

HIZBALLAH IN RELATION TO THE 'ARAB SPRING' AND WAR IN SYRIA

Rafał Ożarowski

Hizballah (the 'Party of God') is a Shia religious and militarized organization, and also a well-known political party in Lebanon that cooperates with Iran and the Assad's regime in Syria. Hizballah which was founded in 1982 by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (*pasdaran*) and the splinter of AMAL – known as Islamic AMAL, quickly became one of the key military organizations in Lebanon. Suicide attacks on American and French military headquarters in Lebanon in 1983 and the long-lasting hostages crisis when Hizballah kidnapped many American, British and French citizens has won the organization its infamous renown.

After the signing of the Taif agreement in 1989, when the war in Lebanon was formally over, Hizballah was faced with a new challenge of adjustment to the new political reality in Lebanon. In 1992, the 'Party of God', being also a military organisation, took part in the first parliamentary elections. Hizballah transformed into a political party at the Lebanese stage with its own military wing – the Islamic Resistance, which has not been disarmed yet.

The aim of this paper is to present how Hizballah's ideological foundations have determined its vision and why ideological assumptions are sometimes not correlated with the Party of God's activity. In the paper, a specific

example of Hizballah's involvement in the Syrian war has been analyzed with the explanation of aims of Hizballah, its role and methods of warfare during the Syrian conflict.

1. *Ideology of Hizballah*

Na'im Kassem indicated three basic ideological foundations of Hizballah: Islam, jihad and the *welayat je-faqih*¹ doctrine. In his book *In the Path of Hizballah* Ahmed Nizar Hamzeh pointed out: formation of a new Muslim order, *welayat je-faqih*, jihad and social justice². As a result, four key ideological foundations of the "Party of God" can be distinguished:

- *Welayat je-faqih* doctrine constituting the religious and political superstructure of the functioning of the organization
- Pan-Muslim concept of order
- The idea of leading jihad
- Dualistic perception of the world (*dar al-islam* and *dar al-harb*).

The *welayat je-faqih* doctrine, which translated from Persian means "the guardianship of the tutor and the jurist", was implemented to the structures of the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran by ayatollah Khomeini who was the first to connect its religious, social and political dimension³. He intended to authorize the political leadership of the clergy in a newly established fundamentalist state. Within the framework of the *welayat je-faqih* doctrine, the highest clergyman (*wali je-faqih*) is to exercise the power in the absence of the twelfth imam and in that way to realize the idea of the rule of God.

The leaders of Hizballah fully adopted the *welayat je-faqih* doctrine. It was included in Hizballah's first political declaration called an *Open Letter Addressed to the Oppressed*

in *Lebanon and the World* (hereinafter referred to as *the Open Letter*) announced in 1985. The *welayatje-faqih* doctrine is already mentioned in the dedication of the *Open Letter*“. To the one who shattered the American dream in Lebanon and fought (resisted) the Israeli occupation, raising the banner of action according to *welayatje-faqih*, the leader, who liked to be addressed as the prince of the Muslims, [Imam] Abdallah (the servant of God) al Khumayni...”

In his statements, Nasrallah repeatedly confirmed that the *welayat je-faqih* doctrine plays a key role in Hizballah's ideology and so is its embodiment, that is *wali al-faqih*: “The decision of peace and war is in the hands of the jurisconsult, not in the hands of the intellectuals, researchers, scientists, and regular politicians, depending on the circumstances”⁴. In an extensive interview given to the Lebanese newspaper *Nida al-Watan* in August 1993, Nasrallah emphasized the immense significance of the relation between Hizballah and the highest spiritual leader, ayatollah Khamenei, who replaced ayatollah Khomeini after his death in 1989, treating him not as a leader of the Iranian state but as the head of all Muslims who is above all other governments. He also pointed out that Hizballah from its beginning has “believed in the *welayatje-faqih*, the guiding supreme leader, as someone who can lead the Islamic nation towards regaining its identity, its existence as an entity, and its self-esteem”⁵. The notion of pan-Islamic Hizballah's order constitutes a duplicate of Khomeini's theory concerning the connections of all Muslims under the rule of God. In a conceptual sense Hizballah is a subject which should carry out all ideological pan-Islamic principles in Lebanon. Therefore, from Hizballah's beginning there have been considerations concerning alleged intentions that Hizballah wants to establish a Muslim state in Lebanon according to the Iranian model. Admittedly, in the *Open Letter*, Hizballah did not herald an aspiration to transform Lebanon into a fundamentalist Muslim country, it only

