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Hezbollah faces a new challenge:
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Abstract:

After having achieved an unprecedented degree of influence over Lebanese politics, the Shia organization Hezbollah faces now a new scenario after the outbreak of massive popular protests, the biggest that can be remembered in Lebanon and that target the political class for its inability to confront a severe economic crisis while immersed in clientelism and corruption. Even though Hezbollah supports the protesters' social demands, it opposes radically to any changes to the current political status quo.

Keywords:

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Introduction

Lebanon is currently plunged into the biggest protests that can be remembered in the country. In previous months, several demonstrations had already taken place, but they focused on very specific demands and not on the whole political and institutional structure.

The 'revolution', as the Lebanese people refer to current events, breaks out on October 17th, when the minister of Information announces the launch of a tax on calls over WhatsApp. It is included within a set of measures against the deep economic and financial crisis the country is facing and which is defined by a gross public debt equivalent to more than 150% of the GDP and the loss of value, for the first time in 20 years, of the local currency against the dollar.

The tax, which was cancelled hours later, was the last straw that broke the camel's back of the population's patience, extremely frustrated by the political class. The elites of the various communities that make up the Lebanese social fabric govern the country under a power sharing consociational system characterized by clientelist practices and high levels of corruption which have undermined the national economy, including the most basic services such as water and electricity, and produced high rates of inequality.

Even though we will start the analysis with a brief introduction on why these protests are so relevant and the key demands of participants, our primary objective is to study the response of one of the key actors of Lebanon's elite, Hezbollah. Our starting point will be that the most important Shia political actor has chosen to position itself as the main advocate of the current status quo, even if this means confronting public opinion, due to the uncertainty produced in the party by the possibility of changes taking place in a political regime which it has clearly come to dominate. We will first go through its political history and later we will analyse in depth its leader's speeches since the beginning of the protests.

The protests

The massive participation of members of all sects against the whole political class is what has made these protests unprecedented in Lebanon. The current outrage has managed to bring together the biggest number of protesters that can be remembered, even higher than that of participants who went out to the streets after the attack that killed late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Moreover, it is especially relevant the fact that back then the Lebanese were divided among themselves and rallied around their sectarian leaders in two opposing political blocks, while in the protests which started in October 2019, citizens are demonstrating as one and, not only side-lining their leaders, but against them. And what it is more important, against those of their own sect and in their own towns, even in regions where disagreeing with the leadership can be riskier, as it is the case of South Lebanon, Hezbollah and its ally Amal's stronghold.

Another aspect to be highlighted is that even though these protests have a strong socioeconomic and activist background, they started spontaneously and not staged by organizations or parties linked to civil society, which have been vindicating for years most of the demands voiced in the demonstrations. Despite their thorough work, these groups have not managed to bring together the Lebanese people in the way these protests have. Their most important success was the campaign against the authorities' management of garbage that took place in the summer of 2015 and which attracted an important number of citizens. Despite the initial success, the movement lost strength. Among the causes that can be highlighted are the difficulties to establish common demands that would take the movement beyond the initial demands regarding the garbage issue and what can be refer to as 'the sectarian ghost', as many of the protesters wanted to exclude their own sectarian leaders from criticism, which made it hard to demand unequivocal political responsibilities.

The current protests bring together all sorts of demands and concerns of the Lebanese society, among them: the restructuring and a haircut of the debt, the reduction of income inequality, the fall of the sectarian regime, the fight against corruption, the reclaim of public spaces, the defence of women's rights and the protection of the environment.

However, as a first step, protesters are focusing in three basic demands so that political, economic and social changes can start: a technocrat government, a non-sectarian electoral law, and early polls¹.

To date, the greatest achievement of the protests has been the resignation of Prime Minister Hariri and his government, but the political elites have not yet been able to reach an agreement on the composition of the next cabinet. Negotiations are marked by power struggles and a lack of consensus regarding the inclusion of technocrats in the government, something that has infuriated the streets that oppose the presence of reviled politicians, among them the influential former minister of Foreign Affairs and Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader, Gebran Bassil.

