Syria’s Sect-coded Conflict: From Hezbollah’s Top-down Instrumentalization of Sectarian Identity to Its Candid Geopolitical Confrontation

Hadi Wahab

Abstract

This article surveys Hezbollah’s sectarian mobilization to justify its early engagement in Syria’s civil war for what was an intervention in a geopolitical confrontation to implement its agenda in coordination with its regional allies. Generally speaking, sectarian relations can be driven from both above as well as below. The article first argues that Hezbollah is a sectarian party whose timing of emergence paralleled with the rise of the Shia in Lebanon and the adjoining region. It contends that Hezbollah instrumentalized its sectarian identity and adopted a sectarian mobilization policy ahead of its engagement in Syria’s conflict. However, as its fighters were expanding across the country, Hezbollah’s sectarian discourse altered to a more politics-centric discourse. Therefore, this article concludes that the falsely framed sectarian conflict in Syria is sect-coded, Hezbollah adopted a top-down politicization of sectarian identity, and its primary aim was to prevent the regime’s collapse, which would have tilted the regional balance of power in favor of its rivals rather than seeking religious truths on Syria’s soil.

Keywords
Hezbollah, Syria, Sectarianism, Identity, Geopolitics, Shia

Introduction

There is no other topic in the study of the modern Middle East that is more essential than “sectarianism.” Several studies by leading scholars in the field such as...
as Valbjørn (2019), Gause (2014), Haddad (2017), and Hashemi and Postel (2017) are available, especially since the post-2003 Iraq and post-Arab Uprisings. Valbjørn (2019) stressed that “authoritarianism, identity politics and sectarianism, framed in terms of a Sunni-Shia schism, figure prominently in current debates on politics in the Middle East” (p. 127). Moreover, earlier works such as by Makdisi (2000) on sect-coded conflicts and waves of sectarian violence can be traced to the early nineteenth century Mount Lebanon and the term ta’ifiyya (sectarianism) is derived from the Arabic word ta’ifa or religious sect (p. 35). However, for our purposes, this article abides by Haddad’s (2020) suggestion to use terms such as “sectarian identity” and “sectarian mobilization” instead of “sectarianism” as the latter is malleable, primarily used as a negative term and is bound to the context. Subsequently, this article surveys Hezbollah, a specific actor that played a key role in the regional order, thereby providing a case worth studying when unpacking the Middle East’s sectarian dynamics.

A key debate in studying sectarian relations is the from-above-from below dichotomy. This article surveys Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria’s sect-coded conflict by politicizing sectarian identity in the top-down dynamics and by adopting a sectarian mobilization agenda, which then shifted to a bolder geopolitical agenda. The overarching aim is to contribute that Hezbollah, like many other actors, instrumentalized its sectarian identity to serve its political agenda. Indeed, Hezbollah is a sectarian party that used its sectarian identity as mobilization machinery not only during Syria’s civil war but also since its emergence in the 1980s. While sectarian mobilization was a key driver of the conflict, as we will see, neither Hezbollah nor other actors were fighting for doctrinal purposes. Daesh or the Islamic State (ISIS) is the only counter-argument to these facts. The primary motive for most state and non-state actors was their participation in a geopolitical contest to secure domestic and regional leverage at their rivals’ expense. Furthermore, what was falsely framed as a sectarian conflict was in fact a sect-coded civil war and sectarian mobilization was a secondary motive but a primary mobilizational tool. This article seeks to unpack these dynamics and Hezbollah’s leap to prevent the collapse of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in its bid to maintain the regional power balance in its favor, in tandem with Russia, Iran, and Shia Iraqi groups.

Are Sectarian Relations Driven from Above or Below?