indicated that such a solution would be the best⁶. Taking into consideration the fact that the religious structure of Lebanon is very complex, Shia religious dominance in this country until now would seem highly improbable. Moreover, in many statements even from the 1990s, Nasrallah officially denied that the aim of the “Party of God” is to implement the Muslim order based on Sharia. In connection with this, a certain ideological and practical conflict appears. Hizballah, which is faithful to the *welayat je-faqih* doctrine, in principle is in favour of the creation of the pan-Islamic order in accordance with this doctrine, however it is fully aware of the fact that this idea cannot be fully realised in Lebanon. The idea of introduction of jihad plays an important role in Hizballah’s ideology. Nasrallah repeatedly emphasized the importance of jihad factor in the sphere of activity of the “Party of God” concerning the assassination of Abbas al-Musawi – Secretary General of Hizballah as well as indicated that Hizballah has been a movement leading to jihad since the time of Israeli invasion in Lebanon in 1982⁷. The leaders of Hizballah often define their own grouping as “Muslim, Lebanese movement leading jihad”, thus emphasizing the identity of the organization.

It is worth mentioning that Hizballah much more strongly emphasizes lesser jihad, i.e. the military one that aims at their enemies, especially Israel. According to Nasrallah, a person who avoids lesser jihad and does not want to get involved in a military fight, and at the same time believes that he or she leads greater jihad, makes his fight only an insignificant ritual⁸.

As a result, in Hizballah’s ideology the division into lesser and greater jihad is not so clear and it serves rather as an appropriate interpretation⁹. Hizballah assumes that lesser and greater jihad depend on each other and one without the use of the other does not allow for a full devotion to God. A dualistic division of the world is a characteristic feature in the ideology of fundamentalist

organizations. Fundamentalist Muslims divide the world into two spheres: *dar al-islam* (it is where Islam governs) and *dar al-harb* (it is where infidels govern). However, *dar al-islam* does not include the areas where Muslims who do not respect God's law govern. Within the framework of a dualistic perception of the world, Hizballah refers to the division into "oppressors" (*mustakbirun*) and "the oppressed" (*musta'difin*). In Hizballah's ideology this division is strongly marked and correlated with the feeling of social justice (*al-'Adala al-Igtima'iyya*).

While dividing the world into *mustakbirun* and *musta'difin*, Hizballah uses a defined gradation among "oppressors" and recognizes some countries such as Israel as the biggest *mustakbirun*, and for example Muslim countries cooperation with the Western world as the smallest *mustakbirun*¹⁰.

Hizballah and the Arab Spring

During the Arab Spring, Hizballah declared strong support for the rebels. It was in accordance with the ideological principles of the "Party of God", because the regimes of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt or Ali Abdullah Saleh Al-Snhani Al-Humairi in Yemen must be recognized as *mustakbirun*, oppressing the Muslims who cooperate with the USA and realize the policy according to the guidelines of the Western world. It is obvious that such an approach of the leaders of Hizballah was determined not only by the ideological factor, but as an outcome of the relationships between Iran and these countries. For many years, the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and in particular Egypt under the rule of H. Mubarak had not had the best relationships with Iran. Iranian interests usually collided with the interests of Egypt in the Middle East. An especially sensitive issue was the issue of Hamas and military support given to Hamas by Iran, which was contrary to Mubarak's policy towards the Palestinian Authority and the Gaza Strip.

In case of Yemen, the situation was much more sensitive. A long-lasting rebellion of the al-Houthi clan from the north Saada province aimed at the government of A. A. Saleh supported by Saudi Arabia. Within the framework of regional competition with the Saudis, Iran supported the rebels and was against the government of Saleh who also had the support of the USA and was useful for them in the fight with the terrorist groups connected with al-Ka'ida and operating in Yemen. Due to this, the case of Yemen ideally inscribed into the notion of *mustakbirun* with a simultaneous subordination of Hizballah to the regional policy of Iran.

