxies on US interests in the region, effectively conflating Iran's actions with that of its allies (Fattah, 2019). A month later, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blamed Iran and its 'surrogates' for an attack on two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman, again without presenting any evidence to corroborate the accusation (Bacon, 2019). Unfounded accusations like these, and the attempt to hold Iran directly accountable for the actions of allies deemed by the US to be 'proxies', have steeply escalated tensions and threatened to spark a war with Iran that could engulf the entire region.

In this paper, I aim to demystify the longstanding strategic alliance between Iran and Hizbullah and challenge its customary portrayal as a sponsor-proxy relationship through a two-pronged methodology. First, I formulate criteria for interrogating close strategic partnerships like the one between Iran and Hizbullah, focusing on historical and cultural ties, shared ideology and the resultant symbiotic or organic nature of such alliances. Second, I assess the Iran–Hizbullah relationship against Realist criteria of proxy relations. For this purpose, I adopt Bertil Dunér's (1981) proxy theory, which offers the most coherent set of criteria for the proxy concept, and apply his concept of power, which he treats as a necessary and sufficient condition for sponsor-proxy relations. I further explore the related concept of asymmetry in relations between partners, and explore the different ways in which non-state actors and weaker states can contribute different power modalities that their more conventionally powerful partners lack and come to rely on, creating interdependent relationships that defy the sponsor-proxy mould. By adopting a constructivist approach that critically engages

with the central tenets of proxy theory, and which deconstructs its main Realist concepts and proposes other ideational foundations that underpin such enduring alliances, I offer an alternative theoretical model for understanding asymmetrical relationships between state and non-state actors which goes beyond the prevailing proxy orthodoxy.

Historical and cultural ties

In this section, I examine the history of cultural, religious and political ties between Iran and the Shia of Lebanon so as to highlight the organic and symbiotic nature of the relationship between Iran and Hizbullah. By tracing the relationship to religious, cultural exchanges and political interactions that go back centuries, I dispel the narrative which claims that Iran was simply grafting itself onto Lebanon in the early 1980s and implanted a Lebanese proxy in its own image. This section will reveal how Iran was hardly a newcomer to the Lebanese Shia scene, and how its relationship with Hizbullah was the natural outgrowth of these deep-seated historical, cultural, social and familial ties that bound the Shia of Iran to the Shia of Lebanon. More importantly, the movement of people and ideas was not unidirectional but flowed from both sides equally. Like the 'special relationship' between the UK and its much more powerful ally, the US, the special relationship between Iran and Hizbullah is one that has enduring historical, cultural, social and familial bonds, which cut across the public and private spheres and predate political, security, defence and economic ties.

These transnational links can be traced back to the early 16th century when the Safavids imported Shi'ite scholars from Jabal Amil in Lebanon (now dubbed 'the South') in order to convert their empire to Twelver Shi'ism. The historic relationship was therefore set in motion by religious influence spreading from the Lebanese Shia to Iran, rather than the converse. In the centuries that followed, the reverse pattern of influence emerged whereby Lebanese Shi'ites studied under religious Iranian scholars in Qom, Iran. Many of them integrated themselves into Iranian society by marrying into Iranian families and were both tolerated and supported by the Iranian regime and clergy. Others flocked to Najaf, Iraq, which remained the main centre of Shi'ite religious learning. In the early 1960s and 1970s, hundreds of Lebanese Shi'ites studied there under the tutelage of radical ideologues like the Iraqi scholar Mohammad Baqir as-Sadr, long-time friend of Khomeini. Moreover, the students rubbed shoulders with the likes of Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, another close associate of Khomeini's, through whom they were exposed to the latter's ideas.

These clerics, along with others, revisited the politically quietist trend of Shi'ite jurisprudence typified by Ayatollah Abul-Qassim Khoei and his successor Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani who placed primacy on religious and scholarly matters over political ones. As redefined by Khomeini and other jurists, Shi'ism was not merely an ascribed cultural identity but a political one shaped by a historical sense of injustice and rejection of oppression and humiliation, as epitomised by Imam Hussein whose martyrdom served as a revolutionary paradigm for Shi'ite believers. In this understanding, the concept of power was synonymous with resistance to oppression and subordination, and the restitution of justice, freedom, dignity and honour – principles which were deeply internalised by the leadership cadres who today constitute Hizbullah.

In parallel with these developments, several Iranian personages settled in Lebanon and, in so doing, had a lasting influence on the Shi'ite community there. One notable

example is Muhammad Baqr as-Sadr's cousin, Musa as-Sadr, who, though of Lebanese ancestry, was born and raised in Iran. On the request of local community leaders, Sadr took up an invitation to succeed Sayyid Abdulhusayn Sharafeddin as religious leader of South Lebanon's Shi'ites in 1959. In light of the Lebanese government's neglect of the Shi'ite community's socioeconomic, political and security concerns, Sadr pressed for the establishment of institutions to redress these grievances – the Supreme Islamic Shi'ite Council in 1969 and Council of the South in 1970. Sadr also played a critical role in politicising the Lebanese Shi'ites through the vehicle of the Ashura commemorations. These efforts culminated in his creation of the Movement of the Deprived in 1974 and its military adjunct, the AMAL movement in 1975. Given that many Hizbullah officials – such as Hassan Nasrallah, Subhi Tufayli (before he was ejected from the movement), Muhammad Yazbek, Hussein al-Khalil, Abbas al-Mussawi and Ibrahim al-Amin al-Sayid – were AMAL members before breaking off from the movement to form Hizbullah, Sadr's political legacy indirectly contributed to the emergence of Hizbullah.

Aiding Sadr in the creation of AMAL was another prominent Iranian figure, Mustafa Chamran, a leading opponent of the Pahlavi regime who settled in southern Lebanon in 1971. Chamran spent several years teaching classes in Islamic ideology to devout Shi'ites who would later join AMAL (Chehabi, 2006: 184). One of those students was Nasrallah who studied under Chamran back when he was an AMAL official. According to his account, Chamran left an enduring impact on the Hizbullah leader:

We used to have weekly or bi-weekly meetings at the Jabal Amil Art [technical] School. Martyr Chamran was our teacher at the school and used to gather the heads of the Amal movement in the South and speak to them ... I have to say that in political and organizational terms, Chamran was my master and I enjoyed his teaching for two years (Nasrallah, 2008a).

