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HIZBULLAH AND THE WAR IN SYRIA: HISTORY AND POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

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ABSTRACT

How did Hizbullah become involved in the Syrian War and to what extent is this participation negative or positive for the group? The goal of this article - based on specialized academic literature and local sources - is to present this scenario of acting of the most important non-state actor in the Middle East and these two possible analyzes.

Keywords: Middle East. Hizbullah. Lebanon. Syria. NonState actors.

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INTRODUCTION

The theory of international relations, in recent years, has reserved unprecedented attention to non-State actors in international politics. Briefly, these actors could be categorized as widely or entirely autonomous entities in relation to the control and resources of a central government; Present in transnational political, social and economic networks; and capable of impacting political processes, within one or more States or in international bodies (JOSSELIN and WALLACE,

2001, pp. 3-4).

In the Middle East, cross-border identity and political axes are manifested, which encourages the activity of non-State agents with international reach. The proliferation of non-State actors stimulates the existence of medium powers in dispute, inclined to promote proxy wars within changeable geography alliances. The anomy of some governmental apparatus is added to this (BUZAN e WAEVER, 2002, pp. 187–218; HALLIDAY, 2005, pp 229-236; HINNEBUSCH, 2002, pp. 29-53; KAUSCH, 2017, pp. 67-69).

Lebanon is a country of average income, with a higher level of human development than that of many other States in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and East Asia. It has shown, since its independence from France in 1943, a political structure of little consistency, fertile ground for parties and armed movements to equate with state control, coexisting with government institutions or challenging them. The main cause of competition between the state apparatus and substate organizations arises from the political model on which the country was founded: the confessional system, with power sharing between Christian and Muslim religious communities. Public policies, such as defense and foreign policies, end up being common minimum denominators of the interests of political associations of sectarian and family characteristics, which, in the course of the country's history, have always been reluctant to dispose of their own nuclei of security – militias – and of their own contacts with other countries (WILKINS, 2013, pp. 39-43).

Of all non-State actors that have appeared in the history of independent Lebanon, Hizbullah proved the most tenacious against domestic and external attempts to accommodate it within the Lebanese State. A complex entity, the "Party of God" – which is the exact translation of its name – represents the largest part of the Shiite community in its country. It was born in 1982 as a secret organization and has since transmuted into a multifaceted entity: political aggregation, paramilitary power, social services administrator and diplomatic interlocutor of other Middle Eastern countries and even

of countries out of this region. Working pragmatically as a component of Lebanese politics and force involved in external confrontations – most often with Israel – Hizbullah has leveraged this duplicity in its favor, associating with other countries that can secure its agenda in Lebanon and abroad.

The aim of the article in question is to focus on the specific analysis of the action of Hizbullah in Syria, which since 2011 has become the setting of one of the world's bloodiest armed confrontation. The idea is to show here the process that culminated with the entry of the "Party of God" in the Syrian theater of war and the changes imposed by it throughout all phases in which it participated, concluding with the presentation of analyses on the gains and losses for the Hizbullah in the wake of its involvement in the conflict.

This is a case study of the action of a non-State actor in the Middle East that is absolutely relevant for better understanding of an important part of the Syrian War and of the broader geopolitical reorganizations in the region. It is also important because of the Brazilian presence at UNIFIL since 2011, in a context in which Hizbullah has an expressive role. The text is based on endorsed secondary literature and on the analysis of local press articles – in English, French and Arabic.

1 - PRELUDE: FROM THE "ARAB SPRING" TO THE ENTRY IN THE SYRIAN WAR

The Hizbullah's participation in the Syrian War can only be understood in the broader context of the emergence of the so-called "Arab Spring," in the early 2011, and of how the "Party of God" reacted primarily to this geopolitical shock in the Middle East. Its leadership welcomed the initial political transformations triggered by "Spring," but with the growth of instability in Syria, the Hizbullah began to reassess its perception of this phenomenon in the "Arab Street." After internal deliberations, it was determined that the party-militia would enter the Syrian conflict (DAHER, 2016, pp. 169-187; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 37-40).

In the early moments of the "Spring," Hizbullah authorities expressed a positive view in relation to the revolts that arose in Bahrain, Libya, Egypt and Tunisia. They indicated that the popular movements against the political regimes in these countries had goals that coincided with the "Party of God" policy of resistance to American hegemony and to the presence of Israel in the Middle East (DAHER, 2016, pp. 171-179; ICG, 2014, pp. 3-5).

In fact, the Hizbullah's initial sympathy for the riots in the Arab countries above, in addition to reflecting its anti-imperialist ideological

reading, was consistent with some specific strategic interests and historical purposes. In Bahrain, for example, the demonstrations pointed to potential gains in the strategy of unlocking the participation of local elements in the Shiite transnational networks of mutual collaboration.

After all, the Bahraini populational majority, belonging to this confessional group, integrated the ranks of those dissatisfied with the arbitrariness of Bahrain's monarchic system, dominated by Sunni elite[3].

As for Libya, the Hizbullah, along with another influential Shiite Lebanese political party, the AMAL, favored the collapse of the regime of Colonel Muammar Qadhafi, in view of the historical suspicion of the Libyan leader's involvement in the disappearance of Imam Musa al-Sadr, founder of the politicized Shi'a movements in Lebanon and one of the most prominent personalities of Shiism in the Middle East. These two, seemingly without resistance from other Lebanese political parties, endeavored so Lebanon, as a member of the League of Arab States (LAS) and as a non-permanent seat occupant of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), approved measures against the Qadhafi regime. Beirut supported the Council Resolution 1973, which imposed on Libya the non-fly zone, as well as arms embargo and freezing of assets of that country's authorities (EL ZEIN, NOTTEAU & DRAVET, 2013, p. 341).

With regard to Egypt and Tunisia, the Hizbullah had no precise immediate objectives. Its leaders were displeased that these two governments maintained preferential ties with the USA (DAHER, 2016, pp. 171-179; ICG, 2014, pp. 3-5), which, in turn, stand out as the greatest western opponent of the so-called "axis of resistance", also designated as the "arch of resistance" or, in the words of King Abdullah II of Jordan, "Shiite crescent." It is the transnational alliance composed of Iran, Syria, Iraqi Shi'a associations, Palestinian Islamist groups and Hizbullah itself. This alliance antagonizes the interests of the United States and of its main strategic partner in the Middle East: Israel, greater enemy of the Lebanese Shiite party-militia (HUSSEINI,

3 A small island in the Gulf, Bahrain, since its independence in 1971, is ruled by Sunni monarchy, although its population is 60% Shiite. The country even formed a parliament, dissolved in 1975 and reinstituted in 2002, albeit with scarce powers. Political parties can operate as "political societies," but with little leeway. The main one would be the Shiite al-Weqaf Islamic National Society, with transnational links (stronger with clerics of Iraqi Shiism than from Iran). This, however, has not preserved it from criticism from the Bahraini government, which accuses the Al-Weqaf of association with Tehran and its allies, which intensified after the "Arab Spring," when the Bahraini crown openly indicated that the Shiites conspired with the Iranians for overtaking the monarchy (KININNMONT, 2011, pp. 40-48, p. 54-57).

2010, pp. 809-813)

Thus, the Hizbullah's positions as to the first effects of the "Arab Spring" on the aforementioned countries provided it with new strategic dividends, albeit secondary, because these States did not represent, in that context, priority focuses for the action of the "Party of God." Otherwise, in the worst case scenario, the group's line of action cost it reduced additional political burden in view of the opinion of Arab powers that, historically, already fiercely criticized the "Party of God," such as Egypt itself and Arab-Sunni monarchies of the Gulf – Saudi Arabia, the aforementioned Bahrain and the United Arab States (UAS). In short, it was a situation that did not challenge the ideological canons of the group very much and in which practical political-strategic gains, although not essential, exceeded possible losses in the external relations of the Hizbullah.

With Syria, the exact opposite would occur. The conflict in that country could cost a very high price to the Lebanese Shiite group, whereas possible gains from its intervention would be of the first magnitude.