In the first phase of the revolution in the Arab world, Hizballah strongly condemned the regime of Ben Ali in Tunisia and H. Mubarak in Egypt which had a pro-Western political orientation. It constituted a perfect occasion for the leaders of the "Party of God" to emphasize their anti-American attitude, which is a crucial element in Hizballah's ideology. Of particular importance is the issue of assessment of the revolution in Egypt. As a Shia military organization connected with Iran, Hizballah has been on the list of Egypt's "enemies" for many years. The relations of Egyptian government with Hizballah got significantly worse in 2009 when a few members of this organization were captured in Egypt and accused of supporting Hamas in the Gaza Strip. They were accused of arms smuggling to the Gaza Strip and preparing attacks on Israeli tourists on the Sinai Peninsula. This issue drew attention of the general public at the moment when Nasrallah issued a few anti-Egyptian statements in which he indicated the falsification of evidence accusing the Egyptian government of serving the interest of Israel and the USA. In response, the pro-governmental Egyptian press described Nasrallah as a "war criminal" and demanded his arrest and bringing an accusation against him¹¹.

In turn, Mubarak demanded Hizballah to issue an official statement in which they would apologize for “using Egyptian soil for illegal purposes”. The “Party of God” had never made such a gesture¹². On the contrary, Nasrallah acknowledged that the support given to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip was an honourable gesture. The crisis in the relations of Hizballah with Egypt later translated into the attitude of Hizballah towards the revolutionary events in Egypt during which the “Party of God” strongly criticised the government of Mubarak.

In case of the revolution in Libya, Hizballah truly supported rebels against the Qaddafi regime. It was strictly connected with disappearance of Shia Imam Musa Sadr, who visited Libya in August 1978. The case of his disappearance is still unknown and casts a shadow on the Lebanese-Libyan relations.

The Qaddafi’s ideology was not acceptable for Hizballah. The mixture of Sunni Islam and Marxism related to pan-Arab nationalism contradicted with the Shia vision of Muslim world divided into the oppressors and the oppressed. For this reason, Hizballah welcomed the fact of taking action by revolutionaries against the hated Libyan regime. In official statements, Nasrallah severely criticized crimes committed by the Qaddafi regime during fights with the rebels, saying that “anyone with honor and consciousness in this world cannot, and should not, keep silent on the massacres that the Qaddafi regime is committing across the country on a daily basis, namely in Benghazi. Terror and violence do not protect a regime that was founded on corruption and crime, from the will and determination of people that have taken their final decision”¹³.

After Qaddafi’s death, Nasrallah praised the Libyan revolution and declared his belief in resolving the case of Musa Sadr and his companions: Sheikh Muhammad Yacob and journalist Abbas Badreddine. However, until today the

government of Libya has issued no statement resolving the issue of their disappearance.

Revolutionary occurrences in Yemen were also commented on by Hizballah due to Iran engagement in the Houthi rebellion in the Sa'ada province. From 2004 to 2010, the Houthi Shia clan and his allies were involved in the war against the Ali Abdullah Saleh regime supported by Saudi Arabia and the USA. Houthis wanted to eliminate Western influences from Yemen, overthrow the corrupt republican government and reinstate Imamate¹⁴.

In the Yemeni conflict Iran was accused of financing Houthis against the government and pro-governmental forces. There were also many suggestions that Hizballah operatives trained rebels in Saada. In 2009, the London-based Arab daily paper Asharq al-Awsat reported that officials of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and members of Hizballah along with Houthis coordinated military operations against Saudi troops. Even president Saleh noted that Hizballah trained Houthis in using grenades, mines and arms. According to the U.S. administration, Hizballah's involvement in the Houthi rebellion was much deeper than the Iranian one¹⁵. Nasrallah denied Hizballah's presence in Saada and blamed Saudi Arabia for invading the Yemeni territory. For this reason, it was not surprising that Hizballah strongly supported revolutionaries against the Salih regime.

The case of revolution in Bahrain was different. It was strongly connected with the Shia-Sunni tensions in the Middle East. In 2011, the ruling of al-Khalifa dynasty decided to crack down on public protests and then several Shia groups organized militant resistance¹⁶. During the revolutionary time, the government of Bahrain accused Hizballah of aggravating the conflict in order to destabilize the country. Nasrallah issued numerous statements concerning occurrences in Bahrain. Some of them were in a form of sharp condemnation of the ruling of al-Khalifa

family. As a result of that, the leader of Hizballah has been reprimanded for direct interference in the internal affairs of sheikhdом.