Hezbollah: from resistance to politics

Since the end of the civil war that devastated Lebanon from 1975 to 1990, until Syrian withdrawal, Hezbollah had no representation in the successive governments. During that period, Damascus' Shia allies had clearly defined roles. While Hezbollah focused on resistance against Israel, which until 2000 kept the southern region of the country occupied, Amal, the other important Shia party, represented the sect in the political arena, and its leader, Nabih Berri, monopolized the position of Speaker of Parliament. Even though Hezbollah has been participating in the elections since 1992, Syria always made sure that it did not surpass Amal's influence in the political field and, above all, that there was no confrontation between the two parties. It is in this context in which we need to understand Damascus' decision to force them to run in a joint list for 1996 elections that made Hezbollah obtain fewer seats than in the previous elections.

The lack of representation in public institutions, derived from its no-presence, for example, in the cabinet of ministries, far from constituting a disadvantage for the militia-party led by Hassan Nasrallah, allowed the organization to focus on the military struggle which granted it a huge amount of popularity not only among Lebanese Shias, but throughout all communities in the Middle East.

¹ AZHARI, T. (2019, November 17) One month on: Hope, defiance as Lebanon protests persist. *Al Jazeera*. Available at:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/month-hope-defiance-lebanon-protests-persist-191117082420709.html> (accessed: November 17, 2019).

This distribution of spheres of influence among the two main Shia groups had another important side effect: Hezbollah did not participate in the creation of the sectarian power sharing structures which have become the basis of clientelism practices, despotism and corruption among the power elites in Lebanon's state institutions, which are the main target of the current protests.

However, this does not mean that the group renounced to develop its own network of institutions and resources intended to meet the needs of its community, just like other sectarian leaders, but that it did through other sources of funding, mainly Iranian aid. Therefore, the Shia organization has developed an important network of associations, "from numerous social welfare institutions [especially healthcare services] to a large, decentred network of educational institutions and schools, designed to renew Hezbollah's social base; to a variety of socioeconomic, cultural, and religious institutions"². As Melani Cammett points out, "Supporters and critics alike have long acknowledged that Hezbollah is the most effective welfare provider in Lebanon, far more effective than the state"³.

As Hezbollah objective was accomplished with Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, it was generally believed that the organization would be "a victim of its own success". Within the group, they acknowledge that the organization was "created", to a large extend, by Israel, "without the *raison d'être* of opposing the occupation, Hezbollah would not have been able to build a broad Shia constituency"⁴.

Hezbollah "had developed into not only a highly professional guerrilla force, but also into an impressive political organization with a broad and varied constituency, a pragmatic leadership and a clearheaded strategy"⁵, in addition to "its ability to adapt to a changing political and social context"⁶.

In the year 2000, Hezbollah could have capitalized on the Israeli withdrawal and clearly surpassed Amal in the elections, but Syria, again, followed on its strategy of maintaining the influence of the second Shia party and forced both to stand in an alliance —the

² KINGSTON, P.W.T. (2013) *Reproducing Sectarism: Advocacy Networks and the Politics of Civil Society in Postwar Lebanon*. Sunny Press. New York.p.53

³ CAMMETT, M. (2006, August 17) *Habitat for Hezbollah*. *Foreign Policy*. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2006/08/17/habitat-for-hezbollah/> (accessed: November 8, 2019)

⁴ NORTON, A. R. (2000) *Hizballah and the Israeli Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon*. *Journal of Palestine Studies*. Vol.30.No.1.p.27

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

Resistance and Development Bloc— which won the 23 available seats in the south, and more than a quarter of all seats in parliament⁷. Hezbollah managed to reinvent itself as a service provider for its community and as a reformist political force, while keeping a hybrid character which has allowed it to continue with its military activities.

In February 2005, an attack ended the life of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, whose relations with Damascus had deteriorated and led him to joined forces with the opposition against Syrian presence in the country. Many blamed the killing on the Al Assad regime and the Lebanese society was divided into two opposing blocks, on favour and against Syria, the former lead by Hezbollah. Popular as well as international pressure finally forced Damascus to withdraw the following April.

Hezbollah faced then a new scenario in which the debate about its disarmament was growing while it did no longer enjoyed Syrian protection. Therefore, the group negotiated its participation in the new government, formed after the elections of that same year, and made several concessions in exchange for reassurance that the Resistance and its weapons would not be challenged. In July, the government headed by Fouad Siniora, issued a statement declaring its national and international positions while emphasizing that it “considers the Lebanese resistance a truthful and natural expression of the national right of the Lebanese people to liberate his land and defend his dignity in the face of the Israeli threats, ambitions and aggressions”⁸.