Generally speaking, in multi-sectarian societies embroiled in conflicts, sectarian identity becomes one among an array of factors that drives sectarian relations which can be driven from either above or below. Lynch (2013) argues that sectarian conflicts are spearheaded by either regimes or elites “who exploit identity for their political aims” when it suits their agendas. Many examples can be provided in this context. For instance, the sectarianization of the consecutive Maronite-Druze confrontations in Mount Lebanon was gradually shaped between 1825 and 1842. In 1825, a confrontation erupted between Emir Bashir Shehab, the ruler of Mount Lebanon, and Sheikh Bashir Jumblatt, a Druze feudalist; who were backed by the
Christians and Druze, respectively. While before this conflict, both Druze and Christians lived peacefully under the same rulers, and conflicts were mainly driven by class, this war generated nemesis between both sects. Emir Bashir, a Sunni, converted to Christianity as the latter sect became the predominant religion in Mount Lebanon (Trabulsi, 2011, p. 23). Of course, from the Druze’s point of view, they [the Druze] were indigenous in these lands long before the gradual journey of the Christians from northern Mount Lebanon to the southern side under the rule of the famous Druze Emir Fakhredddeen al-Ma’ni al-Thani (Trabulsi, 2011, p. 17).

This ordeal paved the way for external interventions that deepened the schism further in Mount Lebanon. Ussama Makdisi blames the sectarianization of politics on the Egyptian reign of Mount Lebanon from 1931 until 1940. The invasion of the region by Mehmed Ali, modern Egypt’s founder, coupled with other cumulative reasons, namely the fall of Shehabi Emirs (Princes of the House of Shehab), who had ruled for decades, and the meddling of European players, culminated in the rise of sectarian tensions. This created “a new order based on religious differentiation” and was not a primordial divide (Makdisi, 2000, pp. 51–52). European states were eager to amplify their influence through a divide-and-conquer policy in the weakened Ottoman Empire (Cagaptay, 2020, p. 42). Makdisi (2000) showed that sectarian identity was neither an explosion of latent or endemic “religious animosities” nor “a primordial resurgence” and explained how it was gradually generated under new policies of sectarian politics (pp. 59–66). That said, the sect-coded conflicts that engulfed Mount Lebanon were initiated by a top-down dynamic for what was a political contest between domestic rivals, grafted with external mediations.

Sectarian relations can also be led by the masses. Traboulsi (2013) narrated that on August 10, 1859, two kids (one Christian and one Druze) who were riding their donkeys in Beit Meri, a village in al-Metn, Mount Lebanon, met on a crossroad and over a crossing priority, a fight erupted between their families culminating in many deaths on both sides (p. 218-219). Hostilities expanded, and while the Druze lost more men, three Christian villages were leveled and set ablaze (Ghannam, 2015, p. 124). Confrontations spread to the Chouf Mountains, in the southern Mount Lebanon, and many incidents were reported (Yehya, 2009, pp. 151–152). These confrontations came to be known by the “events of the sixties” (Trabulsi, 2011, pp. 59–61). The quick spread of skirmishes was caused by the collective memory that played a central role in accumulating enmities during the previous clashes. Like the belief that poverty is divine and imposed by God’s will instead of searching for causal economic and political factors, sectarian affiliations are also considered collective memory and are defended by people as being a utopian choice without taking into consideration the cultural, environmental, and political factors and without even considering the religious beliefs of million others (Al-Sharfi, 2018, p. 57).

A more recent example of how sectarian dynamics can be driven from below can also be presented. The identity-shaped contest, sectarian or/and ethnic, has increased in the twenty-first century in the post-2003 Iraq invasion period due to the politicization of these identities after the weakening of the state (Abd al-Jabbar, 2018, p. 49). The spillovers of this wave of unrest have affected Lebanon since
2004–2005, culminating in a political deadlock between Hezbollah and its allies on one side and Saad Hariri and his partners on the other. On January 25, 2007, a brawl erupted between pro-Hezbollah Shia students and their pro-Hariri colleagues at the Beirut Arab University (Al-Akhbar, 2021). Three Shias were killed in the clash outraging their friends and families, which pressed Nasrallah to make an appearance the next day prohibiting internal fighting and pledging to take revenge from the “masters” of the murderers—about their regional sponsors, namely Saudi Arabia (Al-Akhbar, 2007). Then, the political elite sought to calm things down instead of rubbing salt into the wound. However, the overall situation changed on May 7, 2008 when Hezbollah fighters captured Beirut, exacerbating the Sunni–Shia divide. The point to make here is that sectarian relations can be driven either from above or below, depending on the context. Furthermore, this paper examines Hezbollah’s top-down instrumentalization of sectarian identity to justify its intervention in Syria’s sect-coded conflict.