Hizballah and Syria's war.

Why Hizballah supports the secular regime?

The 'Arab Spring' in Syria, which turned into a long-lasting war, became a real test for Hizballah. The 'Party of God' declared support for the ruling Syrian regime, unlike in case of the other states where revolution has spread. Thus, from the ideological point of view, the Assad's regime was not *mustakbirun*, although he suppressed his own citizens and established secular and authoritarian rule. The Assad's regime features and activity are contradicted with Hizballah's religious and pan-Islamic ideological assumption. Despite this contradiction, Hizballah truly supports Al-Assad.

Standing by the side of al-Assad had an existential dimension for Hizballah, which for many years had taken advantage for its own military activity under the Syrian umbrella. Unlike in case of the other states where revolutionaries overthrew leaders, regarding al-Assad, Hizballah has never condemned its Syrian ally. Due to mutual political and strategic interests, the Party of God had no choice but to support the Assad's regime. As Marisa Sullivan writes, Syria "has played a vital role in the transfer of weapons, equipment, and money from Iran to Hizballah", and also "the Assad regime has provided safe haven for Hizballah training camps and weapons storage"¹⁷. Therefore, Syria under the Assad's regime was a crucial ally for Hizballah.

With such motivation, the Party of God participated in fights and clashes in the first phase of the war, however Hizballah refrained from any comments on its engagement in Syria. They quietly celebrated funerals of killed members and even after the funeral of Musa Ali Shehimi

and the high-ranking commander Ali Nassif, Nasrallah stated that he had been killed in a Syrian border area inhabited by the Lebanese people under the bombardment of rebel forces¹⁸. Additionally, the leaders of Hizballah said that any Lebanese resident killed in Syria acted on its own with no connection with Hizballah¹⁹.

Why did Hizballah hide its own involvement in the Syria's war? Firstly, they usually deny any involvement until it becomes obvious and unquestionable. It is the fundamental Hizballah's strategy of misleading in order to make an informational chaos. Secondly, in this case, Hizballah wanted to avoid situation that official information about its involvement in the Syrian conflict might lead to an outbreak of hostilities in Lebanon.

Therefore, in 2011 and 2012, Hizballah military engagement in the Syria's war was limited. However, the Assad's regime desperately needed Hizballah fighters due to its well-trained special forces which were experienced in fighting in cities and within small spaces. The Syrian regime with an army dominated by heavy artillery was insufficient with such units. Therefore, it pushed Hizballah into a deeper involvement in the war in Syria.

Some sources reported that the estimated number of Hizballah fighters in Syria was around 10,000. It is unlikely and up to now a reasonable estimate is around 4,000 – 5,000²⁰. However, what is significant, Hizballah permanently uses tactics of rotation of its troops so that fighters have a possibility to recuperate and keep combat readiness at a high level.

As Jeffrey White mentions, there is not enough information about the organization of Hizballah forces in Syria, however the Party of God is present there with four types of military missions: a training mission for regime forces; a combat advisory mission; "corseting" operations in which Hizballah reinforces other units of a lower quality; direct military operations²¹.

A full involvement of Hizballah emerged in the battle of al-Qusayr, which started on 19th May 2013. It was almost three weeks after Nasrallah admitted in his official statement to Hizballah's combat presence in Syria. The decision taken by the Assad regime and its allies to recapture²² the town of al-Qusayr had a strategic value due to an important supply route for rebels which runs through this region.

Firstly, in April 2013, the Syrian regime forces and Hizballah took up an action to seize small villages located around the city of al-Qusayr, which was successfully finalized. Afterwards, they conquered al-Qusayr within 17 days. Among the pro-al-Asad regime forces there were 1,200 – 1,700 Hizballah fighters. The Party of God played a special role in fighting rebels in al-Qusayr. Firstly, Hizballah's troops spearheaded the strike on the city and they used other experience as a special trained forces to wage a war in restricted areas of cities where it is necessary to fight for every centimeter of land and every building. The support of the Syrian forces artillery helped to break down the resistance of the rebel combat groups and then take control over the city²³.

