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UNDERSTANDING HIZBULLAH'S SUPPORT FOR THE ASAD REGIME

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Executive Summary

Although Hizbullah does indeed depend on the Asad regime for its arms' flow, this consideration alone does not adequately grasp the other motives behind its controversial stance, nor does it sufficiently explain the sturdiness of its alliance with Syria. Reducing Hizbullah's close alliance with the Asad regime to logistics misses a host of other factors and considerations which sustain the relationship.

Hizbullah's staunch defense of the Asad regime at the most inopportune of times must be viewed against the backdrop of the regional struggle between the "nationalist and resistance project" led by Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas, otherwise known as the *"jabhit al mumana'a*" ("resistance axis" as it is dubbed in the West) and the "US project" pursued by the US' Arab allies who comprise the so-called "moderate axis". Viewed within this broader regional context, Syria's strategic value does not merely lie in its arms' supply role, but derives from its status as the Arab linchpin of the resistance front, or to borrow Nasrallah's words, "the only resistance regime in the region".

On balance, "the Syrian leadership can be credited with the preservation and maintenance of the Palestinian cause," for Hizbullah. So indispensable was the Asad regime to Palestine that Nasrallah boldly declares: "the continuation of this Syrian position" (and by implication, the preservation of the regime), is "the precondition to the continuation of the Palestinian cause." Accordingly, any threat to the regime's security and survival is a "danger" not only to Syria, but to Palestine and -- considering its role in ending the Lebanese civil war -- to Lebanon as well.

The protests in Syria are branded a form of "collusion" with outside powers who seek to replace Asad's rule with "another regime similar to the moderate Arab regimes that are ready to sign any capitulation agreement with Israel." Thus, rather than strive to institute reforms or democracy in Syria, Washington's latest policy essentially aimed at instituting subservience: "if President Bashar al-Asad were to go now to the Americans and surrender, the problem would be resolved."

Aside from the strategic factors behind Hizbullah's continued support for the Asad regime, the movement's position is also grounded in theoretical considerations. Hizbullah's revolutionary prescriptions rest on two concurrent criteria: first, "this regime's relationship with and position towards the American-Israeli project in the region" and second, the potential for reforms. The Asad regime's *mumana'ist* position and role in the region, coupled with its openness to reform and dialogue means that the Syrian uprising has failed to meet either of these requirements, and hence, Hizbullah cannot "support the downfall of a resistant, *mumani'i* regime which has begun reforms".

Hizbullah's understanding of freedom as a positive freedom *to* control one's destiny and to achieve selfdetermination, both digresses from and surpasses the liberal preoccupation with the negative freedom *from* external constraints and hindrances. To be free is not to be left alone but to continually struggle for justice. It is for this reason that Hizbullah is inherently antagonistic to liberal uprisings like Syria's which focus their efforts on freeing themselves from state control at the expense of the struggle against US and Israeli colonialism.

Introduction

One of the paradoxes of the Arab uprisings has been their ability to divide as much as unite the Arab world. While the nexus between authoritarian rule and subordination to the US that typified the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen ensured sweeping, popular Arab support for the revolts there, the Asad regime's affiliation with the "resistance axis" has deprived the current uprising in Syria of a similar regional blanket endorsement.

Not unexpectedly, Hizbullah has positioned itself at the vanguard of the camp supporting President Asad. The movement's support for what is widely perceived as an undemocratic and repressive regime in Syria is seen by many as inconsistent with its own political values and a significant departure from its otherwise consistent denunciation of autocratic Arab rulers.

This discrepancy owes itself in part to Hizbullah's belief that the Asad regime still commands majority support and was "serious" about reforms, in contrast to other Arab regimes which were "closed" to reforms. But far more significant for the movement was the regime's unyieldingness towards Israel and its safeguarding of Arab rights which required that the Syrian people "preserve their resisting and opposing regime".¹

Admittedly, Hizbullah's unequivocal support for the Syrian leader has alienated many Arabs who had been hitherto largely supportive of the resistance movement, but who now accuse it of cynically backing a brutal regime to protect its narrow political interests. Critics of Hizbullah's position view it as one motivated solely by realpolitik and the dependence on the Asad leadership for the procurement and transfer of weapons. Whether by accident or design, such interpretations locate Hizbullah's position within the same "rational actor" model adopted by US policy-makers and self-styled "experts". In conformity with the dominant Realist approach, political behavior is almost entirely explained by an "instrumental" means-ends type rationality.