The Daunting Rise of the Shia in Lebanon

Hezbollah’s emergence in 1982 was the outcome of a nexus of dynamics. To scrutinize its maneuvers, one must observe other events that engulfed the Middle East leading to the upsurge of Islamist movements, and the rise of Shia Islamism. Indeed, there is a twentieth-century ascent of the Shia, but this rise was not the first attempt. The expansion of the Shia across the Lebanese shores thrived between the tenth and early thirteenth centuries in parallel with the Fatimid Caliphate’s growing influence in Cairo (Deeb, 2015, p. 53). In the eleventh century, they constituted a large force in Damascus, Aleppo, Tyre, Tripoli, and some parts of Palestine (Arzouni, 2010, p. 143).

However, this blossom was followed by prosecutions and forays against the Shia areas by the Mamluks and the Ottomans. As the Mamluks were expanding over vast swathes along the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century, they confiscated the lands of the Shia and Nusayris (current day Alawites) for their ambiguous position towards the Crusaders, expelled by the Mamluks off Lebanon’s coastline (Deeb, 2015, p. 55), and in 1267, the Sultan prohibited any madhab (school of thought) not belonging to the four Sunni madhabs (Shafi’i, Hanbali, Maliki, and Hanafi) (Arzouni, 2010, p. 103). And during the Ottoman rule from the sixteenth century until their forfeiture in World War I, the Shia met a similar fate (Deeb, 2015, p. 55). The anti-Shia and anti-Alawite policies by the Mamluks and Ottomans were driven by political instances of both sects rather than doctrinal truths. The large campaigns orchestrated by the two successive Sunni Caliphates caused demographical changes reducing the numbers of those following the Shia madhab. Furthermore, bolstered by the Safavid dynasty in Iran and reorganizing their ranks in 1760 due to the support they received, the Lebanese Shia allied themselves with the army of Yusuf Shehab, the Emir of Mount Lebanon, and were designed to curtail the Ottomans. This uprising was doomed to fail as the Ottoman army was larger and insurmountable. It culminated in thwarting the Shia rebellion by invading their habitat in Jabal ‘Amil, southern
Lebanon, and leveling their religious and educational schools (Deeb, 2015, pp. 56–57).

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Shia’s overall posture was still at its steepest. Abdo (2017) highlighted that Shia in Jabal ’Amil had few paved roads and scarce electricity, and in the Beqaa Valley, they paid tariffs but received minor services in return (p. 103). Blanford (2011) seconds that until 1943, “there was not a single hospital” in the mostly-Shia inhabited south (p. 14). Social, economic, and political factors, Amal Saad-Ghorayeb argues, galvanized the Shia activism in Lebanon. Living in rural and barren areas in southern and western Lebanon, the Shia were deprived, and subsequently, many journeyed toward Beirut’s suburbs looking for better livelihoods. In parallel to their gradual social mobilization, their political mobilization started in the mid-twentieth century by joining active political parties such as the Ba’ath Party, the Nasserites, or the Syrian Socialist nationalist Party (SSNP) (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002, pp. 7–9). Haddad (2020) emphasized that the overlap of sect and lower-class status amongst the Shia became “a driver for political mobilization” (p. 110).

The arrival of Imam Moussa al-Sadr, a Shia Iranian figure who traced his origins to Jabal ’Amil, followed this in 1959 (Blanford, 2011, p. 15). These were the causal factors that culminated in the rise of Shias in Lebanon. Unyieldingly determined to galvanize Shias across Lebanon, al-Sadr adopted a sectarian mobilization agenda, gradually increasing his influence. He had frequently argued that the government has been neglecting Shia areas and that Shias are being used as fuel for others’ battles (Norton, 2007, p. 19). The deprivation and marginalization of Shias was a fact and al-Sadr was keen to exploit this sectarian identity and instrumentize it. Subsequently, he started establishing institutions for the Shia community, such as Majlis al-Janoub (Council of the South), and in the early 1970s, he founded the Deprived Movement (Harakat al-Mahroumin) and its political wing Amal (Norton, 2007, pp. 18–20).