Despite the victory, Hizballah suffered heavy losses. The estimated casualties range between 60 – 120 dead²⁴. After seizing al-Qusayr, Nasrallah stated that Hizballah was aware of the costs of combat engagement in the Syria's war and would maintain its aims in this conflict. Furthermore, he added that Hizballah's position before the battle of al-Qusayr and after this battle was the same and also announced further engagement in the Syrian war²⁵.

In 2014, Hizballah adopted a steady position and did not involve in direct clashes as in al-Qusayr. Likely heavy losses in the battle of al-Qusayr forced Hizballah's leadership to redefine its strategy of engagement in Syria to some extent. However, Hizballah fighters, as reinforcement units, took part in an offensive in the Qalamoun mountains;

seizing the city of Yabroud as well as in clashes in the area of Damascus and the international airport²⁶.

In March 2015, the fights concentrated in the south of Damascus and on the edge of the Golan Heights. The rebellious Free Syrian Army backed up by Sunni Jihadi groups (some of them affiliated with al-Qaeda) took up an offensive that met with a counterattack of the Syrian regime troops, Hizballah with the help of Iranian commanders²⁷.

The area situated between the south of Damascus and the Golan Heights was considered of a strategic value due to proximity of the Israeli border, the Jordan River and the Daraa-Damascus highway that is significant for logistic supplies²⁸. In July 2015, the Syrian army and Hizballah launched an operation near Zabadani. The main aim of this military offensive was to capture the city of Zabadani. Until the beginning of September, Hizballah fighters alongside with the Syrian regime troops seized almost 75 % of the city.

Dilemmas around Hizballah involvement in the Syrian war

By now Hizballah has become an unquestionable and important player of the Syrian conflict. Despite the losses, the Party of God's involvement in Syria has brought some gains. Firstly, Hizballah fighters enhanced their experience and had an opportunity to test variable combat alternatives, outside their own environment. Since the outbreak of the war, Hizballah has been providing support as a light infantry and snipers, however under variable tactics, i.e. as an offensive force and reinforcement group. Up to now, Hizballah leadership has made themselves acquainted with the capabilities of their military units and the extent of engagement with available forces. During warfare, the experience gained by Hizballah may be invaluable in any future wars with Israel or non-state militarized groups.

Since the “July War” with Israel in 2006, Hizballah has not taken part in any such operation, thus for this reason, the military involvement in Syria was one of the greatest challenges the Organization has taken up.

Secondly, Hizballah’s involvement in the Syria’s war, standing by Bashar al-Assad, makes up its existential aim. Nasrallah and the whole leadership of the Party of God are aware of how crucial ally Syria is and how important it is to do as much as Hizballah can in order to maintain this regime ruling Syria. The downfall of the Assad’s regime would undermine Hizballah’s strong position in Lebanon sustained under the Syrian ‘patronage’ and cut off the main route of supplying weapons. It would diminish the role of Hizballah in resistance (*moqawama*) policy against Israel. Therefore, one can notice how important it is for Hizballah to keep the Assad regime in the neighboring state.

Thirdly, Hizballah which is strictly linked with Iran, serves overall Iranian interests in Syria and makes up the link in the Iran-Syria-Hizballah axis. Taking into consideration the downfall of the Assad’s regime, neither Iran nor Hizballah would allow itself to lose the Syrian link, which would deconstruct the axis of common interests and interdependence. For that reason, Hizballah’s involvement in Syria sets division between the pro-Assad forces and its allies including Iran and anti-Assad rebels, Sunni jihadists and also the Western world led by the U.S.

To conclude, the idea of *mustakbirun* and *mustad’afin* is used by Hizballah selectively. Describing some regimes as *mustakbirun* depends on the political context and the Hizballah and Iranian relationships with a given government. As a result, the regime of Ben Ali in Tunisia, H. Mubarak in Egypt, al-Qaddafi in Libya and A.A. Saleh in Yemen were labeled as *mustakbirun*, what was correlated with a

political vision of Hizballah. On the contrary, the oppressive Syrian regime, through the Hizballah activity thereto, can be regarded as a *musta'dafin* mainly due to the anti-U.S. and Saudi Arabian policy and the crucial meaning of this regime for the Hizballah's existence.

NOTES

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