The prospect of spread of the "Arab Spring" to Syria required from Hizbullah a different approach. Strategic thinking predominated over political-ideological interpretations carried out within the group in the first months of popular movement – in Syria and in other Arab countries – sympathetic to the redemocratization of Arab political institutions. This realistic approach resulted from the depth that the political-military collaboration between the Hizbullah and presidents Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000) and Bashar al-Assad (2000-) had achieved since the Lebanese post-Civil War period.

Although in the final years of the Lebanese Civil War the "Party of God", associated with Iran, antagonized the Syrian government by linking it with the AMAL, at the time in dispute with Hizbullah for the leadership of the Shiite population in Lebanon, the pattern of dialogue with Damascus changed after the pacification of Lebanon in 1989-1990 and the establishment of Syrian guardianship over Lebanon between 1990 and 2005 (OSOEGAWA, 2013, p. 88 e pp. 110113; QASSEM, 2010, pp. 393-399; SCHELLER, 2013, pp. 140-146).

During the 1990s, the relation went from mistrust to asymmetric relationship of cooperation. Damascus, in order to erect the Lebanese interparty balance architecture that ensured its control over the neighboring country, mediated peace between the AMAL and Hizbullah and regulated the contacts between the latter and Iran. With Syrian consent, Hizbullah, in contrast to the other factions that fought in the Civil War, did not disarm

itself and could undertake, between 1990 and 2000, the recovery of southern Lebanon, then under Israeli occupation. In much of what related to Israel, Syria, with Iran, coordinated directly with the Shiite organization, circumventing the Lebanese State itself (OSOEGAWA, 2013, pp. 110113; QASSEM, 2010, pp. 393-399; SCHELLER, 2013, pp. 140-146).

In 2004, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1559, demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops, which happened, in 2005, after the assassination of former premier Rafic Hariri and renewed wave of protests in Lebanon and in the international community on Damascus for compliance with Resolution[4].

Syria ceased to exert direct control over Lebanon, but maintained its influence. This was made possible by the alliance with Hizbullah, which began to have an important role in the Lebanese domestic scene, the pro-Assad and pro-Iran party coalition March 8 (also integrated by the AMAL and other parties), in opposition to the March 14, Westernist and Pro-Saudi Arabia (OSOEGAWA, 2013, pp. 157-158; QASSEM, 2010, pp. 393-399; SCHELLER, 2013, pp. 140-146). It is worth detailing that, already before 2005, the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, pressed by the U.S. government's anti-terror campaign, increased its cooperation with Hizbullah (MIKAELIAN e SALLOUKH, 2016, p. 135-138).

In fact, the links between the Syrians and the Hizbullah became more horizontal, based on dynamics of strategic interdependence: Damascus delegating to it the execution of the Syrian agenda in Lebanon, and the "Party of God" relying on the Syrian authorities for the transit of armaments employed by it, of Iranian or Syrian manufacturing. This arrangement within

[4] Rafic Hariri, a Lebanese-Saudi billionaire, was prime Minister of Lebanon in 1992-1998 and 2000-2004. Responsible for the reconstruction of Beirut and other areas of Lebanon after the Civil War, he is remembered as one of the most popular leaders of the country, not only among the Sunni, but also among other confessions. Always supported by Saudi Arabia, Hariri maintained a complex relation with Syria. He cooperated with Syrian president Hafez al-Assad and, above all, with his vice-president, Abdel al-Halim Khaddam, with whom he maintained economic partnerships in Lebanon. The gradual rise of Bashar al-Assad from 1998, when he was appointed by his father to fight corruption and take care of the Lebanese dossier, as well as his election as President of Syria after the death of Hafez in 2000, caused dissociation. Hariri never treated the government of Bashar as an ally, but, rather, as a partner. He was removed from the position of head of government in 1998 by pressure from the future Syrian president. In his second term as a prime minister, he began questioning the interests of Damascus. Leaving the government in 2004, he allied with Western countries, especially the U.S. and France, to end Syria's guardianship, and his administrations contributed to the approval of Resolution 1559. Hariri died in the bombing in February 2005, under circumstances that are still investigated by the Special Court of Lebanon, a hybrid body of Lebanese justice and the United Nations. (BELHADJ, 2013, p. 107-109 and 211-212).

the "axis of resistance" matured after 2005, in events such as the "Summer War" in 2006, between Hizbullah and Israel, being progressively marked by the direct ascendancy of the Iranian government on Syria itself and the "Party of God" ((MIKAELIAN e SALLOUKH, 2016, p. 135-138). It remained without significant threats of disruption until 2011, when the Syrian political and military internal disruptions triggered by the "Arab Spring" began.

The supply of arms to Hizbullah, which could not, in the perspective of the movement, be discontinued by eventual changes of power in Syria, was imposed as an objective factor, of great seriousness, in the organization's decision-making process regarding its position on the Syrian crisis.

However, the involvement did not prove immediate. The leaders of the party, in the course of 2011 and 2012, interpreted the developments in Syria and in the other Arab countries with a view to modulating the most efficient way to deal with them. They pondered the tangible risks of defeat of the Assad government and the projection of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) on a regional scale, with its branches in Egypt and Tunisia coming to power, supported by Qatar and Turkey, while its Syrian branch – equally encouraged by Doha and Ankara – had a role of protagonism within the set of groups of opposition to the Assad regime (DAHER, 2016, p. 169-187; ICG, 2014, p. 3-5; RANSTROP, 2016, p. 37-40).

Moving away from its original approach, more favorable to the popular movements of the "Arab Spring" and, in the case of Syria, to the search for an internal solution between the sides that were mutually opposed, Hizbullah went on to singularize the case of the conflict in the neighboring country, identifying, as one of its main causes, the coordination of external forces hostile to the "axis of resistance": USA, Israel, pro-Washington Arab powers, in addition to Western European countries such as France and the United Kingdom. Its narrative was that the opponents of the Syrian State, instead of defending "revolution" leading to the establishment of a democratic political regime, sought the overturn of Assad, eliminating him from his position as a country leader who embodied the "backbone" of the "arch of resistance." (DAHER, 2016, pp. 169-187; ICG, 2014, pp. 2-5; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 37-40).

It is observed that Hizbullah directed similar criticism to Lebanon itself, accusing segments of the Sunni population – related in some way to the March 14 anti-Damascus coalition – of infiltrating Syrian territory to combat the forces loyal to Assad. The involvement of Lebanese Sunni elements in the Syrian internal conflict implied, in their view, a danger to the security of

Lebanon itself. Its opinion makers emphasized that the flow of combatants between the two countries could take place in the opposite direction: Sunni radicals could, after a combat season in Syria, go to Lebanon, establishing combat or terrorist activity cells in the country. It is noted here a sectarian component, considering the Hizbullah's fear that the Sunni jihadist cells concentrated their attacks on the Lebanese Shiite groups (DAHER, 2016, pp. 169187; ICG, 2014, pp. 2-5; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 37-40).

The sectarian approach employed by Hizbullah to assess the Syrian conflict and its overflow to Lebanon also involved the situation of the Shiite communities and pilgrims moving to Syria, given the presence in that country of small towns with expressive numbers of this confessional group, with Syrian and Lebanese nationalities, as well as sites considered sacred according to the tradition of Shiism. The shrine of Zeinab, daughter of Caliph Ali and granddaughter of Muhammad, located in the suburbs of Damascus and visited by numerous Lebanese, would be one of the most famous Shiite pilgrimage routes in Syria, which, with the emergence of the conflict in that country, was vulnerable to attack. (DAHER, 2016, pp. 169-187; ICG, 2014, pp. 3-5; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 37-40).

Thus, the strategic ingredients and the narrative substance to justify the active role of Hizbullah in Syria were instilled. The group's accentuated inclination to participate in the conflict arose at the same time that the Lebanese political class, fractured between the March 8 and March 14 coalitions, also expressed fear that the country would end up swallowed by the neighboring conflict by importing the violence of the intra-Syria rivalries into the already unstable equilibrium of internal forces.

In an attempt to protect itself from the shock waves coming from Syria, rival party associations negotiated that Lebanon should ratify its historic tendency to neutrality with regard to disputes between the Arabs and adopt its dissociation policy for the War in Syria. Thus arose the "Baabda Declaration," in 2012, which Hizbullah, effectively, never obeyed, preferring the opposite way. According to it, the stability and security of Lebanon would not be achieved by neutralist diplomacy, but rather by favoring one side in the Syrian war – that of Assad – following him ideologically, politically and militarily. (DAHER, 2016, pp. 169-187; ICG, 2014, pp. 2-5; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 37-40).