This paper argues that although Hizbullah does indeed depend on the Asad regime for its arms' flow, this consideration alone does not adequately grasp the other motives behind its controversial stance, nor does it sufficiently explain the sturdiness of its alliance with Syria. Reducing Hizbullah's close alliance with the Asad regime to logistics misses a host of other factors and considerations which sustain the relationship and the sophisticated rationality that underpins them.

A concern for realpolitik considerations alone would not require Hizbullah's leader, Seyyid Hassan Nasrallah, to so outspokenly defend the regime as he did in his May 25 and August 26 2011 speeches, and subject the party to accusations of complicity in the Syrian regime's violence and hypocrisy in its dealings with the Arab uprisings. This is made even more unlikely by Hizbullah's awareness of the

controversy surrounding the party's position. Evidence of such awareness is Nasrallah's reference to his defense of the regime as a "truth that must be said without fear of the blame of anyone, no matter who he is".²

As a movement which has spent years cultivating a "culture of resistance" in the Arab world and employed its popularity to thwart schemes to instigate Sunni-Shiíte tensions, Hizbullah would not so readily trade in its hard-won popular clout for weapons that could be assured through other, albeit more laborious, means. For Hizbullah to knowingly gamble away much of its iconic symbolism in the Arab world and beyond, broader strategic forces must be at play.

It is these same forces which accounted for Nasrallah's provocative *Riad al-Solh* speech in March 2005. Then, as now, Nasrallah turned against the tide of public opinion and defiantly heaped praise on the Asad leadership, just weeks after the Hariri assassination, when anti-Syrian sentiment was at its height. While the US-led international community and many Lebanese were pointing the finger at Syria, Hizbullah stood loyally beside it, apologizing on their behalf and expressing gratitude for its role in Lebanon. Significantly, what was at stake at the time was not the resistance's supply routes, but rather, Syria's strategic role in Lebanon and beyond.

SYRIA'S VALUE AS A STRATEGIC ALLY

Hizbullah's staunch defense of the Asad regime at the most inopportune of times must be viewed against the backdrop of the regional "struggle" between the "nationalist and resistance project" led by Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas, otherwise known as the *"jabhit al mumana'a*" ("resistance axis" as it is dubbed in the West), and the "US project" pursued by the US' Arab allies who comprise the so-called "moderate axis". Viewed within this broader regional context, Syria's strategic value does not merely lie in its arms' supply role, but derives from its status as the Arab linchpin of the resistance front, or to borrow Nasrallah's words, "the only resistance regime in the region".³ By depicting the regime in this manner, Hizbullah conflates the means with the ends: resistance transmutes from a method of struggle supported by Syria into the defining element of Syria's political identity and regional position.

The Battle of Political Positions

The region's fault lines are between rival political positions: resistance and confrontationalism on the one hand, and surrender on the other. This characterization of the struggle corresponds with Hizbullah's analytical schema; as articulated by Nasrallah, the nature of the battle cross-cuts "ideological, intellectual

and religious," affiliations and centers itself on "political position" vis-a-vis the "interests" of the US and Israel.⁴ Nasrallah elaborated on the core conflict in an earlier speech in December 2008:

"In principle, the Americans do not mind if the ruler is Islamist, Communist, Marxist, Leninist, Maoist, or nationalist. This is not important for them. You can have whatever ideology or thought you want. What matters is what is your political programme? What is your position on Israel? What is your position on the United States?"⁵

In this construction of the conflict, Hizbullah elevates the status of political position above ideology which is relegated to a subordinate rank in the geopolitical scheme of things. Implicit in such rank-ordering is the redefinition of political position as an active and substantive role, as opposed to a passive attitude or point of view. By positioning Syria at the helm of the resistance front and ascribing to it a steadfast political position that harms rather than serves US-Israeli interests, Hizbullah challenges the contention made by the regime's critics that Asad's resistance credentials amount to little more than a self-serving attitudinal disposition.