Having said that, the pattern of influence remained reciprocal and relations between the two were far more collaborative than they were dictative. While Chamran also transmitted fighting skills to his Lebanese students (Chehabi, 2006: 194), hundreds of Iranian militants opposed to the Shah received training in the same camps as the Lebanese Shi'ites who were trained by AMAL and Fatah (Chehabi, 2006: 184). The collaborative nature of this relationship was also evinced by the 500 AMAL fighters who volunteered to go and fight alongside the revolutionaries, although the hasty collapse of the Shah's regime obviated the need for their participation in the fighting (Chehabi, 2006: 203). According to Hizbullah Minister Muhammad Fneish,² the close-knit and interdependent relationship between the two was further revealed by the 'tens of thousands' of Lebanese Shi'ites who supported the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and hence staged a mass demonstration before its outbreak (Fneish, cited in Saad-Ghorayeb, 2003: 303). Many of these supporters belonged to the 'Committee Supportive of the Islamic Revolution' – a cultural organisation established in 1979 in the run-up to the revolution in Iran, whose members would later become Hizbullah's organisational 'nucleus' (Fneish, cited in Saad-Ghorayeb, 2003).

Further demonstrating the flow of support from Lebanon's Shia to the Islamic Republic was the number of Lebanese fighters who fought alongside the Islamic Revolutionary Guards in the early years of the Iran–Iraq war. As reported by Mohtashemi, who is widely considered Hizbullah's 'Godfather': 'Part of Hizbullah's

skill goes back to its experience fighting and training ... soldiers from Hizbullah fought amongst our troops [in Iraq] or separately' ([Asharq Al-Awsat, 2006](#)). Of course, Mohtashemi was referring to would-be Hizbullah fighters given that the movement did not exist in the organisational sense at the time. As Sheikh Mohammad Kawtharani, a senior Hizbullah official responsible for the Iraq file, explained in an interview with me:

'Before Hizbullah was officially born, some fighters who belonged to the Da'wa [party] joined the war on Iran [the Iran–Iraq war], on an individual basis. Zulfiqar³ used to train Iraqi opposition groups to fight Saddam during the war on Iran. Da'wa was the backbone of Hizbullah before the falling out between them.'⁴

Considering this historical context of close-knit relations and reciprocal influence between Iran's and Lebanon's Shi'ites, the conventional wisdom surrounding Tehran's role in the creation of Hizbullah requires revisiting. Although Iran played a crucial role in the creation of Hizbullah, the movement is by no means its brainchild, as is often claimed by proponents of its 'proxy' status. Hizbullah's emergence was both a natural and spontaneous reaction to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, codenamed 'Operation Peace for Galilee', which, along with the Islamic Revolution that preceded it, heralded the 'era of resistance' as described by Na'im [Qasim \(2009\)](#), Hizbullah's Deputy Secretary-General. As such, a far more accurate representation of the Iranian role in the resistance movement's formation is that the Islamic Republic served as a source of revolutionary inspiration and support for it, rather than a source of life.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon was therefore Hizbullah's initial *raison d'être* and resistance has since defined the essence of the movement. As proclaimed by Nasrallah (cited in [Saad-Ghorayeb, 2003: 300](#)), 'had the enemy not taken this step [the invasion] I do not know whether something called Hizbullah would have been born, I doubt it'. Both Mohammad Fneish, a Hizbullah minister, and Ali Fayyad (cited in [Saad-Ghorayeb, 2003](#)), a party MP, speculate that a Shi'ite Islamic movement that pursued exclusively social and political objectives, such as the establishment of an Islamic republic in Lebanon, would most likely have been born in its stead.

But although the Israeli invasion was a necessary cause of Hizbullah's emergence as a resistance movement, it was not a sufficient one. Crucial to the survival and development of Hizbullah as an effective guerrilla force and mass political movement, was the assistance the Islamic Republic furnished it with. Without Iran's political, financial and logistical support, the Islamic Resistance's military capabilities would have been largely handicapped and the movement's organisational development decelerated. Furthermore, in the absence of the revolutionary Islamic model provided by Iran, it is unlikely that a distinctly Islamic response to the Israeli occupation would have materialised. While Iran did not give life to Hizbullah, it certainly helped to sustain it.

A shared ideology

Some proxy theories, like [Mumford's \(2013: 34–5\)](#), cite the Soviet Union's motive of exporting Socialism during the Cold War era as an instance of how ideology can serve as a driver of proxy wars. But this undercuts their basic assumptions – a shared ideology changes the nature of the relationship from one characterised by

dependency and subjection, to one bound by solidarity and comradeship. To argue that subordination and ideological allegiance are not mutually exclusive concepts is to belittle the social and political bonds generated by collectively-held norms, and to underestimate the socialising impact of a shared worldview, which obviates the need for political control. [Dunér \(1981: 354–5\)](#) is an exception among proxy theorists; he argues that Cuba was mislabelled a proxy of the Soviet Union's, while attributing its intervention in Angola to 'its long history of affinity with the Third World' and to a convergence of objectives between it and its superpower 'ally', which he considers a more accurate descriptor. Similarly, Hizbullah's resistance to Israeli occupation after its 1982 invasion, its defensive warfare in the July War of 2006, and its intervention in Syria and Iraq post-2012 are also the product of shared strategic and ideological objectives with its Iranian ally.

The religious dimension of this religio-political ideology revolves around Shia Islamic doctrine as well as the theory of the *Wilayat-al-Faqih* advanced by Khomeini, while the political principles underpinning it relate to anti-Zionism, anti-imperialism and resistance to both. As noted above, commitment to the principle of the *Wilayat al-Faqih* and the struggle against Israel galvanised the various Shia Islamic factions to unite under the Hizbullah umbrella, and have since remained the ideological bedrock of the Hizbullah–Iran relationship. Abdallah Safieddine, Hizbullah's official representative to Iran, acknowledges as much when he asserts that the relationship between the two 'stems from the [adherence to] *Wilayat al-Faqih* along with the struggle against the common enemy'.⁵

Although resisting Israel was the main impetus behind Hizbullah's emergence and hence, its *raison d'être*, the *Wilayat al-Faqih* was in Qasim's (2007) words 'the reason for Hizbullah's establishment'.⁶ As detailed in the preceding section, the 'Committee of Nine' dispatched a delegation to obtain the *Wilayat al-Faqih*'s religious legal approval for the establishment of Hizbullah. While the Islamic resistance's agenda coincided with the *Faqih*'s ruling on the obligation to fight Israel, Hizbullah's existence as an organisational entity, as well as its identity as a Shi'ite Islamic movement, derives from its adherence to his guardianship. In fact, Hizbullah was the first organisation in the Shi'ite world outside of Iran, which officially subscribed to the *Wilayat al-Faqih*, before various groups within the PMU followed suit.