2 – THE THREE PHASES OF HIZBULLAH'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN WAR

2.1 – THE FIRST PHASE: 2011–2013

It is difficult to determine precisely at what time Hizbullah began to act within the Syrian conflict, and there was certainly a gap between the introduction of its troops in Syrian territory and the admission of its leaders that their troops interfered in the clashes of the neighboring country. The Lebanese press reported, already in 2011, the action of combatants from the group in Syria, on a reduced scale. Analysts believe that, between 2011 and 2012, military staff members of the party worked as advisors providing training to both Syrian Army troops and pro-Assad irregular armed groups such as the Al-Jaysh al-Sha'bi and the shabiha militias, mostly composed of the Alawite collectivity (same as Assad), subsequently reorganized and renamed National Defense Forces (NDF). With the advice, Syrian soldiers and militia members absorbed Hizbullah's expertise of light infantry and rapid movement, as well as their knowledge of urban warfare (DAHER, 2016, pp. 169-187; ICG, 2014, pp. 2-5; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 37-40).

The inflection that led to Hizbullah's most assertive intervention would have been in July 2012, time of the bombing in Damascus that killed head members of the Syrian government's intelligence and security services. It is observed that one of the victims of the attack was Assef ash-Shawkat, President Assad's brother-in-law[5]. The assassination, along with the arrival of the rebels to Syria's own capital, definitively ratified the Hizbullah's understanding that the Assad government weakened with aggressive opposing attacks and pronounced foreign support. The episodes recommended, for the sake of the strategic interests of protection of the "axis of resistance," more robust armed interference of the Lebanese party-militia on Syrian soil. (DAHER, 2016, pp. 169-187; ICG, 2014, pp 5-6; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 37-40).

Thus, in October 2012, the secretary-general of Hizbullah, Hassan Nasrallah, publicly declared that the troops of his party were in Syria, with the task of protecting the lives of Lebanese Shia who dwelled in villages on the Syrian side, in the vicinity of the border with Lebanon. (DAHER, 2016, pp. 169-187; ICG, 2014, pp 3-5; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 37-40).

It is thus inferred that, in 2011–2012, in the interval when Hizbullah

[5] Assef Ash-Shawkat, of military training, rose to the hierarchy of Syrian security agencies. Between 2003 and 2008, he was responsible for the security and intelligence services. Considered the second most powerful man in Syria in this period, he gradually lost influence because of his rivalry with President Assad's brother, Maher al-Assad, even though he remained in the innermost circles of the government vertex until his assassination in 2012 (TROMBETTA, 2014, pp. 160-162).

analyzed how the situation in Syria developed and shaped its political narrative to legitimize which course of action it would choose, the evolution of modest-sized operations made by its militias, for punctual purposes, was perceived, as exemplified by the protection of the Shia populations and religious sites and the assistance to the military of the Assad government and Syrian militias loyal to it. (DAHER, 2016, pp. 169-187; ICG, 2014, pp 3-5; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 37-40).

At the beginning of 2013, however, the new and decisive mode of action of Hizbullah was inaugurated, exerting a clear influence on the Syrian military and geopolitical theater, with its open and significant participation in the ranks of pro-Damascus combat. The Battle of Al-Qusayir was triggered.

A small town of Sunni majority near the metropolis of Homs, in Syria's north-central region, Al-Qusayir acquired strategic value for Damascus by facilitating the path to Latakia, in the Syrian coastal area, zone of Alawite majority and, therefore, the Assad's bastion of power. Adjacent to the border with Lebanon, Al-Qusayir similarly enables access to the northern fraction of the Lebanese Beqaa Valley. The Valley is a territorial corridor extending from the south to the north, separating the chains of Mount Lebanon, to the west, from the Anti-Lebanon mountains, to the east. Especially its eastern portion, more Shiite, has been under the influence of Hizbullah for years, although its predominance there is not as hegemonic as in the south of the country. The rural and clan based substrate of the BEQAA hampers the full authority of the party, which must live in negotiated symbiosis with local leaders (ALAMI, 2014). In addition to this, there are smuggling routes in the Beqaa, used by Syrian rebels, and Sunni population cysts, potential refuges and points of supply for Assad's opponents and, clearly, a source of concern in Hizbullah's security planning in the Lebanon countryside (ALAMI, 2017 A, pp. 15-18; SULLIVAN, 2014, pp. 14-16).

The geopolitical configuration summarized above made al-Qusayir – dominated by the Anti-Assad troops of the Free Syrian Army since 2012 – a crucial step in the struggle fought by the government of Damascus seeking the restitution of the territory lost to the rebels, while it emerged as the primary target of the "Party of God" in its attempt to shield the Beqaa Valley and increase its coverage over the border zone, where Syrian-Lebanese Shia populations inhabited. Despite the convergence of objectives, it is not rule out that the political stimulus injected by Iran for Hizbullah to commit to this battle has ensured its final engagement in the military operation. (ALAMI, 2017 A, pp. 15-18; SULLIVAN, 2014, pp. 14-16).

In the Al-Qusayir offensive, Hizbullah's intervention was distinguished as to depth from its previous experience in the Syrian conflict by employing a large number of combatants, estimated between 1,200 and 1,700 men, many of which veterans, members of its special units. Moreover, the group headed the planning and conduction of the maneuvers, creating precedent in the alteration of the relationship with the Syrian regular troops by assuming leadership functions. (ALAMI, 2017 A, pp. 15-18; SULLIVAN, 2014, pp. 14-16).

From the rhetorical and political perspective, Al-Qusayir brought two reorientations of Hizbullah's conduct in Syria, in particular, and in the Middle East, in general. Firstly, with an unprecedented tone, the party conveyed to the world that it was infiltrating the neighboring country with the purpose of preventing a regime change, safeguarding the Assad government from attempts to remove it, thus guaranteeing the survival of the "axis of resistance." Secondly, their leaders were no longer restrained and began to afford the potentially high political costs resulting from leaving it so ostensive that their militias attacked other Arabs, rather than Israeli commands, the historical opponent of the "Resistance." Nasrallah attempted to administer this contradiction by encouraging the idea that the rivals of Hizbullah were the takfiriun, that is, the Sunni Islamic radicals who committed apostasy for their extremism violating the Koranic precepts and who fought on behalf of conservative Arab-Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in Al-Qusayir (DAHER, 2016, pp. 182-183; ICG, 2014, pp 7-10; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 37-45).

Another problematic incident of the battle: the Hizbullah troops clashed directly with detachments of the Izzi din al-Qassam, the military branch of the Palestinian Islamist party HAMAS, previously a faithful allied of Damascus and declared member of the "axis of resistance," which, by virtue of its ties with the Brotherhood, decided to join the rebels in the Syrian conflict (RANSTROP, p. 43; SEURAT, 2015, pp. 88-91).

2.2 – THE SECOND PHASE: 2013–2015

In September 2013, the Hizbullah and the Syrian troops emerged victorious from al-Qusayir. This battle broke the pace of achievements of the opposition since the beginning of the war in Syria, creating a new levelling of power between the belligerent groups. Thanks largely to the cooperation of the Lebanese Shiite militia, the Assad government gained – in the turn from 2013 to 2014 – a new breath, while, reactively, the Arab powers and Western

countries increased support to the anti-Damascus factions, causing even greater internationalization of the conflict. From then on, the "Party of God" plunged into ascending military spiral in the neighboring country.

The increase in the group's military presence was based on the initial strategy of submitting the Syrian-Lebanese border band to a type of sanitary cordon aiming at the control of human and material flows between the porous boundaries between the two countries. The ambition was to: stop jihadi penetration in Lebanon; cut off supply routes from this country to Syrian rebels; undermine communications and support platforms between the rebels and their sympathizers on the Lebanese side; and consolidate the scheme for protection of minorities and Shia worship sites in Syrian territory.