For these detractors, the Asad leadership's anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist stances serve as a rhetorical device for preserving its popular legitimacy. Hizbullah on the other hand, purposively elides the pervasive tendency among progressives to judge the merit of a political position on the basis of its presumed motives and chooses instead to imbue these stances with deeper political import and hence, strategic value. Irrespective of the regime's motives, both the nature of Syria's alliance with its Lebanese, Palestinian and Iranian partners and the price exacted on it for maintaining this alliance, affirms for Hizbullah that its *mumana'aism* is a strategic choice rather than a mere policy tool.

Doubtless, Hizbullah is aware that the regime does indeed derive its legitimacy from its resistance credentials as evidenced by Asad's own admission that "conspiring against the resistance" would spell "political suicide for me".⁶ However, Hizbullah does not subscribe to the view that the regime sustains its legitimacy by means of rhetoric alone. Beyond preserving its physical security, the Asad regime's *mumana'ism* has also become a principal source of its ontological security; that is, security of its identity as a resistant state and champion of Arab rights. Maintaining such an identity and the regional alliances that flow from it clearly requires far more than rhetorical posturing.

The Indispensability of the Asad Regime to the resistance in Lebanon and Palestine

Syria's support for resistance movements in Lebanon and Palestine was "not only moral and political", but also strategic, according to Nasrallah. Asad's Syria was not merely an active bystander who defended its allies, but a party to the resistance struggle as "it did not only *stand* by the resistance, but it *backed* the resistance in Lebanon and Palestine". The resistance movement even maintains that it owed its victory in 2000, at least in part, to "Syrian backing". While the nature of this backing is not specified, Nasrallah's claim that he did "not want to go into details" about this support, "so as not to embarrass the Syrian leadership," insinuates that it is military. In another unprecedented disclosure, Nasrallah further intimated that Iran funneled arms through Syria: "Even today, most of the Iranian support came through Syria. Without Syria's willpower and stand, even the Iranian support would not have reached Lebanon or Palestine."⁷

Syria's commitment to the resistance project was further manifested by its principled stand in the peace negotiations. Confirming the old adage coined by Henry Kissinger, "No war without Egypt, no peace without Syria", Hizbullah praised the Asad leadership's refusal to "capitulate" to Israel's conditions and applauded it for foiling attempts to divorce Syria from the Palestinian track. Had Syria pursued a settlement on its own "while the Palestinian track was being fragmented in the negotiations", the Palestinian cause would have been lost.⁸

On balance, "the Syrian leadership can be credited with the preservation and maintenance of the Palestinian cause," for Hizbullah. So indispensable was the Asad regime to Palestine that Nasrallah boldly declared: "the continuation of this Syrian position" (and by implication, the preservation of the regime), is "the precondition to the continuation of the Palestinian cause." Accordingly, any threat to the regime's security and survival is a "danger" not only to Syria, but to Palestine and -- considering its role in ending the Lebanese civil war-- to Lebanon as well. ⁹

This appreciation of Syria's regional role conflicts with the counter-narrative of Syria's history of waging war against the Palestinians in Lebanon as well as Lebanese groups opposed to Israel. While Hizbullah does not dwell on this darker side of Syria's history, a recognition of at least part of its unsavory past in Lebanon can be deduced from Nasrallah's admission that: "No one denies that Syria made mistakes in Lebanon. President Al-Asad said this at the People's Assembly [in 2005]."¹⁰ Judging by the history of relations between Hizbullah and Syria, it would appear that these "mistakes" typified the period before the mid- 1990s after which relations between Hizbullah and Hafez al Assad's regime improved. In so doing, the relationship with Syria matured from an indirect one, mediated by Iran, to a fully fledged regional alliance under Bashar's rule.