Despite accusations by many Lebanese of other sects that Hizbullah's allegiance to the *Wali al-Faqih* renders it subordinate to Iran and detracts from its national identity, the party does not shy away from publicly championing the concept. This public embrace was demonstrated by [Nasrallah's \(2008c\)](#) declaration that: 'They imagine that they insult us when they call us the party of the *Wilayat al-Faqih*. Absolutely not. Today I declare, and this is nothing new, that I am proud of being a member of the *Wilayat al-Faqih* party'. In his post-election speech on 17 June [Nasrallah \(2009\)](#) went even further when he warned that while Hizbullah would accept political 'offences' such as the accusation that the party is an Iranian 'agent', it drew the line on attacks relating to Hizbullah's adherence to the *Wilayat al-Faqih*, since 'such issues for us are a part of our religious belief. Insulting it is an insult to our religious belief.'

But this religious allegiance does not diminish Hizbullah's agency or reduce it to a proxy.

Hizbullah's commitment to the *Faqih* does not represent a political commitment to a national head of state but an intellectual commitment to a sacred Islamic figure and his successors, whose commands are considered 'fixed truths' ([Saad-Ghorayeb,](#)

2002: 66). In his book *Hizbullah: The Story from Within*, Qasim (2005: 57) elaborates on this distinction:

There is no connection between the internal administration of the Iranian state and Hizbullah's administration. These are two separate issues, each having its particularities and bodies of administration despite the commitment of both to the commands and directions of the Jurist-Theologian who is custodian of the entire nation of Islam and whose power of command is not confined to any circle within it.

But as one who leads and 'supervises' (Iranian Constitution 1979, Article 110; WIPO, 1989) Iran's religious, political and military institutions, Hizbullah's direct relationship with the Faqih effectively means it has a relationship to all these state institutions as well. Accordingly, the party's allegiance is owed primarily to the Faqih and only secondarily to Iran, the state, leaving it with a wide margin for independent decision-making. Since the political *power* he wields is confined to Iran's national borders, he is only able to exercise political *authority* over the Shi'ite believers who are subject to other political powers. His authority is therefore restricted to strategic issues like jihad, political rule and the classification of 'friends and enemies' (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002: 67). What is more, in the first two cases, the Faqih he does not initiate rulings on such issues peculiar to individual states but awaits a request for his legal opinion before formulating religious edicts (*fatwas*) on them. It is only on matters which concern the entire *umma* that the Faqih issues directives and even then, he merely draws up general policy outlines. Although the Shia believer is only obliged to comply with the Faqih's political authority, the majority of Hizbullah's adherents also subject themselves to his religious authority as well.

With regard to Hizbullah's establishment, the Faqih at the time merely deemed it a 'duty' to fight Israel, without specifying how: 'He said 'it's a duty to fight Israel'. That is all. He didn't tell us to arm, to stage operations etc. ... He doesn't issue *fatwas* on details' (Qasim, 2007).⁷ However, the Faqih's rulings were still sought on some details such as whether 'martyrdom attacks' were deemed legitimate from a religious stand-point. Moreover, when the party was faced with an internal debate over the problematic issue of political participation in the parliamentary elections of 1992, Khamenei's arbitration was sought to resolve the matter.

The Faqih's political authority is not only legitimised on religious grounds, but on political grounds as well. Central to this legitimisation is the 'Khatt al Imam' (the path of the Imam), which represents Khomeini's (2005: 16) unique interpretation of Islam conceived as 'the religion of militant individuals who are committed to truth and justice. It is the religion of those who desire freedom and independence. It is the school of those who struggle against imperialism.' It is this revolutionary interpretation of Islam which resonated among the Shia in Lebanon who found in it a valuable vehicle for political mobilisation against the Israeli project in Lebanon and Palestine (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2003). As expounded by Safieddine: 'the culture Iran is exporting is the culture of confronting the US in the region'.⁸

Exporting resistance provides the explanatory model that accounts for how other actors who neither belong to the Twelver Shia school nor subscribe to the Wilayat-al-Faqih, such as Syria, Yemen's Houthis and Palestinian resistance groups, also align themselves with the 'Resistance Axis' which Iran spearheads. These

divergent secular and religious, Shia and Sunni actors converge around an anti-Zionist, anti-imperialist identity, which seeks to resist US, Israeli and Saudi Arabian machinations in the region, while reclaiming sovereignty over their lands and expelling foreign occupation. That Iran is the lynchpin of this axis is not only due to its regional power status, but also to its identity as a specific *kind* of regional power, which derives its sense of ontological security from this political identity.

In fact, to the extent that the revolution was driven in part by a struggle for freedom, the very existence of the Islamic Republic was somewhat reactive and its identity defensive. The revolution was therefore at one and the same time a revolt against the monarchy and a war of liberation against US imperialism and Israeli penetration, as embodied by its key catchphrase: ‘Independence, freedom, Islamic Republic’ (Esteqlāl, āzādī, jomhūrī-ye eslāmī).

In light of this historical background and its political identity, Hizbullah and its supporters do not view the Islamic Republic as a state whose purpose is confined to its national boundaries; Iran is seen less in terms of a nation state than an ongoing revolutionary process headquartered in Tehran, a bulwark against American and Israeli designs on the region. By the same token, Khamenei is not only the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but is also the Leader of the Islamic Revolution at large. Hizbullah’s relationship with Iran is therefore governed by ideational and ideological norms and identities that operate on an entirely different level of analysis than that of a controlling benefactor and its compliant surrogate.