Saouli (2019) argues that the Amal movement “paved the way for Shia political awakening and organization” (p. 58). Now that political and sectarian mobilization commingled, the al-Da’wa party came to the surface. Al-Da’wa was spearheaded by Muhammad Baqer al-Sadr, an idol for most prominent Shia clerics. Lebanese al-Da’wa was supervised by Muhammad Mahdi Chamesedden and Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, two prominent Shia clerics, and became increasingly active. Balfourd (2011) reported that small armed units dubbed Qassam were created by al-Da’wa and frequently clashed with the Iraqi Ba’ath Party in Beirut (p. 35).

All these events pre-dated the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. In other words, the Shias started thriving in Lebanon’s political landscape before the success of the Iranian revolution. As Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) emphasizes, the Shias’ political mobilization preceded their religious mobilization (p. 9). This dispels the false and falsifying leitmotif that Iran’s Islamic revolution stands behind the Shia rise. Iran only came later to co-opt and dominate the regional Shia upsurge. After years of struggles, the revolution against the Shah succeeded, and Khomeini declared himself Iran’s Supreme Leader. In a letter written to his supporters, Muhammad Baker Sadr asked them to “melt yourself in Khomeini, just as Khomeini has melted
himself in Islam” (Azizi, 2020, p. 57). Subsequently, a relationship developed between Lebanese Shia figures and Tehran’s new leadership.

However, the turning point was Israel’s 1982 full-scale invasion of Lebanon, which culminated in putting the final touches to create Hezbollah. While many of the figures who later became leaders in Hezbollah, including Hezbollah’s former secretary-general Subhi al-Tufaily and Hezbollah’s current secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah and his deputy Naim Qassem, had defected from Amal movement, others were prominent figures in the Lebanese-based al-Da’wa party (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002, pp. 13–15). At the outset, according to Nasrallah, the group had no name “since no one took the time to find a suitable one for it” (Noe, 2007, p. 126).

Gradually, Hezbollah’s influence has continued to rise unabated, shaking the Amal movement’s prevailing status amongst the Shia. War, dubbed later “The Brothers’ War”, erupted in 1988, and hostilities ended in 1990 by a consensus supervised by Syria and Iran, the sponsors of Amal and Hezbollah, respectively (Noe, 2007, p. 35). The fluctuating love/hate relationship notwithstanding, the duality of Amal-Hezbollah would come to dominate the Shia decision-making in the country for four decades. Furthermore, this 2-year conflict mended ties further between Tehran and Damascus, a partnership that kept developing until the eruption of the Syrian civil war.

The Syria-Iran Agreement and Vilāyat-i faqīh

Keen to pursue an increasingly assertive foreign policy and projecting the Islamic revolution beyond its borders, Iran sponsored Hezbollah’s establishment. However, as it was hard to operate in Lebanon without Syria’s consent, which was already enmeshed in the Lebanese civil war, a quid pro quo took place: Syria controls the timing of the operations that Hezbollah would strike against Israel and Iran trains and funds the group of fighters (Harik, 2005, p. 39). According to Blanford (2011), Syria wanted to prevent the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) from initiating a new fight with Israel that has proven costly to the Syrian army, but it agreed to let them construct a resistance force instead. In exchange, Iran would assist Syria with nine million tons of free oil per year (p. 44). Therefore, 1,500 Pasdaran were deployed by Iran to the Beqaa Valley to help train, arm, and organize potential Hezbollah fighters (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002, p. 14). The Syria–Iran partnership has undergone three essential events that mended ties between both countries: Syria’s arms shipments to Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, the creation of Hezbollah, and the cooperation during the Lebanese civil war.