Political Leadership

Since it became part of the government and its institutions in 2005, Hezbollah has achieved a significant share of power, to the extent that nationally, as well as internationally, it is frequently highlighted how the organization has managed to exert its control over the system in its whole, though not only the members of its group, but also its allies, and even with the tacit approval of his most prominent opponents in a not-so-distant past.

⁷ NORTON, A.R. (2007) The Role of Hezbollah in Lebanese Domestic Politics. *The International Spectator*. Vol.42.No.4. pp. 481- 482

⁸ Cited in Rabil (2011) R.G. Religion, National Identity and Confessional Politics in Lebanon. Palgrave Mac Millan. New York. p. 103

In its rise to power, the ability to establish alliances across the entire sectarian spectrum has been crucial, specially its agreement with the Christian FPM of President Aoun, which has also achieved a hegemonic position among its community.

The war against Israel between July and August 2006 played an important role in Hezbollah's political aspirations. The ability shown by the group to resist the Israeli attacks, despite the great military power of Lebanon's southern neighbor, was interpreted as a major victory that conferred to the party renewed popularity within not only its community but also among Arab public opinion throughout the region. Through the conflict with the Israelis, "Hezbollah sought more legitimacy after integration in the political process undermined its status as an Islamic *jihad* (struggle, resistance) movement. Hezbollah repeatedly and consistently stated that resisting occupation and integration in the Lebanese public sphere are closely associated"⁹.

In a short time, the party wanted to translate the achievements in the military field into greater political power. All this led Nasrallah to demand, in October of that same year, that its military victory be transformed into a greater influence of Hezbollah and its allies in the cabinet, specifically through a government of national unity and enjoying veto capacity, which meant controlling a third plus one of the seats, which gave them the power to stop any initiative against their interests.

The demands caused a crisis that led to: the resignation of all Shia ministers, which brought into question the legitimacy of the remaining executive, a sit-in by Hezbollah followers in central Beirut that lasted 18 months and, what was more alarming, the armed takeover of the streets of the capital in May 2008. Finally, in negotiations sponsored by Qatar, the Shia party gained veto power and "in exchange, Hezbollah has agreed not to use any armed force to deal with domestic political problems"¹⁰, but did not accept to disarm its militia.

⁹ ALAGHA, J. (2008) The Israeli- Hezbollah 34- Day War: Causes and Consequences. Arab Studies Quarterly. Vol.30. No.2. p. 2

¹⁰ WIEGAND, K.E. (2009) Reformation of a Terrorist Group: Hezbollah as a Lebanese Political Party. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. Vol. 32. p. 677

The events of 2008 took their toll on Hezbollah in the 2009 elections. Even though the Shiite party won all the seats it ran for, its allies were less fortunate. Beirut's takeover, "while anchoring Hezbollah more firmly in its Shia constituency, led to a significant loss of support among other communities [...] Sunnis and Christians, fearful of a Hezbollah — dominated Lebanon, gave the majority to the Western— leaning coalition"¹¹.

However, the government formed by the leader of the Future Movement, Saad Hariri, would end up falling in January 2011 after the resignation of the ministers of the opposition, Hezbollah's allies, who opposed the government's support for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, in charge of carrying out the investigation into Rafik Hariri's assassination and which was pointing at Hezbollah's possible participation in the events. The Shia party would shortly after managing to form a new government more favorable to its interests.

The outbreak of protests in 2011 throughout various countries in the region, gave Hezbollah at first the opportunity to reclaim its position as the defender of the oppressed. Its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, encouraged demonstrators in Egypt¹² as well as those leading revolts in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain¹³. However, there was a change in Hezbollah's attitude when protests reached Syria. Its involvement on behalf of President Bashar Al Assad, ended up becoming "the group's greatest military undertaking"¹⁴ and a drain of economic resources. But, despite its position in Syria, Hezbollah did not see its popularity diminished among its community, nor that of its allies of the FPM among

¹¹ EL-HUSSEINI, R. (2012) *Pax Syriana: Elite Politics in Postwar Lebanon*. Synacuse University Press. New York (Note: No page number available as the author used an electronic version of the book)

¹² AFP (2011, February 7) Hezbollah backs Egypt protests. Al Jazeera. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/02/20112716455777942.html> (accessed: November 17 2019).