Material assistance renders ideology meaningless in proxy theory; states supposedly purchase the political loyalty and subservience of their junior allies, even those with whom they share an ideology and strategic interests. [Dunér \(1981: 358\)](#) similarly observes how in the dominant proxy model, material support trumps all other considerations in determining the ‘proxy situation’ and the supposed ‘volitional subordination’ of the intervener – a condition which he deems a ‘very shallow notion.’ While Hizbullah has made no secret of Iran’s ongoing material support, [Nasrallah \(2018\)](#) is keen to highlight the distinction between those ‘stances are for sale’ and ideological comrades whose political stands cannot be bought:

They believe in no such thing as ideology ... Their mistake lies in that they look at this resistance as a mercenary of Iran’s. Because Iran offers money to these people [Hizbullah].. then these people are mercenaries ... [The Americans] should know, these resistance fighters, along with their supporters, families, community and everyone with them, [these people] are ideological, they are humanitarian, they are nationalist, they have a cause ... they defend a cause and they are ready to sacrifice their souls and most dear ones to this cause ...

Nasrallah’s line of reasoning is echoed by an IRGC commander interviewed by *Foreign Policy*: ‘What Americans don’t understand is that the groups that we support in the region are not our mercenaries. The Americans think everything is about money. They think we buy loyalty in the region, because that’s how they buy loyalty’ ([Bajoghli, 2019](#)).

Another variable that is entirely displaced by material assistance, and its supposedly inherent power dynamic, is strategic interest. Although proxy theories allow for a compatibility of interest between the sponsor and the intervener, the concept of

interest is treated as a convergence of short or medium term objectives, rather than ‘long lasting strategic preferences’, otherwise known as ‘strategic culture’ (Johnston, 1995: 46). In this connection, Iran and Hizbullah do not merely share common interests but more importantly, common strategic cultures, and could even be considered as one strategic community. As first coined by Jack Snyder (1977: 8) in reference to the former Soviet Union, strategic culture is ‘the sum of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behaviour that members of a national strategic community share.’ For Snyder (1977: 8), these ‘general beliefs, attitudes, and behavior patterns achieved the status of semipermanence’ that put them ‘on the level of cultural rather than mere policy.’

Although Iran is a major regional power, Hizbullah shares its ideational and attitudinal disposition and has similar habitual responses vis-à-vis its enemies. It does not just share the same enemies as Iran, but more significantly, its assumptions about ‘the nature of the adversary and the threat it poses’ – be it the US, Israel or Takfiri-Jihadis – and ‘about the efficacy of the use of force’ (Johnston, 1995: 46). These shared ideas, preferences and strategic understandings emanate from a shared ideology; as constructivists argue, norms shape identities, which in turn, define interests, and presumably also, strategic preferences. Sheikh Naim Qasim (2007), Hizbullah’s deputy Secretary-General articulates this connection between shared ideology and political identity, and strategic culture: ‘so long as our path is the same as Iran’s, whatever it succeeds in so do we.’⁹

These assumptions about the use of force also constitute the basis of Iran’s and Hizbullah’s national security doctrine which treats Takfiri-Jihadis and Israel as existential threats. Even without these ideological underpinnings, these threats would still be prioritised and the social, political and military spheres would still be securitised on this basis. Discounting shared national security concerns as an equalising force in strategic relationships further detracts from the conceptual sophistication of proxy theory. Particularly problematic is the proxy model’s assertion that the more powerful ally in an asymmetric alliance is motivated solely by a desire to expand its influence, without necessarily deriving any security benefits. Realist alliance theories like James Morrow’s (1991) autonomy-security trade-off model, hold a similar premise to proxy theory: in asymmetric alliances, the major power protects the security of the minor power in exchange for autonomy, defined as influence over the minor power’s foreign and internal policies. Both these models presuppose the national security of the more powerful ally, whose security interests are taken for granted when it pursues influence or control over its less secure, weaker ally, which is presumed to have no autonomy or influence of its own. But as demonstrated by the securitisation of Iran’s social, political and military spheres from Israeli and American threats on the one hand, and Takfiri-Jihadis on the other, it is clear that Iran’s security interests are identical with Hizbullah’s. Moreover, Iran’s direct intervention in Syria, and the loss of 561 IRGC forces by 2018 (Alfoneh, 2018), militates against the depiction of Hizbullah’s role in Syria as a proxy intervention.

Power

Power defined as compulsion

At the crux of proxy theory, is the premise that what essentially makes a proxy a subordinate client or surrogate for the benefactor, is the power differential between

the two which is driven by the asymmetry in resources, and the sponsor's provision of material assistance on account of this asymmetry. The relationship is viewed in purely transactional terms whereby financial and military support is the quid pro quo for proxy intervention. The proxy is obligated to intervene on account of this aid, which functions as a form of hard power for the sponsor who is able to compel obedience in the proxy. Although Dunér's proxy model examines material support and compatibility of interest as variables, he neither views them as necessary nor sufficient conditions for the proxy status. For him, the 'exercise of power' is the paramount determinant of a proxy relationship: 'whether a state has acted or not as a proxy can best be regarded as a question of whether it was subjected to the exercise of power by some other state; whether it has been pressured into intervening' (Dunér, 1981: 357). According to his schema, receiving material support may or may not be conducive to a proxy relationship, depending on whether or not there is 'pressure to intervene'. As such, an actor who receives material support but is not pressured to intervene is not classified as a proxy but as a 'partner', while one who does not receive support but is pressured to intervene is deemed a proxy on the basis of power (defined as compulsion) alone (Dunér, 1981: 358).

On the basis of Dunér's taxonomy, it would appear that despite the provision of material support, the absence of an 'exercise of power' on the part of Iran, vis-à-vis Hizbullah, renders the latter a partner and not a proxy. Nasrallah (2016b) distinguishes commonality of 'effort' from 'pressure':

There are those who understand any effort as being pressure, they understand the effort as being dependence. When we say 'allies', 'two allies', it means two, not one side ... Alliance does not mean subservience. Alliance does not mean that when one ally takes a decision all other allies should follow suit, in that case that would be subservience.