Suggestively, after al-Qusaiyr, another fundamental battle was fought, between the late 2013 and the late 2014, whose purpose was, for Hizbullah, to secure the western fraction of Syria contiguous to Lebanese territory: Qalamoun. It is a mountainous area of the border between Damascus and Homs. Controlling it would secure the supply routes coming from Lebanon to supply the battalions of the Shiite militia in Syria. Qalamoun was also important for the Syrian government to maintain its access to the sea by the M-5 highway (ALAMI, 2017 A, pp. 17-18; SULLIVAN, 2014, pp. 20-22).

Following Qalamoun, the group redoubled its activities in the Syrian capital, where it had been since 2012 to watch the sacred site of Zainab. In addition to looking after the holy Shiite site, Hizbullah went on to fight the rebels who occupied the outskirts of eastern Ghouta. (ALAMI, 2017 A, pp. 17-18; SULLIVAN, 2014, pp. 20-22).

Always having as a underlying motivation the defense of the transnational arch of "resistance," which ultimately fed the war power of Hizbullah, it can be noted that, up to a certain limit, the above directives were more defensive and intertwined with perceptions of the evolution of the Lebanese political and security context, whose tenuous balance had been severely shaken by the repercussions of the war in Syria. After all, throughout 2013, interconfessional tensions, particularly between the Shiite and Sunni collectivities, intensified again in Lebanon. In cities where Sunnism prevailed demographically, there was a rise in uprising against the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), accused of complicity with Hizbullah, as seen in the Sidon protests stimulated by Salafist Sheikh al-Asir. Similarly, clashes with other minorities proliferated, as in Tripoli, where the Alawites of the Jabal Mohsen slum were surrounded by the Sunni of Bab at-Tabaneh. In Palestinian refugee camps, such as Ain al-Hilue, in southern Lebanon, the sections of traditional

parties – FATAH, HAMAS, Islamic Jihad, PFLP, DFLP, among others – struggled hardly to suppress armed elements inspired by al-Qaeda. Car bombs exploded in Beirut, sometimes in the Shiite periphery, sometimes in Sunni and Christian neighborhoods (DOT-POUILLARD, 2015; ICG, 2015, pp. 1-19).

At the same time, the political-institutional functioning worsened. Lebanon remained without a president from 2014 to 2016 and with an almost dysfunctional parliament during this period. The moderate current of Sunnism deteriorated, personified in the figure of former premier and deputy Saad Hariri, chairperson of the Future party – the greatest party of the March 14th Alliance –, who, living outside the country, let his links with the population erode, inadvertently fostering the Sunni radicalism (DI PIERI & MEIER, pp. 35-53; ICG, 2015, pp. 1-19). The LAF and the public security entities, underfunded and underequipped corporations, lacked the means to deal with this series of challenges (DIDIER, 2014, pp. 191-196), whose great dimension provided Hizbullah with arguments to reiterate to society the duty that it assigned itself unilaterally of paladin of stability of Lebanon.

The internal agenda of Hizbullah, aimed at resolving the worrying prospect of Lebanese security and politics, guided its military options in Syria, sending its commands to the Syrian border space in Lebanon, seeking to stop or, minimally, mitigate the rebel movement in those locations. While its military projection in Syria began to show another dynamics, of a perhaps more offensive nature: its spread, with several dimensions, speeds and times, to almost all Syrian regions.

The leaders of Hizbullah argued that the movement to more distant areas of the Syrian-Lebanese border supplemented the work, centered in the bordering region, of dismantling the logistical channels of the Syrian opposition that used Lebanon. Nevertheless, it is worth assuming that the widening of the radius of action of the "Party of God" could be conditional on other phenomena, more unrelated to the concerns immediately related to the instability of security and of Lebanese institutions.

Among these phenomena, it would be highlighted the fact that the Syrian armed forces, despite having regained vitality after al-Qusayir and – during the early 2013 and late 2014 – having contained the advancement of the opposition, suffered substantial losses. Charles Lister (LISTER & NELSON, 2017, pp. 1-2), one of the most renowned scholars of the war in Syria, estimated that between 2011 and 2013 the conventional forces of Assad were reduced to half, from 220,000 to 110,000 men. Thus, Damascus faced the dilemma of

overload: the troops could not cover the entire territory without leading to lack of men and inferiority before their enemies. Local armed supplements, such as those of the NDF militias, and foreigners, such as Hizbullah itself and Shia battalions from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan, added the necessary firepower to numerous battle fronts.

Another relevant traction that would direct Hizbullah to other destinations in Syria would have to do with long-term geopolitical interests of its organic partner in the "axis of resistance," Iran[6] . This, perhaps already in 2013-2014, predicted that the reinvigoration of its solidarity to the Assad government, more than expedient to conserve the "axis of resistance," could be transfigured into a unique opportunity to reinforce it, under the ever greater Iranian hegemony. To Tehran, amplifying the scope of the "Party of God" in Syrian territory would not be restricted simply to nullifying the possibility of erosion of that transnational alliance. Encouraging Hizbullah and other Shia contingents – that are more loyal to supreme leader Ali Khamenei than to President Assad – to move with more freedom in Syria would increase Iran's influence on the Levant, part of the Middle East where this country mapped one of the greatest threats to its security: Israel (ICG, 2017, pp. 18-20, p.26).

In the mid-2014, there were two of the most harmful developments in the war, which would aggravate the condition of military insufficiency of the Assad government: intensification of the presence of the self-denominated Islamic State (IS), or DA'ESH; and the escalation of the action of Jibhat anNusra, Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda supported by Qatar and Turkey. The first terrorist organization, with a high Iraqi percentage in its composition, but heavily multinational, fought both in Syria and Iraq and, after taking the city of Mosul in northwestern Iraqi, lunged with more military weight against the northeast Of Syria, especially the provinces of Raqqa and Deir az-Zor, subordinating space between the two countries the size of England, named "Caliphate." Capturing 30% of Syria's territorial mass, the IS, at the apex of its

[6] Differently from its relationship with Syria, which is based on mutual strategic benefits, without ideological basis, Hizbullah established organic links with Iran post-revolution of 1979 due to three circumstances: the "Party of God" would commune with the doctrine of the Uilayat Al-Faqih, which, by accepting the Iranian supreme guide as the main reference for Islamic doctrine, accepts his leadership figure; it would see the Iranian Islamic State model as an inspiration; and it would agree with the position of rejecting the American hegemony and supporting liberation movements, especially those that fight against the Israeli occupation. According to Tehran, Hizbullah is an agent that adopts innovative and efficient practices in the dispute with Israel. Cooperation with the "Party of God" would transcend, in Iran, the inconsistency between reformists and conservatives, since both, in the same measure, would consider the Lebanese Shiite group as an indispensable ally (QASSEM, 2010, 387-393).

military campaign, projected over up to 50% of the country, although most of it was desert. In turn, Jibhat an-Nusra, with foreign and Syrian leaders, but largely local followers, was rooted in the Syrian northwest, highlighting the province of Idlib, and in the southwest, in the provinces of Deraa and Quneitra (Lister, 2014, pp. 71-98).

In short, the territorial progression of the IS and Jibhat An-Nusra led the Hizbullah to deepen its participation in Syria, in order to execute both the strict goal of isolation of the eastern portion of Lebanon from anti-Damascus forces and the role of war supplement to exhausted Syrian troops and, eventually, of front of Iranian penetration in Syria, together with other Shiite guerrillas and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) itself.

With regard to the operations in the border zone, they became even greater priority when, in August 2014, the first armed incursion of the IS and Jibhat an-Nusra in Lebanon was detected. In a rare alliance, the two terrorist factions precipitated over the municipality of Arsal, Sunni enclave within the Shiite eastern Beqaa, one of the bridgeheads of the opposition to the Syrian government. According to researcher Pierre-Jean Luizard (2015, pp. 114-123), DA'ESH was aware that its foray in Lebanon could not extend to the interior of the country, where it would bump into a social-religious landscape that, unlike that of Syria, did not have Sunni predominance and was characterized by enormous diversity, which would repel its armed advancement. Arriving in Arsal would have been, therefore, an act of sedition, in order to encourage the Lebanese Sunni-Shiite discord, politically undermining the Hizbullah.