Furthermore, with Hezbollah’s emergence, tripartite cooperation initiated and would develop in the four ensuing decades, becoming vital for the regional order. Nasrallah argues that the arrival of the IRGC units to the Beqaa Valley was paralleled with devout people’s approval that a revolutionary current must repel Israel’s Lebanon invasion. This current, Nasrallah pursues, had an Islamist political agenda with a clear ideology and swore allegiance to vilāyat-i faqīh (Guardianship of the Jurisprudence) represented by the supreme leader called the
It is important to briefly explain the concept of vilāyat-i faqīh and Hezbollah’s allegiance to it. In the early 1970s, Khomeini gave a landmark series of lectures in which he outlined his theories of an Islamic government, known as vilāyat-i faqīh. Khomeini postulated that the laws of a nation should be the laws of God, the Sharia, and therefore those holding power should possess full knowledge and understanding of the holy laws. The ruler of an Islamic State should be the preeminent faqīh, or jurist, who must be obeyed because “the law of Islam, divine command, has absolute authority over all individuals and the Islamic government” (Blanford, 2011, p. 33). In Nasrallah’s words, Hezbollah’s “relationship is with the supreme leader, who draws on general policy lines not only for Hezbollah but for the nation” to which Hezbollah belongs (Noe, 2007, p. 135). The faqīh, however, takes into consideration the conditions surrounding each group that abides by his creed, and there is a margin of independence when it comes to day-to-day maneuvers, but it would appeal to the faqīh and Sharia vis-à-vis big decisions (Qassem, 2005, p. 56).

It is plausible to argue that this religious relationship provides Hezbollah with a certain autonomy. Even though Hezbollah cannot reject Iranian orders and it has also declared on various occasions its willingness to attack Israel if the latter launches an assault against Tehran, Lebanon’s multi-sectarian society confines Hezbollah’s maneuvers. Schachtel (2015) confirmed that “Hezbollah has 80,000 missiles” that could unleash into Israel if Iran comes under attack. However, Hezbollah has to balance its regional role and national belonging or risks generating domestic antagonism, threatening its survival. By and large, Hezbollah’s fate is pegged to Iran.

Is Hezbollah a Sectarian or Sect-Centric Party?

Haddad (2020) suggests using “sect-centric party” to refer to a political group representing a sect-specific constituency rather than “sectarian party” because the latter could mean “anything from a party marked by sect-specificity to one that promotes hatred of others” (p. 19). Haddad (2020) explains that the term sectarian “can also mean little more than sect-centricity: a kind of narcissistic attachment to one’s own sectarian identity that may or may not be accompanied by belligerence toward the sectarian other” (p. 45). Although such terms can certainly raise blurry explanations, this article labels Hezbollah as a sectarian party marked by sect-specificity and sectarian identity rather than a party that promotes any kind of hatred or bellicosity against the sectarian other. To further explain why Hezbollah is a sectarian party, Haddad’s example is treated. In some cases, Haddad argues, the concept of sectarian identity was mistreated by observers. For instance, while the Ba’ath regimes of Syria and Iraq were labeled as “Alawi regime” and “Sunni regime,” respectively, and accused of deploying sectarian identity, they have not deployed “religious heritage as a marker of political identity” but only implemented sect-centricity to favor one sectarian group (Haddad, 2020, p. 26). While this
clarification is fully plausible, Hezbollah has deployed sectarian identity to indicate its political identity making it a sectarian party.