The Strategic Value of the Asad Leadership's Rejectionism

The movement's ability to dismiss the more problematic features of Syria's past is facilitated by the Asad leadership's refusal to reach a settlement with Israel in contrast to its capitulatory Arab brethren. For many Arab progressives though, this negotiating stand alone does not qualify the regime for "confrontational" status given that Syria remains "Israel's quietest front".¹¹ Hizbullah rejects this line of reasoning as intellectual absolutism. In the first place, it does not evaluate Syria's actions according to the same benchmark used for non-state (resistance) actors. Nasrallah admitted as much in a 2009 Al-Quds Day speech when he distinguished between Syria "as a regime" and resistance movements who do not have the same "economic, social and political responsibilities and international affairs' [obligations]."¹²

Second, Hizbullah does not adopt a similar all-or-nothing logic as Asad's progressive critics do. In the above-mentioned speech, Nasrallah responded to this same group of "people who always talk about opening fronts" by lauding Syria's rejectionism: "It is true it [Syria] did not fight and close a front but still, it did not surrender." For the past 30 or 40 years, Syria did not "concede one grain of soil or one drop of its waters," and even obstructed an imminent deal at the Geneva Summit "over a couple of cubic meters of water". ¹³ Moreover, although the Asad leadership was not engaged in armed resistance to liberate the Golan, "it is enough that Syria stood beside the resistance in Lebanon, and the resistance in Palestine and the resistance in Iraq."¹⁴

Whatever Syria lacked in direct military confrontation, it compensated for in political fortitude. To put it differently, the policy options before *mumani'ists* did not fit into a neat dichotomy: "either war or if not able to fight, we succumb". When the requirements for military confrontationalism could not be satisfied, rejectionism served as it's ideologically consistent and strategically advantageous, political substitute. The "third option" therefore, was quite simply, to "not succumb" and, as Syria has done, to "remain steadfast, oppose, resist and work to achieve power and capability and wait for changes."¹⁵

By linking political steadfastness with resistance, Hizbullah strips rejectionism of its passiveaggressive connotations and infuses it with an active and purposive meaning. Moreover, since the concept of steadfastness itself presupposes adversity or stress, Syria is viewed as having further earned its *mumana'ist* status by resisting pressures and threats to capitulate to US-Israeli dictates. These pressures escalated after the launching of the so-called "peace process" in 1991, alternately using carrots and sticks, or in Nasrallah's terminology "intimidation and temptation". ¹⁶ Pressures further mounted during Bashar's tenure when Syria found itself on George Bush's infamous "Axis of Evil" list and saddled with USsponsored sanctions, UN resolutions and charges of terrorism. Although Washington shifted from a "regime change" to a "behaviour reform" policy beginning in 2007 when it began to "engage" Syria, this policy essentially aimed at nudging it into a peace agreement with Israel and disengaging it from its regional allies rather than making a genuine rapprochement with it.

Hizbullah's understanding of the Syrian Uprising

Seeing as Washington achieved neither of these objectives, it has now reverted to its earlier regime change policy. Just as Hizbullah viewed the 2009 protests in Iran as a "bid to destabilize the country's Islamic regime" by means of a US-orchestrated "velvet revolution",¹⁷ the protests in Syria are branded a form of "collusion" with outside powers who seek to replace Asad's rule with "another regime similar to the moderate Arab regimes that are ready to sign any capitulation agreement with Israel."¹⁸ Thus, rather than strive to institute reforms or democracy in Syria, Washington's latest policy essentially aimed at instituting subservience: "If President Bashar al-Asad were to go now to the Americans and surrender, the problem would be resolved."¹⁹

Echoing Hizbullah's stance on the Iran protests is Nasrallah's characterization of the US' role in the Syrian uprising as an extension of the July War and the Gaza War. Since the resistance in Lebanon and Palestine had foiled the "New Middle East" scheme in both these military aggressions, Washington was "trying to reintroduce [it] through other gates," such as Syria.²⁰

With this in mind, attempts to overthrow the Asad regime are considered a "service" to American and Israeli interests.²¹ While Hizbullah has not directly accused the Syrian opposition of serving or collaborating with the US and Israel, Nasrallah recently chastised it for pandering to Washington's political sensitivities by omitting the Palestinian cause from its discourse.²² The anti-Hizbullah slogans raised by some elements of the opposition, as well as their accusations concerning the movement's alleged involvement in government repression, have done little to assuage its fears.