¹³ AL MANAR (2011, March 20) Sayyed Nasrallah to Arabs: Your Spring has begun. Available at: <http://archive.almanar.com.lb/english/article.php?id=6713> ((accessed: November 17 2019).

¹⁴ ALAMI, M. (2018, November 29) Hezbollah's evolving role in Syria and Lebanon. Atlantic Council. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/hezbollah-s-evolving-role-in-syria-and-lebanon/> (accessed: November 17 2019).

Christians. This is due to the fear it generates in both communities the possibility of a Sunni Islamist regime taking power in Damascus.

The parliamentary elections of 2018 were key to increase the Shia party's influence not only among its community but also within other sects. Hezbollah managed to increase its number of seats and its ally became a hegemonic force among Christians, However, the most remarkable event was its progress in the Sunni community as six pro-Hezbollah candidates gained seats while the formerly all powerful Future Movement of Hariri lost momentum. The composition of the following government, which got stalled by Hariri's initial refusal to include a Sunni representative who was not part of his block, demonstrated, once more, Hezbollah's power. The ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense were assigned to the FPM and Finance to Amal, while Sunnis non-aligned to the Future Movement and opponents of the traditional Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, were also granted a place in cabinet while Hezbollah took control of the ministry of Health, which manages one the of the main budgets.

How Hezbollah has responded to the protests: Nasrallah's speeches

Nasrallah's spoke publicly for the first time after the outbreak of the protests on October 19, a day after Saad Hariri gave his partners in government a 72-hour deadline to reach an agreement on new reforms. Even though Hezbollah's leader support of the protests and his opposition to the new taxes served as the backbone of his speech, what really resonated among those gathered in the streets was his strong defense of the need to keep the government in place. "We refuse the resignation of the government". In his opinion, it would take around one or two years to form a new cabinet which would, at the end, be made up of new faces but the same factions. What about new elections? It would mean more expenditure to end up with the same parliament and the same government. And to wrap the speech up: absolute rejection of a technocrat government.

All his words of admiration towards the "spontaneous" and "non-backed by internal or foreign forces" protests were fruitless, as were his efforts of appeasement. "Your message is very strong and resonated on the government"¹⁵. He also failed to calm

¹⁵ All subsequent quotations of Nasrallah's first speech are taken from the full version published in PressTV (2019, October 19) Nasrallah says opposed to government resignation, won't let anyone burn Lebanon. Available at:

Hezbollah supporters who were demanding the group to side with the protests. Nor did he managed to move demonstrators by expressing the organization's wish to take to the streets against the tax raise to the working classes, although he said they avoided it so as not to transform the protests from social to political.

Nasrallah took also the opportunity to try to distance himself from the political class pointing out that "No one can come and rule the country for 30 years [...] and at the end of the day [...] throw the responsibility on everyone", referring to the fact that Hezbollah only started participating in government cabinets after 2005 and therefore it is not part of the elite that shaped the corrupted and clientelist structures of power born after the war.

And yet all this was in vain as demonstrators in Beirut started to chant soon after his speech "All of them, all of them, all of them. Nasrallah is one of them"¹⁶, identifying the Shia leader with the rest of the political class. Nasrallah made two mistakes during his speech, first by "trying to deflate protester demands for better, less corrupt governance"¹⁷, focusing mainly instead in the tax issue and, secondly, becoming the primary defender of the status quo, vehemently opposing the resignation of the government. The Lebanese people are well aware that Hezbollah is the main force behind the cabinet led by Hariri and that it is the most affected by its fall. "[The group] is scared of emptiness and the unknown [...] of a transformation of the Lebanese system that would change the political equation", highlighted the L'Orient, Le Jour newspaper¹⁸.

Hezbollah's leader second speech after the beginning of the protests took place on October 25, a day after the televised address of Lebanese President Michel Aoun —the

<https://www.presstv.com/detail/2019/10/19/609050/nasrallah-speech-recent-protests> (accessed: November 13 2019).