The "Party of God" reacted with discretion. It circumvented the "DA'ESH trap" and the provocation that would deepen the Sunni-Shiite division within Lebanon by – at that time – having left to the LAS and the public security agencies the burden of militarily overcoming the terrorist insurgency on the Lebanese side of the frontier, including tactical and intelligence aid. It is worth detailing that Hizbullah preferred this same approach in cities in Lebanon of Sunni majority, such as Tripoli – where there was intense adherence to Jibhat an-Nusra (LISTER, 2014, p. 90[7]).

As for the dissemination of Hizbullah units to the remainder of

[7] The author himself witnessed the flagrant influence of Jibhat an-Nusra in Tripoli, where, still in 2014, its flags were hoisted in central localities of the city, even with strong police and military monitoring apparatus. A representative of a Sunni Islamic group self-conceived as moderate, with an important presence in Tripoli, informed the author, in 2016, that the leadership of his organization supported frankly Sunni Lebanese volunteers who would fight in Syria against the Government of Assad, on the condition that they did not transpose the conflict to Lebanon.

Syria, more visible after the late 2014, the party leaders dispatched units to different theaters of operations. It was no longer just the mountainous areas of the Syrian-Lebanese border or the suburbs of Damascus. They were both rural and urban areas, of perimeters far superior to those with which the organization used to deal in the previous two decades in Lebanon, with the "campaign for liberation of the South" and the "Summer War" in 2006. Detachments of the group headed to Homs and Aleppo, in the Midwest and Northwest; and to the Syrian Golan, in the south. Along with the combat activities, the party continued its role of training conventional Syrian troops and irregular forces.

2.3 – THE THIRD PHASE: SINCE 2015

The third and current stage of Hizbullah's trajectory in Syria can be considered as the consolidation of the process of geographic expansion of the military branch of the party in that country. The maturation of this trend coincides with the direct entry of Russia into the conflict, announced in September 2015, which abruptly modified the developments of the war, putting Assad's forces again on the counter-offensive, this time in sustainable march, without interruption in its cadence to the present moment.

In this last phase, the Shiite group has been clearly explaining the dividends gained from the military learning cycle that it had been experiencing since choosing to enter the Syrian conflict, enabling them to acclimatize to geographic environments with which it was not familiar before. According to observers, it was evident that the "Party of God," among all the hundreds of pro- and anti-Assad militias involved in the war (it is estimated a universe of up to 1,500 groups), showed the greatest military dexterity, insofar as being considered – along with the very Syrian troops, Russian troops and the IRGC – as the most powerful pro-Damascus armed actors.

One of the characteristics of the troops of the "Party of God" that situates it in a position of protagonism in the sphere of the Syrian-Russian counteroffensive is its employment as spearhead, practically opening new fronts of combat. This role is assigned to it because of the high level of training of its teams, cohesive and disciplined. In addition, the militia members of Hizbullah, in striking contrast to the tightly hierarchized Arab armies, are structured in a more horizontal way. Its reduced detachments excel in agility, since the combatants learn to have a good margin of freedom of action and decision-making. On many occasions, the Lebanese Shia troops align themselves with other units as reinforcement, positioning themselves

on their outermost flanks and acting as the protective ring of these battalions (BLANFORD, 2017, pp. 7-10; SHAPIR, 2017, pp. 74-76).

As for the group's leadership role, inaugurated, at least explicitly, in Al-Qusaiyr, it became more frequent, especially after 2015. The Arabic language, known by Hizbullah, but not necessarily by the Russians and Iranians, proved to be a facilitator. Its combatants have also often been responsible for command in relation to foreign Shia forces, such as Afghan Liwa Fatemyoun and Pakistani Liwa Zaynibiyun, which denotes sectarian logic in the military organization of pro-Damascus groups (BLANFORD, 2017, pp. 7-9; POWER, 2015, p.1). The Lebanese Shiite group would also inspire the formation of small Syrian Shiite militias, which would replicate their doctrinarian and organizational concepts in order to establish a "Syrian Islamic resistance," emulating the Hizbullah (JONES & MARKUSEN, Maxwell, p. 4).

It is noted that, with the third stage of the projection of Hizbullah in Syria, dialectics appears in its military behavior. As said, the group collaborates with the Syrian armed forces to train them as light and high-mobility infantries, which would contribute to what analysts call the "militiarization" of the military structures of the Assad government, by approaching them to the modus operandi of the Lebanese Shiite guerrilla, including the mixture of regular and irregular components (LISTER & NELSON, 2017, p.4). Simultaneously, however, their armed ranks begin to function as a more conventional war power, differentiating from their origin in militia, prepared for asymmetric conflict with Israel. This phenomenon of convergence can be read as a product of the greater interoperability between Hizbullah and the military institutions of Syria and Iran, resulting in partial homogenization between the combat models of each of these actors (SHAPIR, 2017, pp. 74-76).

The corollary of this was that, by virtue of the conflict, the cooperation between the components of the "arch of resistance" ended up having a qualitative leap, reaching a new level. In addition to the mutual political-diplomatic assistance and logistical assistance in the provision of weapons and other resources among its members, there was now direct coexistence, in the battlefield, between their armed sectors. (SULLIVAN, 2014, p. 26).

The operational standardization between Syrian troops, the IRGC and the Hizbullah, overcoming tactical inconsistencies – more common between 2013 and 2015 – could have reached a new level of harmonization with the recruitment of Hizbullah members to be part of new paramilitary detachments. It is speculated that this would be the case of the so-called "Fifth

Legion," launched by the general command of the Syrian armed forces in 2016 as an assault team, enlisting Syrian veterans and novices, as volunteers, as well as members of the "Party of God," who would then fight under the official coverage of Syrian combat unit members (AL-TAMINI, 2016).

If it is true that the transformation of Hizbullah into a more conventional war power had not begun with the conflict in Syria, but, rather, in the 2006 war against Israel (GLEIS & BERTI, 2012, pp. 76-84), the contours of the armed branch of the party as a hybrid force – half army, half militia – were very well outlined in the last two years of fighting against the Assad government's opponents. After all, its troops are equipped with increasingly more sophisticated armaments, including heavy artillery. The Hizbullah would have in Syrian territory an armed car brigade, with armored vehicles for transporting men, tanks and mobile systems of anti-aircraft missiles (JONES, Seth G. & MARKUSEN, Maxwell, pp. 10-12; SHAPIR, 2017, 74-76).

Moreover, the military enhancement that Hizbullah experienced from the mid-2015 was largely due to its growing interaction with Russia's troops. Moscow perceived the effectiveness of the Lebanese Shia militia members – especially after Aleppo was seized back in 2016 – and sought to coordinate with them to minimize losses of Russian soldiers. Consequently, there are more contacts and exchanges of knowledge, which provided Hizbullah with access to Russian intelligence and further valued its work in Syria by being identified – this time by the power that changed the fate of war – as one of the their collaborators with higher performance in combat (CORBEIL, 2017; POWER, 2015, pp. 16-20).

Geographically, Hizbullah's aggressiveness in Syria in recent years can be translated by its increased presence in locations along almost the entire Syrian western portion, from Aleppo to the Syrian Golan, through the adjacent zone to the border with Lebanon and through Damascus.

The Golan region arouses the greatest concern of several foreign powers. The Hizbullah, the Syrian army and the IRGC would fight, there, against a mosaic of anti-Damascus forces, also competing among themselves: the Free Syrian Army; the Jibhatan-Nusra (renamed Jibhat Fatah ashSham and then Haii'at Tahrir ash-Sham) and the army of Khalid Bin Walid, associated with the IS.

Cumulatively, however, the "Party of God" and the Iranians would aim to establish in the Syrian Golan a privileged military platform against the occupied Golan and other parts of northern Israel, which would, in a way, duplicate the front built by the "axis of the Resistance" against the Israeli State

by adding to the Lebanese south, region where Hizbullah is hegemonic and whose stability has been seen as precarious for decades, which, incidentally, justifies the operation of the United Nations peacekeeping Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Established in 1978 and reinforced in 2006 with more battalions and its naval branch – the Maritime Task Force (MTF) –, UNIFIL conducts interposition work between the "Party of God" and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in that region.