Khalil Youssef Harb (2017), a high-ranking Hizbullah commander who has been active across the region, makes a similar argument when he details how the Iran–Hizbullah relationship, as well as Iran's relationship with other allies, plays out on the battlefield: 'The relationship isn't one whereby someone gives an order and the other has to execute it. When there is real debate and participation, everyone feels responsible for its [the operation's] success and nobody holds anyone else responsible.'¹⁰

Hizbullah's autonomy is substantiated by outside observers who are hardly sympathetic to the organisation, like Abbas Samii (2008: 33) who contends that: 'it is not accurate to describe Hizbullah as an Iranian or Syrian proxy. Indeed, it would be more useful to consider Hizbullah as an autonomous actor in the Lebanese context.' Brian Katz (2018), a former DOD and intelligence official, and currently, Center for the Strategic and International Studies fellow, concurs arguing that Iran's Resistance Axis non-state allies 'are no longer simply Iranian proxies. Rather, they have become a collection of ideologically aligned, militarily interdependent, mature political military actors committed to mutual defense'. In fact, even Mumford (2013: 56) who identifies Hizbullah as a proxy war actor, concedes that the movement later 'shrugged off its non-state proxy label' asserting its independence from Syria and Iran, adding that: 'despite long-standing Iranian assistance, Hizbullah over the last decade has fiercely protected its political and paramilitary autonomy from Tehran and has assiduously prevented a picture of subservience from being painted.' This view

is echoed by an Iraqi commander in Syria, interviewed by Reuters, who admitted that Hizbullah enjoyed much more autonomy than other foreign Shia fighters in Syria: 'The Iranians manage all the factions but Hezbollah is independent' (Perry et al, 2016).

Hizbullah's independence can be further ascertained by the fact that it was the movement that convinced Iran of the need to intervene in Syria, rather than the other way around. This is not just Hizbullah's account of the context of the intervention, but also Iran's account; former IRGC commander and member of parliament, Esmail Kowsari, recounted to Fars News Agency how Nasrallah had approached Khamenei in November 2013, warning him that Assad might lose power. Quoting Nasrallah, Kowsari claimed that Khamenei agreed, responding: 'We must just do our duty. If we do our duty, Assad and Syria will be stable' (Hashem, 2017). IRGC general, Hossein Hamedani, who was killed in Syria in 2015, corroborated this account in his memoirs. Hamedani who was responsible for leading Iran's forces into Syria, wrote how Nasrallah was 'in charge of all the policies of the resistance axis in Syria,' and that on that basis, Khamenei instructed him to consult with the Hizbullah leader on Syria (Hashem, 2017). Hizbullah commanders go further than this, claiming that 'the battles in Syria which end up taking place are mainly those which Hizbullah commanders have recommended'.¹¹ One such example is Aleppo which neither Syria nor Russia prioritised, but which Hizbullah 'insisted on', according to Harb (2017).¹²

Mainstream Israeli media accounts of Hizbullah's growing autonomy and influence in Syria go even further this, not only claiming that 'the Syrian army [is] now dependent on assistance from Hezbollah and Iran in order to survive', but that Hizbullah is 'now one of the chief powers setting the tone in the country after years of civil war, Syrian army forces are now in some cases taking their orders from the organization' (Issacharoff, 2019). Such claims would have been unthinkable before the Syrian war, when Hizbullah was still widely labelled as a Syrian proxy. Indeed, while Hizbullah was once compelled to respect the '*Saqf al Suri*' (Syrian ceiling) in order to protect its resistance activity, before the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, it would be no exaggeration to say that it is Syria who is now dependent on Hizbullah, as well as Iran and Russia, for its survival and for the preservation of its territorial integrity. Bashar al-Assad's tributes to Hizbullah confirm this dependence, and betoken the interdependent nature of their relationship. In a 2014 speech, Assad (2014) declared he would

not forget the loyal sons of the Lebanese resistance, the brave ones who stood side by side with the heroes of our army, ... and offered martyrs in defense of the Resistance Axis. I salute them, and the families of each of their martyrs who reciprocated our loyalty with loyalty, and considered the duty of standing with Syria like the duty of defending South Lebanon.

Hizbullah as regional power

Hizbullah's expanding regional role and advanced military capabilities make it an invaluable strategic ally for Iran and has created a sense of mutual dependency whereby Iran has increasingly come to depend on Hizbullah's regional clout and power; interdependence rather than subordination and control, defines the essence of this relationship. While mainstream media reports remain reluctant to shed the 'proxy' label, they too describe Hizbullah as 'not just a power unto itself, but one of the most important instruments in the drive for regional supremacy by its sponsor:

Iran' (Hubbard, 2017), unwittingly admitting that its indispensability to Iran and stand-alone power preclude its designation as either a proxy or an 'instrument'.

Other analyses make a greater conceptual leap, labelling Hizbullah a regional power in its own right. A Century Foundation commentary argues that Hizbullah has 'made it clear that it is de facto a peer, rather than a player in a less significant category simply by dint of being defined as a non-state actor' (Cambanis, 2017). Others who share this view include scholars like Adham Saouli (2019: 201) who notes how Hizbullah's 'socialization in the region' as he calls it, has 'transformed it in the eyes of supporters into a de facto "regional force"'. Although Phillips (2018) classifies it as a proxy in his other works, he also concedes that the resistance movement is 'a far more powerful, well-trained regional power than it was before the war'.

Indeed, Hizbullah's rising status in the Resistance Axis by dint of its military intervention in Syria and Iraq, has fundamentally recast its classic resistance role and placed it on a par with its long-time mentor: Iran's special operations, Qods Force. Starting in 2013, Hizbullah's military role in Syria witnessed a dramatic shift from a small advisory mission to a direct combat role involving a large number of fighters, at times taking the lead in ground offensives, while in other cases, deploying special operations forces to assist, train, advise and organise Syrian regular forces and paramilitary groups, including foreign ones. What is more, the movement has created a branch of Hizbullah in Syria manned exclusively by Syrian troops, which is under its direct command and payroll.

Extraterritorial operations like these have usually been the exclusive preserve of major powers, rather than non-state actors who have customarily been the recipients of such assistance. As defined by the US Army Special Operations Command (2014), unconventional warfare usually 'involves external parties aiding indigenous actors against governments. Such aid can involve training, organizing, recruiting, operational advising ...'. In other words, special operations forces affiliated with conventional, state armies have normally been deployed to assist unconventional forces rather than the other way around.

Hizbullah's ability to take on such a transnational, conventional military role, coupled with the expansion of its domestic military activities to include conventional roles such as homeland security and counter-insurgency has transformed Hizbullah's irregular Resistance forces into a hybridised Resistance army, rendering it a post-resistance movement. As a post-resistance movement, Hizbullah has gone beyond its original mission of expelling occupation forces and deterring Israeli aggression, and now seeks to preserve the political-territorial framework and strategic environment that it requires for its continued operational integrity – a strategy that presupposes capabilities that most non-state actors and small states, like Lebanon, lack.