¹⁶ *Al Arabiya* (2019, October 19) Hezbollah's Nasrallah: We do not support resignation of Lebanese government. Available at:

<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2019/10/19/Secretary-General-of-Lebanese-Hezbollah-Hassan-Nasrallah-addresses-protests.html> (accessed: November 11 2019).

¹⁷ Young, M. (2019, November 13) Hezbollah could be hastening the demise of the system it is trying so hard to preserve. *The National*. Available at:

<https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/hezbollah-could-be-hastening-the-demise-of-the-system-it-is-trying-so-hard-to-preserve-1.937182> (accessed: November 13 2019).

¹⁸ JALKH, J. et al. (2019, November 9) Face à la révolte, le Hezbollah empêtré dans ses contradictions. *L'Orient- Le jour*. Available at:

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1194437/face-a-la-revolte-le-hezbollah-empetre-dans-ses-contradictions.html> (accessed: November 11 2019)

group's main ally— which drew considerable criticism, not only because the speech had been previously recorded, but also because he seemed out of touch when he demanded the decentralized street protest movement to elect a leadership that would represent them in negotiations. Probably, this was a strategy to drive a wedge between protesters who would have to agree on a set of demands and representatives. Even if turned out to be a mistake, it was not initially such a foolish idea as the movement behind the garbage crisis of summer 2015 started losing steam when faced with this kind of decisions.

Nasrallah appeared to harden his position in this second speech and claimed that “what started spontaneously has been largely exploited by political parties” and that some protesters “have been financed by embassies and suspicious sides” warning that “social and livelihood demands have been diverted to target resistance [Hezbollah and its allies].”¹⁹. He didn't name them, but he clearly had in mind two parties which have traditionally been extremely critical of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb, whose leaders have called their followers to join the protests. Internationally, he focused on Israel and the United States. Many activists on the ground highlight “the immense parallels between Nasrallah's rhetoric now and his rhetoric in 2011 during the Syrian uprising: acknowledging the existence of socio-economic demands and grievances but highlighting an overwhelmingly-dominant political agenda which serves against the party's internal and external interests”²⁰.

Hezbollah wants people to realize that they can now leave the streets as they have accomplished important goals, such as the withdrawal from the 2020 budget of planned new taxes which was agreed by the cabinet before Hariri's resignation, and a firm commitment of all parties to fight corruption. In his speech he also criticized the blocking of roads by protesters and asked that they be open “for people to go to their work, universities and schools”.

¹⁹ *Al-Manar* (2019, October 27) S. Nasrallah Says Suspicious Sides Exploited Popular Protests, Urges Supporters to Leave Streets. Available at:

<https://english.almanar.com.lb/857188> (accessed: November 13 2019)

²⁰ SAFIEDDINE, K. (2019, October 29) Hezbollah and Lebanon's 2019 revolution. *Beirut Today*. Available at: <http://beirut-today.com/2019/10/29/hezbollah-lebanons-2019-revolution/> (accessed: November 15 2019)

Nasrallah reiterated his opposition to the government resignation and stressed that he would not accept “toppling the presidency”. This is a key point of his second speech since Michel Aoun and the party created by him, the FPM, are Hezbollah’s main allies to monopolize the largest share of institutional power. Therefore, the fall of the president and to have Gebran Bassil, current FPM leader and an extremely polarizing figure, excluded from the next government represent a red line for the Shia group. In the last cabinet, pro-Aounist²¹, held 10 portfolios of the 30 that made up the government, among them Defence and Foreign Affairs. Together with the three pro-Hezbollah ministers and the three of the also Shia Amal, Nasrallah’s party had the power to veto any decision.

Nasrallah’s third speech took place on November 1, three days after Hariri’s resignation, which he continued to oppose, and under strong criticism for apparently allowing, if not directing, hundreds of pro-Hezbollah and pro-Amal followers to confront and attack protesters in Beirut and pull down their tents set up in order to facilitate logistics and celebrate debates.

Hezbollah’s TV channel, Al-Manar, had already received strong criticism for defining the aggressors as “locals” who had clashed with “bandits” to open the blocked roads and “remove” the tents in order to put an end to the crisis that was being exploited by “certain forces and political parties for political ends”²².