Israel, for obvious reasons, does not want the rooting of Iranian elements and their Lebanese ally in southern Syria, in the speculation that ballistic missiles can be fired from that region, in addition to areas in southern Lebanon (KHALIFA, 2017). This has been the main motivation for its involvement in the conflict, especially from the end of 2015, when the Israeli air raids began to repeat more and more. Nor would Jordan be interested in such instability in southern Syria. Amman fears that an even greater number of Syrians move to Jordanian territory, already inhabited by more than 1 million refugees of this nationality, greatly affecting the country's weak economy. USA and Russia seem to understand the Israeli and Jordanian afflictions, as well as the need to decompress the southern region.

In addition to its power in the west and southwest of Syria, the Hizbullah in 2016 and 2017 increased focus on the northwest, where several forces, both local and foreign, attempted to suppress the IS, which had, since 2014, chosen that area to promote its campaign of conquest of Syria. The destruction of DA'ESH in Syrian territory occurred in conjunction with fierce campaign of the official troops of Iraq and the Shia militias of that country – with heavy international support, namely North American – to destroy the power pole of the IS on the Iraqi side: Mosul (ALAMI, 2017 B).

For the "axis of resistance," recovering the east of Syria from the IS represented, in addition to defeating it, curbing the spread of other actors in Syria, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), federation of Arab militias and, mainly, Kurd (having ahead the YPG, Syrian extension of the PKK, movement for the Liberation of Turkish Kurdistan). The SDF have obtained increasing support from the U.S. and, secondarily, from Gulf powers such as Saudi Arabia. For Hizbullah and Tehran, above all, it would also be at stake in the eastern Syrian portion – particularly the province of Deir az-Zor – the opportunity to secure route of weapons and equipment supply to Hizbullah from Iran itself, passing through Iraq (ALAMI, 2017 B).

3 – THE RESULTS FOR HIZBULLAH: TWO POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

The previous description of Hizbullah's campaign in Syria, publicly deflagrated since 2013, makes believe that its penetration into Syrian territory has been a crucial variant for the Assad government's goal of counter-arresting opposition forces and terrorist organizations that antagonized it.

As seen, the "Party of God," Iran and Russia intervened decisively in the conflict. With them, Damascus abandoned a defensive and almost conformist position, perceptible in 2013, of saving what was called "useful Syria," that is, concentric circles around the capital and the region of Latakia that, juxtaposed, did not exceed 30% of the country (albeit 60% of its population). Reanimated by his allies, Assad adopted, as already exposed, offensive posture, whereby he would have recovered about 70% of Syria, while the government officially claims that 90% of the territory returned to their hands.

Regardless of how much of Syria was returned to Assad, it can be affirmed that, in the current stage of the conflict, his internal enemies live almost all under siege of government troops and their allies, or, at best, withdrawn. They are distributed in niches like Idlib, where a mix of jihadist groups is rooted; or in southern Syria, where rebels and radical affiliations suffer losses that are not terminal only because there is the support of Jordan and the care of foreign powers so that this theatre of operations does not overflow, leading to direct clash between Israel and members of the "axis of resistance." To the north, the only parts of the country where significant advances of the Syrian Army are not registered are those either controlled by the SDF (which benefit from support from the U.S., which dispatched forces to this area) or where there are quartered Turkish troops that fight the Kurds.

If, on the one hand, the advantageous condition of the Syrian government is sufficiently consensual, it is discussed, on the other hand, whether the Hizbullah has effectively emerged as a winner with its intervention in the neighboring country, despite the unquestionable improvement of its experience as to combat, as to the leadership role given to it, and as to the renewal of its arsenal, nowadays more sophisticated than ever before.

3.1 - INVOLVEMENT AS NEGATIVE: HIGHER COSTS AND RISKS THAN BENEFITS

A current of analysis, of a more negative approach concerning the Hizbullah's involvement in Syrian territory, when assessing the military aspect of the "Party of God" participation in the war, initially puts in perspective

its gains in skill and armaments. It is based on the assumption that, despite the new military "assets" being adequate to counterpose opponents such as rebels and terrorist entities, the definitive test that would prove the usefulness of the Shiite group's military learning in Syrian territory would come with its replicability in the theater of foreground operations in the geopolitical and military strategy of Hizbullah since, at least, the Lebanese Civil War: the south of Lebanon, where there is conflict, latent or manifest, with Israel.

It is argued that, in this field, the group's newly acquired capacities, more typical of a conventional force, would not make such a difference because the conditions would be reversed: the troops of the "Party of God" would not have the Syrian-Russian aerial coverage that they have in Syria. On the contrary, they would have to continue relying on asymmetric tactics to counterbalance Israeli air power. Offensive maneuvers, such as those of Al-Qusayir, Qalamoun and Aleppo, would not be provided for in southern Lebanon, much less those of Deir az-Zor, a desert region. Nor would it seriously be considered the use of armored vehicles and tanks which the group would have available in Syria (BLANFORD, 2017, p. 7; ICG, 2017, pp. 5-6; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 41-43).

By diminishing the relevance of the "Party of God" achievements in terms of military techniques and firepower, this unfavorable perspective, still in the military field, emphasizes the problem of human losses inflicted on the Lebanese Shiite group. While quantifying the number of Hizbullah combatants remains one of the greatest challenges for observers of the Syrian conflict, speculations range from 5,000 to 10,000 men, and 1,700 or 1,800 would have perished between 2013 and 2017, a high number when compared to the 1,200 who died over the 18 years (1982–2000) of fighting for the liberation of southern Lebanon from Israel. Assuming that, today, its military power is 20,000 militia members, staying in Syria could exhaust the organization in the long run, even weakening its position in areas such as the Beqaa Valley and to the south of Lebanon. (BLANFORD, 2017, p. 7; ICG, 2017, pp. 5-6; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 41-43).

In addition, to compensate for casualties, the organization has used less rigid selection mechanisms. In addition to the veteran and elite fighters, they increasingly engaged the young ranks submitted to a short training period, without having to undergo rigorous inspection by their superiors, which would open margin for infiltration and sabotage, two threats that the "Party of God" has always managed to contain. This volunteer profile also contrasts with the traditional: they would be attracted to the

Syrian campaign by material advantages, such as generally higher soldier's pay exceeding wages that they would be paid working in Lebanon (BLANFORD, p. 8, p. 18; SHAMIR, p. 20).

The increase in deaths in the ranks of Hizbullah in Syria would not only sensitively undermine its military structure, but would also affect the party's reputation in its social and confessional basis in Lebanon: the Shiite collectivity. Studies argue that this population segment would begin to resent the group's presence in Syria, which has been dragging for almost five years, signaling "fatigue" of war. Although there are public demonstrations of firm support for the campaign, voices of discontent would emerge, questioning the merits of intervening in a conflict to defend a regime which would not enjoy so much popularity within the Lebanese Shiite community (DAHER, 2016, pp. 187-191; ICG, 2017, pp. 6-10; RANSTROP, 2016, pp. 41-43).

More serious than the emerging dissatisfaction of the Lebanese Shiite segment, the "Party of God" would face the discredit of Sunnism in its country. The aforementioned discourse employed by the group's secretary-general that the fight in Syria is directed against the takfiriun and not against Syria's Sunni majority would need adherence from the members of this community of Lebanon. They would see Hizbullah's intervention as another chapter of a sectarian war headed by Iran that would engulf the entire Middle East, removing Sunni leadership from power (suggesting the case of Iraq) and marginalizing the populations of this confession. Even worse, the sectarianism imputed to the Lebanese Shiite group's action in Syria would lead to the "self-achievable prophecy": the party would end up sowing intercommunal hatred and providing the birth of radicalized pockets of Sunnis in Lebanon. (RANSTROP, 2016, 41-43)

With regard to Lebanese Christians, they would be divided. There would be those who would object to the Hizbullah's projection in Syria simply because they are critical to the "axis of resistance" and because they believe that the group's activities in Syrian territory foster Sunni hatred and the extremism of followers of this confession in Lebanon, which would turn against the Christian community as well. Others are partially aligned with the "Party of God," recognizing it as a movement of defense of religious minorities, such as the Shiites and the Christians themselves.