Indeed, Hizbullah has started to identify itself as a 'regional power' which has surpassed its erstwhile status as a local and subnational regional player. At times, this self-definition has been restrained and qualified, while in other instances it has been bold and unapologetic. For example, in one speech, Nasrallah (2015c) equivocated on the issue, saying: 'I always avoid saying "regional power", I say "a local force with a regional role"'. In other instances, he has depreciated this power to regional influence, claiming

[Hizbullah] is a Lebanese party with influence over the regional situations and regional events. Now if somebody else wants to describe us with more

than that, that is their business. We are modest ... But as a result of the region's composition and events, and due to our alliances, our relationships, our friendships and our capability in being present in some areas, arenas or fields, we can say we now have a kind of regional influence. (Nasrallah, 2015a)

However, in another 2015 speech Nasrallah (2015b) declared:

Let us even go to any place where we find this danger that threatens our nation and region, because this is how we defend Lebanon and the Lebanese people, and this is how the great powers, respected states and strong armies in the world behave.

Moreover, in 2016 Nasrallah (2016c) observed how 'the whole world now admits it [Hizbullah] has transformed from a local power into a regional power', without qualifying this classification.

Hizbullah's deployment of both 'hard' military power and 'soft' normative power throughout the region represents a new paradigm in international relations; it is a non-state actor which performs some of the central functions of the state, effectively making it a state within a non-state in the Lebanese context, while also fulfilling some of the strategic imperatives of a regional power. This research does not make the claim that Hizbullah is a regional power in the same way Iran or any other powerful state actor is. However, as a powerful actor on the domestic level, which straddles the line between state and non-state actor, and an influential quasi-state actor on the regional level, Hizbullah would be more appropriately termed a 'regional subpower'.

Doubtless, Realists would challenge such a classification, on account of their material criteria for regional power projection which includes a limited range of 'hard power' indicators like military and economic capabilities and demography. Moreover, the Realist definition privileges advanced military capabilities which tend to be associated with military expenditure and technology, and size of armed forces (Nolte, 2010), over other material criteria like military prowess, and strategic outcomes such as an outright military victory or depriving a more powerful enemy of a victory, effectiveness of deterrence capability and psychological warfare. A more flexible interpretation of military, hard power would render Hizbullah's indisputable, given its advanced military capabilities, tens of thousands of battle-hardened fighters, military prowess, and successes against both Israel and jihadi groups in Syria and Lebanon. Using a combination of French and Raven's categories of 'coercive power' and 'expert power' (French and Raven, 1959), Hizbullah earned its status as a powerful regional force to be reckoned with. As conceded by Katz (2019), 'Hezbollah's 20,000 to 30,000 active-duty fighters arguably form the most battle hardened and effective Arab army today'. This coercive power is not only attributable to Iran's military assistance, for this factor alone would not have enabled it to outperform its far more technologically sophisticated enemy which is itself equipped by the US. Significant as they were, its advanced weapons provide only a partial explanation for the movement's military achievements. Hizbullah's strategic value to the Islamic Republic derives from expert power or prowess in using these weapons, and its ingenuity in integrating them into the unique hybrid model of combat that fuses conventional with unconventional weapons and capabilities – its 'new school of warfare', pioneered by the late Imad Mughnieh, the Resistance's most senior military commander.

Even by Israel's own account, the biggest casualty of the July War was Israel's deterrence capability. The Winograd report's acknowledgement that the war was a 'large and serious failure' for Israel, and that a 'semi-military organization of a few thousand men resisted, for a few weeks, the strongest army in the Middle East' (Independent, 2008), was tantamount to an admission that Hizbullah had shattered the myth of Israel's military invincibility. It is in this context that sensationalist Israeli media headlines like 'Israel's next war: We ain't seen nothing yet' (Rosenberg, 2017) must be read, and that the Israeli military's regularly scheduled, massive military drills, conducted both alone and with its US and EU partners, must be viewed.

In addition to its defensive capabilities in Lebanon, Hizbullah has honed its offensive capabilities and improved its fighting skills across a range of military terrains during the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Hizbullah has now been thrust into a regional role, which, while proving costly in human and material terms, has increased its influence exponentially and given added credence to its threats. Its interoperability with other actors in the Resistance Axis and the interlinking of all battle-hood arenas, has transformed its Resistance Army into the backbone of a much larger armed body which is ready and willing to deploy 'hundreds of thousands of resistance fighters from all around the Arab and Islamic world' to Hizbullah's defence in case of an Israeli attack, to borrow Nasrallah's (2017a) words. Likewise, Hizbullah fighters will also be ready to deploy anywhere in the region: 'We will be wherever we need to be', as Nasrallah (2013b) famously threatened.¹³ This warning not only applies to Israeli and Takfiri-Jihadi attacks on Syria and Iraq, but also to a US attack on Iran, as evidenced by Nasrallah's (2019b) threats to respond in such an event: 'If America launches war on Iran, it will not be alone in the confrontation, because the fate of our region is tied to the Islamic Republic', and more recently, that 'the entire region will be set on fire and all American interests in the region will be eradicated' (Nasrallah, 2019a).

But hard power, defined as coercive and expert power, is only one component of Hizbullah's newfound regional power status. In defining power narrowly as 'the ability of states to use material resources to get others to do what they otherwise would not' (Barnett and Duvall, 2005), Realists neglect important ideational indicators of power which constructivist scholars on regional power highlight. Mario E. Carranza (2016) describes this narrow focus on material, and especially military power, as a 'conceptual jail'; he asserts that globalisation has 'devalued' this understanding of power and substituted it with one that exalts 'soft power' as the main determinant of major power status. As such, in order to properly situate Hizbullah's position in the regional order and appreciate its elevated standing among its peers in the Resistance Axis, it is necessary to include these alternative, ideational and norm-generating criteria of power.

While not a theorist on regional power, Berenice Carroll's (1972: 588) conceptualisation of power per se, as 'the ability to act', is a compelling and much needed corrective to the prevailing power orthodoxy. Carroll compares the definition of power in the 1933 edition of the Webster's International Dictionary with that in the Third Edition, and finds that in contrast to the prevailing usage of power as command, control and domination, power once primarily meant ability, competence, control over one's security and life, autonomy, independence, self-sufficiency and determination; moreover, power is exerted over oneself rather than others. She further provides evidence to illustrate how deeply ingrained this older definition is, by pointing to the everyday usage of the term 'powerlessness' which denotes

'impotence' and 'engender[s] apathy by calling up images of helplessness, inability, weakness, inadequacy' (Carroll, 1972: 607).