Nasrallah, far from condemning what happened, justified the attacks by denouncing “the unprecedented form and amount of cursing [against politicians in the demonstrations] which I assure to you is not at all spontaneous, even more, [they are] broadcasting these curses and humiliations on media”²³. Thus, the Hezbollah leader sought understanding by appealing to a basic Arab cultural aspect, the safeguarding of honor, considering, in addition, that many of the insults uttered against politicians mentioned their mothers and sisters. In this way, Nasrallah placed protesters proffering insults at the same level as those who had attacked them. However, the popular political blogger Ramez Dagher

²¹ Michel Aoun is the first president after the Taif Agreements who heads one of the main parties, even if he is not officially the leader anymore. This means that, in addition to the five ministers he is entitled by law to choose as president, he has influence also over FPM’s five assigned members in the cabinet.

²² *Al-Manar* (2019, October 29) Beirut Locals Clash with Bandits in Al- Ring Area to Open Blocked Highways. Available at: <http://english.almanar.com.lb/859586> (accessed: November 14 2019)

²³ *Al-Manar* (2019, November 4) Sayyed Nasrallah Calls for Dialogue, Urges Formation of Government in Shortest Time. Available at: <https://english.almanar.com.lb/862886> (accessed: November 14 2019)

defends the chants claiming that this is “an uprising whose highlight was breaking the taboos and the constructed ideas of sanctity of the za’im [the sectarian leader]”²⁴.

The Shia leader took also the opportunity to send a clear message to his community, showing the strength of his party and resorting to a clientelist discourse common among the sectarian elites and extremely reviled by the protesters, “for the past couple of years we had never been worried about Hezbollah because we are very strong unlike any time that had passed [...] We are only worried about our country and people, and I assure to you that if the country fell into chaos and it couldn’t pay salaries, we could still do...” Nasrallah implied that those who remain loyal to the party will be protected from the economic uncertainty that the country is going through.

Hezbollah’s leader starts to realize that the Shia unity behind the party is cracking. From the first days of the protests, its supporters took to the streets in towns such as Baalbeck, Nabatieh and Tyre, Hezbollah’s traditional strongholds, and even in the southern suburbs of Beirut. They went as far as attacking the office of the leader of Hezbollah’s parliamentary group, Mohammad Raad, as well as those of two parliamentarians representing Amal.

However, as Bilal Y. Saab points out, the size of the Shia discontent with Hezbollah is unclear. Although it is true that they achieved an important victory in the 2018 parliamentary elections, even back then there were already some signs of discontent in their traditional strongholds due to what was perceived as “[Hezbollah’s] decreasing ability to provide them with basic goods and services due to its taxing war in Syria”²⁵.

Despite all this, respect for Nasrallah remains a red line for many of the Shias. Timour Azhari, a Lebanese journalist, has collected some very significant testimonies of protesters that express the sentiments within the community. “They are many [Hezbollah] MPs, of course some of them are corrupt. [But] the important thing is that the *sayyed*”²⁶

²⁴ DAGHER, R. (2019) The Revolutionary Diaries. Moulahazat. Available at: <https://moulahazat.com/> (accessed: November 14 2019)

²⁵ SAAB, B. Y. (2019, October 2) Hezbollah’s counterrevolution. Middle East Institute. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/blog/hezbollahs-counterrevolution> (accessed: November 15 2019)

²⁶ Honorific title used by those claiming descent from Muhammad, especially through his second grandson, Husayn.

ESPOSITO, J. L. (2003) The Oxford Dictionary of Islam. Oxford University Press. New York. p. 281

has made sacrifices for this country”²⁷. The fact that his son died fighting Israel in 1997, meant that he was viewed as being of a different cloth²⁸. However, some supporters think that he can be criticized for his political decisions. “OK, he is a religious figure, but he has a political side”²⁹.

Nasrallah’s fourth speech on TV, and the last one to date, took place on November 11 and focused primarily on the economic situation. He proposed various economic measures that included Chinese, Iranian and Russian investments in the country and the participation of Lebanon in the reconstruction of Syria, as well as restoring trade with Iraq. But who was he addressing exactly? Analysts like Joseph Bahout believe that he was targeting left-wing ideology supporters. They have been traditionally closely linked to the Resistance against Israel, and have a significant presence in the south of the country, but “they find themselves confronting a dilemma: how can they reconcile their support for Hezbollah with their participation in a popular protest movement that the party derides”³⁰, specially following Nasrallah accusations that it relies on external influence, mainly from the United States.