The Hizbullah's image deterioration resulting from its military operations in Syria would also be perceived among the Sunni of other Arab countries and of the rest of the Muslim world. Previously, the "Party of God"

obtained much political capital from these populations because of the idea that it spread of being the only Arab and Islamic force seriously engaged in the fight against Israel. This capital would have been sterilized with the war in Syria and the conviction within the constellation of Arab-Islamic Sunnism that the Lebanese Shiite group, less than neutralizing terrorists, would commit atrocities against the Syrian Sunni (RANSTROP, 2016, p. 41-43).

Becoming alienated from the Sunni in Lebanon and in the rest of the Arab world would ultimately compromise years of party efforts that, leveraging its good acceptance, volunteered as a pan-Islamic entity, erecting bridges, between Iran and the Arab world, as well as between Shiism and Sunnism, also through its discourse of resistance and in vocal support to the cause of Palestine. Organizations related to the Muslim Brotherhood such as the Ikhuaan in Lebanon and the Palestinian HAMAS maintained close political and military relations with Hizbullah until the advent of the Syrian conflict, which, however, would have fostered disagreements between these Sunni factions and the Lebanese Shiite group (DAHER, 2016, pp. 191-196; HAMZEH, 2004, pp. 3942, p. 60, pp. 66-67).

If, at the level of the Arab and Islamic "street," the "Party of God" would have, due to the Syrian conflict, lost much of its symbolic and political transit, in the specific sphere of international relations its condition would be even more fragile. Critics of Hizbullah emphasize that, with its entry into the war, it exposed itself to the unprecedented pressure of its geopolitical rivals. The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), captained by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, undertook, in 2016, successful managements in the League of Arab States (LAS) and in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to classify the group as a terrorist entity. The Saudi, Emirati and Bahraini governments also threaten to expel members of the Lebanese diaspora in their territories if the government of Lebanon does not contain Hizbullah, which may affect the economy of that country, as it is very dependent on the remittances of its expatriates. With the same objective of putting pressure on Beirut, Riyadh, individually, froze billions in financial aid for the LAF and public security entities, aside from wanting to suppress capital injection in the Lebanese Central Bank (LCB), necessary to mitigate the macroeconomic imbalances of Lebanon (DAHER, 2016, pp. 190-191; MAMARBACHI & KOSTRZ, 2016, pp. 1-6).

The U.S., in turn, attacks Hizbullah with the promulgation of unilateral sanctions against the party, in an attempt to smother it economically. Both president Barack Obama and his successor, Donald Trump, approved,

in 2016 and 2018, legislative proposals from the U.S. Congress stipulating financial repression against the "Party of God" and entities affiliated with it for being terrorist and criminal forces, including drug trafficking (ZUGHAIB, 2016, pp. 207-221).

Finally, five years ago, Israel bombarded Hizbullah in Syria, having intensified the most recent attacks. Survey of the Center for Strategic and International Studies Briefs, American think-tank, estimated that, of the 101 Israeli air raids carried out between 2013 and June 2018, 47 had as targets the organization's bases. In other words, nearly half of the attacks were carried out against the Lebanese Shiite militia and their infrastructure. The Israeli air raids would also be eliminating several combatants with renowned experience of the "Party of God," which could lead to acephaly in the leadership of the organization's military apparatus in Syria. Therefore, it is concluded that the Israeli government, aware so that the Hizbullah and the Iranians do not establish in the Golan and do not convert it into a double of southern Lebanon, resort to preventive measures, without having to open direct confrontation, of great proportions (ICG, 2017, pp. 15-17; JONES & MARKUSEN, 2018, p. 6).

3.2 - INVOLVEMENT AS POSITIVE: LOWER COSTS AND RISKS THAN BENEFITS

The second analytical approach contradicts some of the previous statements. According to this approach, as the situation is today, Hizbullah, considering the sacrifices it faced when entering Syria, obtains higher dividends than costs.

With regard to the purely military aspect, there would be no doubt that, with its entry into Syria, the "Party of God" would have confirmed its position as the most powerful non-state actor of the Middle East and, probably, of all the Arab-Muslim world. The group would undergo a virtuous circle, assimilating several new military techniques and storing much more modern armaments.

The caveats that the training that Hizbullah received on Syrian soil could not necessarily be employed in southern Lebanon against Israel are correct, and also that its transformation into entity similar to regular armies would not provide it with significant advantages in facing the IDF.

It should be considered, even so, that, in Syria, the Lebanese Shiite organization has seized vast anti-aircraft and anti-tank capacities, as well as longer-range ballistic missiles, which would increase its deterrence vis-à-vis Israel. Moreover, the transformation into a more conventional military

structure in Syria would not hinder the group's ability for asymmetric combat. What is seen today is a new generation of polyvalent militia members, capable of warring in various settings. From the perspective of Israel's military and intelligence apparatus, Hizbullah is much more threatening today than in 2006, when it was able to resist Israeli air bombardments and halt the terrestrial advancement of the IDF (CIMINO, 2016, pp. 118-120; JONES & MARKUSEN, 2018, pp. 10-13).

As for human losses, it is not argued that they were numerous, despite the secrecy of their numbers. However, Hizbullah would have reservists. It would also seek new replacements to their casualties by reducing the recruitment age from 18 to 16 years, which would enable it to more easily obtain members of this age group. They are often young people enrolled in party-related organizations, such as the Mahdi Scout Association, an institution of paramilitary characteristics. With more faithful volunteers, the quality of the new combatants would not be degraded, although in fact there are conscripts trained for shorter time and without sufficient indoctrination (CIMINO, 2016, pp. 117-120).

Another phenomenon in the military field that enhances Hizbullah's growth as an armed organization is its leadership in relation to other non-state groups in Syria. The group developed influence over these other militia formations, which take it as a model both for its organizational dimension and for the set of ideas and concepts of "resistance" that is has espoused since its emergence. Thus, the "Party of God" has been forging more solid links with these other militias, of diverse nationalities: Afghans, Yemeni, Iraqi, Iranian, Palestinian, Pakistani and Syrian. Consequently, Hizbullah would be situated in a more prominent position in the network of Shiite transnational solidarity that permeates the Middle East and other Muslim countries, which has always had Iran in its center. Within Syria itself, the influence of the "Party of God" proves very significant in relation to the NDF, to the other factions trained by it, and to those that would have been structured thanks to the training of the Lebanese Shiite group. On the outskirts of Aleppo, for example, there would be 7,000 members of the "Syrian Hizbullah" (KHATIIB, 2017).

In the optimistic hypothesis about the intervention of the "Party of God" in Syria, the Shiite social bases in Lebanon would not be so dissatisfied with the group's presence in the neighboring country. Still in 2015, the Lebanese NGO Hayya Bina, headed by Lokman Slim, anti-Hizbullah Shiite activist, published an opinion poll in which 78.7% of the Shiite electorate

appreciated the actions of its militia members in Syrian territory. Behind this high rate of approval was the fear of the terrorist wave of DA'ESH and of other groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Therefore, the protests in the Shiite community against the campaign in Syria have not echoed so much within this confession, and the "Party of God" marginalizes them successfully (CIMINO, 2016, pp. 123-124; MAZZUCOTELLI, 2017, pp. 55-69).

There is, in fact, greater rejection of Lebanese Sunnism, but the "DA'ESH effect" and Hizbullah's narrative that its mission in Syria is to annihilate Sunni extremism and block its infiltration into Lebanon would have, to a certain extent, accommodated the malaise of the moderate Sunni. In the political dialogue, the acute animosity between the "Party of God" and the Future, the main Sunni party, did not break the communication links to deal with jihadism and interfaith tension (WILKINS, 2015, pp. 161-162).

In addition to that, there is the fact that Hizbullah has lately worked more with the Sarayyat al-Muqauuama – the Resistance Brigades. Founded in 1997, in the context of the fight for the expulsion of Israel from southern Lebanon, the Sarayyat, which would have 20,000 to 30,000 members, scattered throughout the country, would constitute a kind of "militia of the militia," with the duty of providing logistics and intelligence services to military contingents of the "Party of God." The specificity of this organization is its multiconfessional composition. By not restricting themselves to the Shiite community, gathering volunteers from other religious groups in Lebanon, including Sunni, the Brigades would demonstrate Hizbullah's attachment to trans-sectarian nationalism, diminishing the suspicions of their Shiite confessionalist vocation (RABII', 2017 A; CIMINO, 2016, pp. 125-126)

A clear proof of the "Party of God" popularity among the Shiite and their resilient acceptance among the Sunni and Christians in Lebanon was evidenced with the choice of the new president of the country, Michel Aoun, in October 2016, and, even more, with the outcome of the Lebanese parliamentary elections in May 2018. After more than two years of acephaly in the presidency because of a deadlock in the Lebanon Assembly concerning which Maronite Christian leader should be chosen as new head of State, Aoun, who had been anchored since 2006 in strategic partnership with Hizbullah, ended up winning, with the endorsement of the Sunni of the Future, who, in return, demanded that Saad Hariri was assigned back to the position of Prime Minister.