Nasrallah would likely endorse Carroll's definition as he has adopted a similar one, attributing Iran's 'number one regional power status' to its independence. Moreover, in invoking Iran's 'perseverance' in facing the 'entire world [which] besieged it,' Nasrallah (2019a) draws a causal link between the concepts of independence, autonomy and self-sufficiency and 'real power'. He contrasts this with Saudi Arabia, which he contends, is mislabelled as the main power in the region, despite its near total dependence on the US. Nasrallah (2008b) similarly views Israel as a US proxy by dint of the UK's role in its founding and its 'mission' to serve US interests in the region. By contrast, Hizbullah sees its own power as stemming from its ability to subvert US and Israeli attempts to dominate the region's 'sovereignty, freedom, dignity and civilization' (Nasrallah, 2015b); in other words, power conceived as ability, competence, control over one's security and life, independence, and self determination.

While self-conception does not figure into Realist understandings of power, for constructivists it is one yardstick by which to measure regional power. Detlef Nolte (2010: 892) considers self-conception or a 'self-created identity' as a more significant determinant of regional power than objective hard power criteria like GDP or military power. This does not mean that constructivists omit material resources and capabilities from their classification, only that they view them as no more than a required baseline from which shared understandings about their roles as 'leaders responsible for regional security' emerge (Flemes, 2007: 18; Nolte, 2010: 892; Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010: 748; Guzzini, 2013: 5). Regional power is thus a socially constructed category that is co-constituted by self-recognition as such and the recognition bestowed by one's regional neighbours, as well as others outside the region (Flemes, 2007: 18).

Region-wide acceptance of a self-styled regional power is a recognition of that power's leadership. According to Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll's (2010) regional power model, leadership is one of the three roles performed by regional powers. In their definition, leadership entails 'actively seek[ing] to move other regional members in specific security policy directions' (Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, 2012: 69), by securitising a problem or actor as a security threat (Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, 2012: 75). The ability to frame issues as security concerns is what distinguishes leadership from coercive power; rather than resorting to the use of force or the use of material power alone, leadership appeals to shared interests (Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, 2012: 73). As observed by James MacGregor Burns (1978, cited in Park, 2014: 73): 'all leaders are actual or potential power holders, but not all power holders are leaders'. Regional power therefore presupposes legitimacy of authority, variously called 'legitimizing power', by Carroll (1972: 611) and 'legitimate power' by French and Raven (1959: 265), which grants the actor the right to prescribe behaviour for others.

Hizbullah fulfils the criteria of regional leadership – at least among its non-state peers – insofar as it was anointed by Iran as the leader of the Resistance Axis in Syria. It earned its leadership position in three ways: by successfully securitising Takfiri-Jihadis in Syria as an existential threat; by persuading Iran to intervene; and by mobilising and training other forces like the PMU for the same end. In a very telling speech, Nasrallah (2017b) openly assumed the mantle of Resistance Axis spokesperson, declaring 'Today I want to talk not in the name of Hizbullah alone, but on behalf of the entire resistance axis; I know their points of view and stances, and I am in

contact with all of them.' Nasrallah's speech went further than this by enjoining all Hizbullah's allies, HAMAS included, to close ranks with one another: 'I call today on the reunification of all resisters, to reunite ranks ... I call upon all resistance factions in the region, and all those who believe in resistance, to communicate and intersect to set the larger stance.' This ability to prescribe behaviour for its allies reveals Hizbullah's legitimising power, and highlights the 'blind trust' its allies have in it, as Harb (2017) explains: 'We have authority or influence. The use of [coercive] power cancels out influence, you can't be influential if you use power.'¹⁴

Closely interwoven with legitimising power, is 'socializing power' which Carroll (1972: 611) defines as 'the power of shaping habits and attitudes'. This concept closely parallels French and Raven's (1959: 266) notion of 'referent power' which denotes an actor's 'identification with' an 'attractive group' and desire to mimic or join it. In fact, the now widely used neologism 'Hezbollahization', usually used in reference to the PMU and Yemen's Houthis (Ricks, 2016; Lenarz, 2019), captures the essence of Hizbullah's referent power as a model that is being replicated in Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Yemen. As a 'socializing power,' Hizbullah has played a crucial role as a primary agent in the region's political socialisation and mobilisation, socialising its allies in its 'war making' ethos of 'armed resistance and constant mobilization and preparation for war', as Saouli (2019: 96) describes it. As professed by a PMU fighter: 'You can say that we [Iraqi militias] look like Hezbollah now – but we are Iraqi' (Peterson, 2017). Khamenei's representative in the Qods Force, Ali Shirazi, similarly depicts Hizbullah as a regional model: 'Ansar Allah are a copy of Lebanese Hizbullah. The popular Basij [i.e. Popular Forces] in Iraq and Syria are also copies of Hizbullah and Ansar Allah' (Mansharof and Kharrazi, 2015).

Hizbullah's expert power has undoubtedly played a pivotal role in transforming it into a regional model. Frazier and Stewart-ingersoll (2012: 101) regard the provision of expertise as one aspect of their second measure of regional power – regional custodianship. Another dimension of this polymorphous criterion is the regional power's ability to identify and prioritise securitised threats which could destabilise the regional order (Frazier and Stewart-ingersoll, 2012: 98), which Hizbullah has clearly taken the lead in doing, particularly in Syria and Lebanon. Other aspects of custodianship which Hizbullah has performed include 'building coalitions and mobilising institutional resources and mechanisms to address such security threats; direct deterrence of the threat; direct intervention into situations and active attempts to manage security threats' (Frazier and Stewart-ingersoll, 2012: 120) While these roles have been detailed in the sections above, it is worth noting how Hizbullah's allies assess its role of regional custodian. Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis (2017), Deputy Commander of the PMU, acknowledged the effectiveness of this role when he acknowledged that:

Were it not for the support extended to the PMU by Iran and Hizbullah, it would never have attained its current achievements against ISIS ... We welcome the victories attained in Iraq and thank the Imam, [Iran's Supreme] Leader Ali Khamenei, and Hizbullah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah for the help they have given us in the campaign against ISIS.

Assad (2017) goes even further, not only paying tribute to Hizbullah's fighters for defending Syria, but elevating the movement to the same rank as major powers like Russia and regional powers like Iran:

As the Syrian Arab people along with the armed forces write down a new history for Syria and the region today, chapters will be written about Iran and Imam Khamenei, about Russia and President Putin, and about Hizbullah and Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah.