During this last speech, the Shia leader mentioned for the first-time current US sanctions affecting various group members, including parliamentarians, and even a financial entity, Jammal Trust Bank, which after being accused of providing Hezbollah with financial services has been finally forced to close. Lebanese leaders warned repeatedly months ago that by placing banks, a pillar of the local economy, in the spotlight, the United States would only upset the stability of the country, already threatened by a serious economic crisis³¹. Therefore, Nasrallah took the opportunity to emphasize that sanctions endanger

²⁷ AZHARI, T. (2019, November 13) Hezbollah supporters turn on party in demonstrations. *The Daily Star*. Available at: <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/Nov-13/495471-hezbollah-supporters-turn-on-party-in-demonstrations.ashx> (accessed: November 15 2019).

²⁸ ALI, M. H. (2019, November 4) Partners in failure. Carnegie- Middle East Center. Available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80257> (accessed: November 15 2019).

²⁹ AZHARI, T. (2019, November 13) (accessed: November 15 2019).

³⁰ JALKH, J. (2019, November 5) Lebanese leftist side with the protests, against Hezbollah. *L’Orient- Le Jour*. Available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1194199/lebanese-leftist-side-with-the-protests-against-hezbollah.html> (accessed: November 16 2019).

³¹ ROSE, S. (2019, September 4) Lebanon’s Jammal Trust Bank to be sold or liquidated due to US sanctions. *The National*. Available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/lebanon-s-jammal-trust-bank-to-be-sold-or-liquidated-due-to-us-sanctions-1.906484> (accessed: November 17 2019)

the country but not his party, “We have told you that our funds are not in Lebanon”³².

Finally, he insisted once again on distancing the group from corruption and pointed out that Hezbollah, in addition to having opened its own investigation, has submitted, together with its ally Amal, a draft law to lift impunity [immunity] of members [of parliament] and the cabinet since 1992 and called on the judiciary to start with Hezbollah ministers and parliamentarians first. “Like the collaborators (with ‘Israel’), corrupts have no religion or sect”³³.

Conclusion

Since its early stages as a militia and a network of social organizations, Hezbollah has managed to establish a formidable political machinery and position itself as the most influential actor in Lebanon. Its project culminated successfully in the last parliamentary elections followed by the formation of the new government characterized by a broad presence of its allies from all sects.

Although the group has always held a strong critical view of the Lebanese political system and, especially of the elite’s corruption, the current situation forces Hezbollah to stand as the main guarantor of the *status quo* given the uncertainty posed by the protesters’ demands. Despite having traditionally been characterized by a great versatility and ability to assume changes, it now must face a new context at a time when it had achieved political success.

³² *Al-Manar* (2019, November 12) Sayyed Nasrallah: Resistance at its Height, US Administration Blocking Investments in Lebanon. Available at: <https://english.almanar.com.lb/868188> (accessed: November 16 2019)

³³ Ibid

Although the streets have also targeted the group, all analysts point out that Hezbollah would have a good result in case new elections were to be held. As it is not perceived as corrupted as the rest of the elite, especially his leader Hassan Nasrallah, it still maintains a high degree of loyalty within the Shia community, unlike the Amal movement, headed by Nabih Berri. This may explain why most protests in the south of the country have occurred in municipalities controlled by Berri's party. However, there is some disappointment with Hezbollah, not only for not having firmly supported the demands of the protests, but also for not having curbed the corrupt practices of its ally.

However, Hezbollah is primarily concerned by the fate of its most crucial ally, the FPM, without which its power could be greatly reduced. The group fears the consequences of the protests on the Christian party, whose leader Gebran Bassil, has become the main focus of people's criticism. Moreover, his former head and current president of Lebanon, Michel Aoun, has been lately rather controversial and unpopular due to his speeches regarding the protests.

In order to continue to maintain a relevant role in the future of Lebanon, Hezbollah must assume some of the streets' demands, despite the risks they may involve, being the first step the formation of a non-political and notably technocratic government. The party, as it has done countless times in the past, must adapt to the new dynamics that, given the support it still enjoys, should not be entirely adverse.

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