The legislative election, in turn, indicated that, politically, Hizbullah would not only have survived the test of the war in Syria, but strengthened

its participation and that of its allies in the Lebanese parliament. The group obtained another deputy, forming a set of 13 legislators. The Shiite bloc in the Assembly, also conformed with the AMAL, now had 29 members. The pro-Syria and pro-Iran March 8 coalition, led by Hizbullah, obtained 72 of the 128 seats, occupied by many Christians of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) – President Aoun's party – and independent Sunni. If skilled, March 8, which already has a simple majority, may block laws, which require a qualified majority of 2/3 of the Assembly (GHITIS, 2018 A).

In the Arab-Islamic world, the deterioration of Hizbullah's image in the view of the Sunni would not be irreversible. There are signs that Islamist and leftist movements in countries with mostly Sunni majority would still appreciate the relations with the Lebanese Shiite organization. A suggestive case is HAMAS. Although it did not cut its dialogue with the "Party of God," this Palestinian organization greatly reduced its contacts with it in the wake of its rupture in 2012 with the Assad government (which supported it and housed its leadership in Damascus) and the Battle of al-Qusayir in 2013, when, as stated above, the Lebanese Shiite militia faced combatants of the armed branch of HAMAS, the Izzi din al-Qassam. Since 2014, however, the leaders of this Palestinian party would seek to realign with Hizbullah and deepen military cooperation with it and against Israel (AS-SAFIR, 2014 A; DOT-POUILLARD, 2015, pp. 1-7). Similarly, in Tunisia, the "Party of God" attracts the sympathy of the Tunisian General Labor Union (TGLU), the largest union confederation and one of the four pillars of the coalition government that congregates the Ennahda, chapter of the IM in Tunisia (DOT-POUILLARD, 2017, p. 93).

With regard to the diplomatic, financial and military maneuvers of the GCC countries, USA, and Israel to neutralize Hizbullah, monitoring the implementation of these policies makes it possible to diagnose ambiguous results so far. First, the Council itself, the geopolitical nucleus by which Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain launched a campaign against the "Party of God," would not unanimously share the determination of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Except for Bahrain, the governments of Kuwait, Oman and Qatar (the latter practically suspended from the body), even endorsing the Saudi and Emirati positions, behave with caution. They are less vocal, probably in order to avoid friction with Iran. The Arab League, in which the Saudi and the Emirati sponsored a declaration classifying the Lebanese Shiite group as terrorist, became, after the "Arab Spring" and the Syrian war, an even less expressive forum. The declaration itself was seen with reservations by Algeria and Iraq,

and the Lebanese delegation abstained. It is supposed that governments such as Egypt of General Abdel Fatah as-Sisi, less hostile to Assad and involved in the fight against the IS and al-Qaeda, in practice would not be dissatisfied with Hizbullah's presence in Syria, since it combats these terrorist entities (AS-SAFIR, 2014 B; DOTPOUILLARD 2017, pp. 93-94).

With regard to the U.S., the sanctions imposed on the "Party of God" and the social and banking institutions cooperating with it would not have had the effect desired by Washington. Apparently, Hizbullah would have a way of circumventing them, using rudimentary methods for paying their workforce, outside the financial circuits and protected from international monitoring systems. The U.S. sanctions could, instead, weaken Lebanon's economic health if they concentrate on punishing banks that negotiate with individuals and legal entities related with the party. This would imply a result contrary to that pursued by the Americans: instead of exhausting the sources of money of the "Party of God," the sanctions would damage the financial sector of Lebanon, the lungs of its economy and hinder the situation even of the allies of Americans. Premier Hariri, for example, would have negotiated with the U.S. a mitigation of sanctions (ARBID, 2017; RABII', 2017 B and C).

Finally, Hizbullah's military expansion in Syria has actually led to more frequent Israeli air raids, with human and military capacity losses of the party in Syrian territory. However, this has not paralyzed the advancement of the Lebanese Shiite group in the southern border.

Therefore, it is still unknow the extent that this confrontation can reach; how effective the preventive maneuvers of Israel would be; and if they can become a more widespread offensive, risking overflowing to the south of Lebanon and triggering another Arab-Israeli war. In recent months, journalistic reports and risk forecasting consultancies point to the greater probability that skirmishes between, on one side, the "Party of God" and Iranian forces, in the Syrian Golan, and, on the other side, the IDF, in the occupied Golan, are converted into frontal war, since surgical attacks, according to the Israeli military leaders, would not exterminate the threat of the "arch of Resistance." A wider military attack would engulf Lebanon, with certainly harmful but hardly measurable developments. Experts claim that large-scale action conducted by Israel on the entire Lebanese territory may be counterproductive: it would not necessarily annihilate the Shiite militia, but would cause enormous destruction (BLANFORD, p. 23; JUMA'AT, 2017, p. 8).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since 2017, Iran, Russia and Turkey, key actors in the Syrian scene,

have promoted the rounds of the Astana conference. This conciliation favors the discussion between opposition segments and the Assad government for medium- or long-term purposes, such as the end of the conflict and the drafting of a new constitution for a pacified Syria .

In a shorter timeframe, the Conference seeks to implement a gradual scheme to pacify some of the main focal points of violence by creating the so-called deescalation zones: Idlib, Eastern Ghouta, Deraa and Quneitra. They are located in the northwest and southwest of Syria, where there is greater presence of Hizbullah, which, incidentally, would have participated in or participates in battles in localities within or near these zones.

Observers assumed that, with the eventual depressurization of these western areas of Syria, the "Party of God" could begin to reflow, which did not happen. Along with the Iranians, the persistence of Hizbullah, especially in Quneitra, maintains the impasse with Israel. A more robust response from the Israeli government is still not discarded, and the question as to whether the offensives would cover Lebanon is also unanswered.

It could be said, therefore, that these two Shiite members of the "arch of resistance" continue their military victories in Syria against the opponents of the Assad government to consolidate a geopolitical influence belt in the Levant that would significantly reorder the balance of power with Israel and, secondarily, with the Sunni Arab powers, whose projection in countries such as Lebanon has declined. Assad is in a position of dependence in relation to the Shiite duo. If the Hizbullah-Iran expansion diverges from Damascus' priority of regaining the integrality of the country's territory without triggering conflict with Israel, the Syrian president would undoubtedly lack political resources to make them retrocede.

While Russia, Assad's most powerful ally, by planning to restore geopolitical importance in the Middle East similar to that of the Soviet Union in the Cold War, tries to take on the role of guaranteeing peace. Flexible, Moscow avoids establishing excluding alliances, such as with the "axis of resistance," so that its diplomatic channels with all regional powers, including Israel, are not closed. At this point, there is a strategic contradiction with Iran: the Russians would not risk the stabilization of Syria – in particular their South – in exchange for strategic advances of Tehran and of the "Party of God" to the severe detriment of Israel. Consistently with these principles, the Kremlin has sought to convince the Iranians and the Lebanese Shiite group to compromise, at least partially, by establishing a buffer zone in the Golan. Hizbullah, the IRGC and other militias should withdraw, allowing this space

to be filled by exclusively Syrian troops. In parallel to this development, the press has reported that Russian squadrons stationed in areas of western Syria, compelling Hizbullah to leave. At the same time, however, Assad would have announced that this would not be the time for the "Party of God" and the Iranian forces to depart. Another complicating factor is the possibility that the U.S. government will – surprisingly – decide to recognize the occupied Golan as Israeli territory, which would greatly contradict Syria, leading Assad to legitimize the persistence of Iranian and Hizbullah operations in the south (GHITIS, 2018 B; RABII', 2018 A and B; STRATFOR, 2018).

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