Regional protection is the third criterion for regional power in Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll's model. Unlike leadership and custodianship, protection here refers to defending the region from extra-regional threats (Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, 2012: 11), and preventing external powers from interfering in regional affairs, which may be driven by a 'wish to prevent a return to colonial realities of Western control over a non-Western region' (Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, 2012: 125). While outside observers regard Israel as a natural and intrinsic part of the Middle East, Hizbullah views it as 'a colonial military base, a frontal military barracks for old imperialism and new hegemony, represented today by the United States' (Nasrallah, 2016a). As such, it defines its regional protection role as defending Lebanon and Palestine from an externally generated threat. Furthermore, given Nasrallah's recent threats to respond to a US attack on Iran, Hizbullah also seems ready and willing to protect its closest regional ally by targeting US interests in the region.

Conclusion

Despite Hizbullah's transformation from a regional player into a regional power in its own right, it continues to be mislabelled as a proxy of Iran's, even when the very same observers of this relationship recognise Hizbullah's regional standing and power. While the politically charged policy and media milieu is partly responsible for this reductive understanding of the Iran-Hizbullah relationship, it also lies in a wider trend among proxy theorists and international relations practitioners more generally to reduce all contemporary religious networks to geopolitical tools of Iran's and Saudi Arabia's, viewing them as the by-products of this regional competition rather than as one of its causes. It is highly unlikely that Iran, or Syria for that matter, would be viewed as an enemy of the US, Israel or Saudi Arabia, had it remained neutral on Palestine, and refrained from supporting resistance movements in Lebanon and Palestine. Although Hizbullah and other Shia actors did securitise further as a result of regional conflicts which prominently featured Iran, this had more to do with the expansion of military arenas and battlefronts that encompassed the Resistance Axis as a whole and which threatened the security of its territories than with serving Iran's geopolitical interests. That Iran's position vis-à-vis its enemies has improved on account of the military successes achieved by Hizbullah and other Shia actors is testament to the growing power and influence of these non-state actors, and Iran's increasing dependence on them.

A brief survey of Iran's ties to Hizbullah reveals the longstanding and deeply rooted relationship between the Shia of Lebanon and Iran, which crude material considerations like material assistance and power conceived as compulsion and pressure fail to take into account. Similarly, shared ideology, strategic culture and national

security doctrine, are completely displaced by material assistance in proxy theory, which reduces all ties between asymmetric allies into transactional relationships and power dynamics.

Moreover, ideological ties like Hizbullah's adherence to the Wilayet al-Faqih are misconceived as indicators of its subordination to Iran rather than an intellectual commitment to the political authority of a religious figure. Proxy theorists have adopted a linear model of religious authority which views its transmission in unidirectional terms, flowing exclusively from Iran, to Hizbullah and other Shia networks.

Hizbullah has in fact a vast degree of autonomy from Iran, as demonstrated by its indisputable role in mobilising support for the besieged Assad government and in persuading Iran to directly intervene. That Syria is now far more dependent on Hizbullah than the converse is testimony of Hizbullah's rising status as a regional power, placing it on a par with Iran as a junior partner and ally, rather than a subordinate. According to both hard material power criteria favoured by Realists and soft ideational and normative criteria outlined by constructivists, Hizbullah represents a new category of non-state actor with regional outreach and influence – what I have termed a 'regional subpower'.

The cultural and historical ties with Iran, shared religio-political ideology and strategic culture, and, the power modalities that Hizbullah contributes as a regional subpower, signal an organic and interdependent relationship between ideological comrades and brothers-in-arms. Harb spells out the organic nature of the relationship succinctly: 'It's above interest. Even with material calculations, the relationship is humanitarian and brotherly, its value and outcome and strength of the alliance are much greater than the material relationship. This is something they [the Americans] can't understand.'¹⁵

In fact, ecological theories are far better positioned to provide meaningful insights into transnational relationships than dominant IR theories. Iran's relationship with Hizbullah is far better explained by the ecological concept of symbiosis for instance, than sponsor-proxy relations, bandwagoning or the autonomy-security trade-off model. Symbiosis is defined as 'an evolved interaction or close living relationship between organisms from different species, usually with benefits to one or both of the individuals involved', and can assume different forms, such as 'mutualism' which is a type of symbiosis where both symbiotic partners benefit, either as 'resource-resource relationships, service-resource relationships, or service-service relationships'. Symbioses may be either 'obligate', where the interdependence between the two is necessary for survival, or 'facultative', where the relationship is borne of choice rather than necessity (Biological Dictionary). Applying this definition, the Iran-Hizbullah partnership appears to be a mutualist type of symbiosis. Furthermore, although the movement would surely have to significantly downsize if Iran were to cut off funding, Hizbullah's ability to survive on its own, makes this relationship a facultative one.

Notes

¹ As defined by Deutsch (1964: 102), proxy warfare is 'an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country, disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of the country and using some of that country's manpower, resources and territory as a means of achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies.'

² Author's interview with Mohammad Fneish, 7 August 2007.

- ³ Zulfikar is the nom de guerre of senior Hizbullah military commander, Mustafa Badreddine, who was assassinated in Syria in May 2016.
- ⁴ Author's interview with Sheikh Mohammad Kawtharani, 20 November 2017.
- ⁵ Author's interview with Abdallah Safieddine, 6 December 2007.
- ⁶ Author's interview with Na'im Qasim, 26 February 2007.
- ⁷ Author's interview with Na'im Qasim, 26 February 2007.
- ⁸ Author's interview with Abdallah Safieddine, 6 December 2007.
- ⁹ Author's interview with Khalil Harb, 21 July 2017.
- ¹⁰ Author's interview with Na'im Qasim, 26 February 2007.
- ¹¹ Author's interview with Hizbullah Commander in Syria, 7 January 2019.
- ¹² Author's interview with Khalil Harb, 21 July 2017.
- ¹³ This threat was repeated in several other speeches: 6 February 2014, 7 April 2014, 6 April 2015, 25 September 2015, 16 February 2016, 22 March 2016, 24 June 2016, 23 October 2016, 11 May 2017, 23 June 2017, and 8 June 2018.
- ¹⁴ Author's interview with Khalil Harb, 21 July 2017.
- ¹⁵ Author's interview with Khalil Harb, 21 July 2017.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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