These fears have been lent further credence by Israel's public pronouncements on the uprising. In one such instance, Israeli president, Shimon Peres, openly called for the overthrow of Asad, declaring "Asad must go". Despite the reservations of some about the unpredictability of a new regime, Peres conceded that regime change could help pave the way for an eventual peace treaty between Israel and Syria. ²³ In a word, it would deal "a severe blow to Iran and Hizbullah", according to Israeli Defence Minister, Ehud Barak's analysis.²⁴

HIZBULLAH'S THEORY AND PRAXIS AS DETERMINANTS OF ITS SUPPORT FOR THE ASAD REGIME

Aside from the strategic factors behind Hizbullah's continued support for the Asad regime, the movement's position is also grounded in theoretical considerations. Mediating Hizbullah's strategic imperatives is an intellectual schema that prioritizes its political objectives and conceptualizes its central values. For that reason, an inquiry into Hizbullah's political thought and praxis is crucial to understanding how it rationalizes its controversial stance on Syria.

Hizbullah's hierarchy of oppression

As the raison d'être of Hizbullah, resistance to Israel is constitutive of the movement's identity and thus fashions its interests and strategic objectives. The "resistance priority" is therefore the guiding principle of the movement's rationality. The preeminent status accorded to resistance is itself contingent on a conceptual hierarchy of oppression, where Israel emerges as the ultimate injustice, with the United States running a close second, and autocratic regimes, particularly those subservient to the US, occupying third place.²⁵ Given that violence and repression are common characteristics of all three categories of oppression, it necessarily follows that violence per se is not the sole determinant of injustice. What makes Israeli violence particularly egregious is that the Zionist state represents an "absolute evil" which arises not from "the circumstances of the occupation" but from "the very existence of the Israeli state." ²⁶ As such, there can be no comparison for Hizbullah between the violence perpetrated by Israel and that practiced by the Asad regime.

A point often overlooked, is Hizbullah's own experience of repression at the hands of the Syrian regime. One such instance was the '*Fathallah* Massacre' of 1987 when Syrian forces gunned down twenty-three Hizbullah fighters in cold blood, in Beirut. Again in 1993, the Lebanese army, acting at the behest of Syria, killed several Hizbullah supporters protesting the Oslo Accord in September 1993, otherwise known as the 'September Massacre'. In both these incidents, the movement merely licked its wounds so as to avoid obstructing its resistance activity. The resistance priority clearly took precedence over confronting Syria's forces in Lebanon.

If Hizbullah itself was willing to overlook the Syrian regime's violence against it, for the sake of a higher cause, it stands to reason that it would expect the same of the Syrian protesters. According to Hizbullah's strategic logic, exerting one's efforts on the removal of an oppressive regime deflects attention from the priority of resisting Israel and confronting US military and political imperialism.

In 1997, in the midst of the Algerian civil war and a series of violent incidents executed by Egyptian Islamists, Nasrallah launched an initiative aimed at reconciling opposition Islamist groups with their autocratic regimes. In Egypt, militant Islamists were exhorted to refrain from taking up arms against the state and to opt for dialogue with the Mubarak regime instead. Part of Hizbullah's rationale for this policy was its aversion to chaos which it considers "more oppressive" than the oppressive regimes themselves. Its stand was also dictated by the logic that rather than target internal "tyranny", the Islamists would better serve their people by directing their weapons at their "fundamental enemy", Israel.²⁷

After the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2002-2003, resisting the US occupation was added to the list of priorities which took precedence over confronting oppressive regimes. It is based on this line of reasoning that on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, Nasrallah called for reconciliation between the Iraqi Shia opposition and the Saddam regime along the lines of the Lebanese Taif Accord. Worth recalling here is the vast number of Shi'ite dissidents who died at Saddam's hands, including Seyyid Mohammad Baqr al-Sadr, the intellectual founder of the Islamic *Da'wa* party, from which many Hizbullah officials originally hailed, as well as the fact that Saddam Hussein's regime was a sworn enemy of Hizbullah's closest ally Iran. But both the prospect of a civil war engulfing Iraq, as well as its occupation by US forces, were considered greater evils than countenancing his oppressive rule.

It should come as no surprise then, that Hizbullah would support the Asad regime when its removal is associated with US hegemony and the fragmentation of Syria. It is safe to assume that Hizbullah would not have been so vocal and unequivocal in its defence of the regime had it not framed the violence as a low grade, sectarian civil war supported by foreign powers, rather than a brutal crackdown on unarmed protesters. For Hizbullah, the absence of reliable information on either side, as well as rampant media distortion, has not only clouded the extent of popular agitation, but also, "the nature and scope of the clashes".²⁸

The Obama administration's recent recognition that the opposition has "turned violent ... as an act of self-preservation,"²⁹ has done little to discredit Hizbullah's reading of events. Further calling into question the mainstream narrative of regime brutality vis-a-vis unarmed civilians is the *Syrian National Council's* (SNC) threat to resort to violence,³⁰ and requests for weapons from "the international community" by armed elements close to the opposition umbrella group.³¹

Hizbullah's criteria for supporting revolution

None of this is to say that Hizbullah is inherently anti-revolutionary -- its support for the Arab uprisings testifies to its championing of revolutionary causes. As Arab regimes have inched closer to the US and Israel over the past decade or so, their association with the "greatest abominations in our era" -- to quote Hizbullah's previous leader, Sayyed Abbas Al-Mousawi -- has become more direct and hence, intolerable. Consequently, the perceived benefits of abstaining from revolutionary action (maintaining civil peace and focusing efforts on Israel and the US) have been outweighed by the costs of inaction vis-à-vis the US and Israel.

Thus for example, while the movement tried in the past to dissuade Egypt's Islamists from taking up arms against the state, this changed during the Gaza War when Nasrallah all but stopped short of calling for the regime's overthrow. In an unprecedentedly bold and somewhat subversive move, Nasrallah urged the Egyptian military to refuse to maintain the regime's siege on Gaza and called on "millions" of Egyptians to brave government repression and take to the streets to express their outrage. This stand was the result of Egypt's "partnership with Israel" which had surpassed the level of mere silence or complicity owing to the Mubarak regime's foreknowledge of the Israeli invasion, and its strangulation of the Gazan people and resistance forces with its closure of the Rafah crossing.

When the Egyptians launched their revolt two years later, the movement traced its causes to "injustice, corruption, repression, hunger ... and the regime's policies towards the Arab-Israeli conflict." Not only was the uprising in January 2011 motivated in part by strategic issues, but served to harm Israel's interests and caused it "real panic and alarm". More than that, the impact of the revolt transcended Egypt's borders and had the potential to "change the face of our region ... especially in Palestine"³² — terms normally reserved for the resistance struggle.

Thus, during this phase of flagrant Arab complicity with the US-Israeli scheme, Hizbullah's revolutionary prescriptions rest on two concurrent criteria: first, "this regime's relationship with and position towards the American-Israeli project in the region" and second, the potential for reforms. ³³ As underlined by Nasrallah, "our criteria are the same criteria which determine our position on all the Arab revolutions."³⁴ Since the revolutions in Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and especially Egypt meet both these criteria, in that the regimes there are subject to the American project and are not willing to reform, Hizbullah considers its support for these revolts as consistent. Conversely, the Asad regime's *mumana'ist* position and role in the region, coupled with its openness to reform and dialogue means that the Syrian uprising has failed to meet either of these requirements, and hence, Hizbullah cannot "support the downfall of a resistance, *mumani'i* regime which has begun reforms".³⁵As such, Hizbullah's withholding

of support from the protesters is "not based on double standards" as is commonly alleged, but "one standard".³⁶

Conclusion: Hizbullah's conception of rights and freedom

As a political party which has always subordinated its political role to its military one, Hizbullah has never pursued the political rights that it is entitled to, such as greater political representation in Lebanon. Both in 1992 and 1996, the party allowed itself to be pressured by Syria into an electoral alliance with AMAL, although it could have won more seats on its own. As with the killing of its fighters and supporters, Hizbullah once again adhered to the "*saqf al suri*" (Syrian ceiling) in order to protect its resistance. Similarly, even when it has pursued political power, it has only been to shield its resistance from external pressures - as in 2005 following the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon - and in 2011 when it ousted the Saad Hariri government over the issue of the *Special Tribunal for Lebanon*. Even then, Hizbullah has always contented itself with minimal government representation. Nor has the movement pursued communal rights for its Shi'ite constituency, such as a larger share of political power commensurate with the community's size.

Indeed, Hizbullah sacrifices its political rights in order to safeguard its resistance, but it is also willing to deprive others of their perceived right to terminate it. As illustrated by the events of May 2008, Hizbullah did not hesitate to turn its arms against its domestic rivals who sought to paralyze its resistance activity. It has been similarly intransigent in less provocative setting such as the National Dialogue talks. While Hizbullah is willing to dialogue with its foes over its arms, its conditions are effectively non-negotiable insofar as it rejects the notion of disarmament outright as well as rejecting any proposals to place the resistance under the command of the Lebanese army. Nasrallah admits as much when he describes the movement's resistance as "a controversial national issue" which never was "an object of national consensus."³⁷ Popular legitimacy is undoubtedly desirable for Hizbullah but by no means necessary. In this connection, resistance is not a right because it was launched by the people; rather, it is a right because it is a freedom-seeking action. More than this, it is a duty: "The resistance does not wait for national or popular consensus, but must take to arms and press ahead with the duty of liberation."³⁸

As with revolutionary action, the issue at stake is "not just the blood of a man, the fate of a woman, the crushed bones of a child, or a piece of bread stolen from the mouth of a poor or hungry person. It is the issue of a people, a nation, a fate, holy places, history, and the future."³⁹ In other words, the ultimate end of political action is not merely the protection of various civil and political rights of the individual as in Liberal thought, nor only about expanding the scope of participation for the attainment of

social and economic rights, as in the Socialist dispensation; it is the trans-historical collective right of the *umma* in its past, present and future manifestations.

In effect, although the party's participation in the political system generally conforms to the rules of liberal democracy, its resistance is not amenable to universalized Euro-American liberal norms like majority rule and political value pluralism. By implication, Hizbullah's understanding of freedom as a positive freedom *to* control one's destiny and to achieve self-determination, both digresses from, and surpasses, the liberal preoccupation with the negative freedom *from* external constraints and hindrances. In so far as freedom is associated with liberation, it figures more prominently in the movement's public discourse than the liberal concept of freedom which Hizbullah refers to in the plural as public "freedoms". Liberationist freedom is also used synonymously with democracy as demonstrated by Nasrallah's response to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: "This big charlatan deduced that there are only one million Arabs in what he called Israel enjoying freedom and democracy. No Mr Netanyahu ... we in Lebanon are the free men of this world. We in Lebanon secured our freedom with blood...".⁴⁰Also alluding to this liberationist understanding of freedom is Nasrallah's construction of the Egyptian uprising as "the revolution of the poor people, the free men, the freedom-seekers and those who reject insult and humiliation ... as a result of surrendering to the will of the US and Israel."⁴¹

The association between freedom on the one hand, and oppression and liberation on the other, is more evident still when one recalls how Hizbullah's first manifesto - its "Open Letter" of 1985 - was addressed to the *"Free* downtrodden men". In another instance, oppression is defined as being "free".⁴² By rendering freedom and oppression interchangeable, Hizbullah's concept of freedom emerges less as a liberal, post-dictatorship ideal and more of an ongoing, and indefinite status and process. To be free is not to be left alone, but to continually struggle for justice. It is for this reason that Hizbullah is inherently antagonistic to liberal uprisings like Syria's which focus their efforts on freeing themselves from state control at the expense of the struggle against US and Israeli colonialism.

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The opinions in this paper are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of Conflicts Forum.

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³⁰ See for example Syrian National Council President, Burhan Ghalioun, quoted in "Syria hails 'historic' Russia, China vetoes", *AFP*, 4 October 2011

- ³¹ "Syrian Defector Urges Aid For Armed Opposition Group," AFP, 10 October 2011
- ³² Nasrallah, Manar TV, 7 February 2011
- ³³ Nasrallah, Interview, Manar TV, 24 October 2011
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Nasrallah, 19 March 2011
- ³⁷ Nasrallah, Manar TV, 16 February 2011
- ³⁸ Nasrallah, *Manar TV*, 26 May 2008
- ³⁹ Nasrallah, Manar TV, 7 February 2011
- ⁴⁰ Nasrallah *Manar TV*, Resistance and Liberation day speech, op cit.
- ⁴¹ Nasrallah, Manar TV, 7 February, 2011
- ⁴² Quoted in Saad-Ghorayeb, p.19