Moreover, Hezbollah deploys sect-specificity on multiple levels. Haddad (2020) narrated how Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq’s Prime Minister, launched an operation against ISIS in al-Anbar province naming it Labbayk ya Hussain (meaning We are here for you, Oh Hussain), and was later pressed to change the name to Labbayk ya Iraq (p. 72). Such sect-specific mottos of Shia symbols, such as Labbaikiya Zeinab (We are here for you, Oh Zeinab) and Labbaika ya Hussain, had been used by Hezbollah fighters when launching operations against Syria’s rebels who happened to be Sunnis. This was most vivid in a series displayed on Hezbollah’s al-Manar TV and Twitter page, called “Asrar al-Tahrir al-Thani” (The Secrets of the Second Liberation) (Hezbollah Media Group, 2020). Regardless of the fact to which extent these sect-specific slogans triggered further anti-Shia hatred amongst Sunnis and mobilize more fighters, they were deployed since Hezbollah’s emergence at a doctrinal level; while the opposition in Syria happened to be Sunni, Hezbollah is not seeking religious truths or launching operations for doctrinal purposes. These sect-specific symbols, namely Ahl al-Bayt (People of the House), such as Hussein or al-Zahra, have always been the recourse for Hezbollah’s fighters in battles in order to boost their moralities. For instance, one fighter is filmed saying: “Ya sahiba al-zaman adrekna (recognize us), ya sahiba al-zaman aghethna (rescue us)” (Ya sahiba al-zaman refers to Imam al-Mahdi who is the redeemer for Twelver Shi’ism) (Hezbollah Media Group, 2020).

Furthermore, since its birth in the 1980s and long before it intervened in the 2011 sect-coded conflict in Syria, Hezbollah has best deployed sect-specific symbols and commemorated sect-specific events and grievances, namely through the death of Imam Hussein and Ashura. The latter is the annual commemoration of Imam Hussein, the third Shia Imam, son of Imam Ali and the Prophet’s Grandson, killed in Karbala, Iraq (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002, p. 11). In Karbala, Hussein and all his followers were killed, and all women were humiliated by Yazid, Hussein’s foe (Norton, 2007, p. 56). In 1983, Israelis violated a ceremony commemorating Ashura, enraging Shia and unyieldingly furthering their determination to fight the invaders and allowing them to politicize the incident (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002, p. 11). Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) contended that today’s Shia clergy and elites mirrored Hussein’s martyrdom as heroic and an act of sacrifice to use it as an exemplary against what they perceive as contemporary oppressors (p. 12). Within this context, Hezbollah has created a discourse of oppression, which became more of an ideology of oppression, to create solidarity and unity amongst the Shia (Worrall et al., 2016, pp. 74–76). Hezbollah’s sectarian identity played a role in intensifying the Sunni-Shia schism in the region, but sectarian mobilization had long been best exploited by Lebanon’s political elites. That said, Hezbollah is the by-product of the nexus between a national and transnational sectarian context.

Consequently, streets and backboards were filled during these days with banners such as “Every day is Ashura and every land is Karbala” (Norton, 2007, p. 55). During the tenth and final day of Ashura, called the Tenth of Moharram, thousands of Shia take to the streets in the predominantly Shia areas such as
al-Dahiyeh, beating their chests in a ritual called *latem* (Norton, 2007, p. 54), in tandem with chanting what they call *latmiyyeh* or slaps, a specific type of songs dedicated to this event. The march itself is called *Masira Ashoura‘iyya*. Masses of Shia currently participate in Hezbollah’s “military-style” commemoration of Ashura during the *Masira* every year (Norton, 2007, p. 53). During Ashura, Nasrallah addressed televised speeches, during which he spoke on both religious and political matters (Norton, 2007, p. 67). Ashura is an opportunity for Nasrallah and other top-ranked leaders, such as Naim Qassem, deputy secretary-general, to speak live on TV, directly serving Hezbollah’s social-political goals. This helps rekindle old-age grievances and builds a modern sense of victimhood which Hezbollah and its leadership exploit. After all, these tools lay at the core of Hezbollah’s political instrumentalization of sectarian identity.

Further afield, it shows Hezbollah’s strength as it organizes large marches in its dens: south, Beqaa Valley, and al-Dahiyeh. During these commemorations, its martyrs’ pictures displayed across the streets, walls, backgrounds, and banners, show a shared struggle and martyrdom with Imam Hussein. “Tens of teams are dressed in military fatigues of different colors and march like soldiers as they tour various districts of al-Dahiyeh. Hundreds of thousands would be shouting as Nasrallah triggers them: ‘Death to Israel, Death to America’” (Saouli, 2019, p. 109). In 2016, Nasrallah reiterated with thousands of Shia commemorating the Ashura rituals, *Al-Mawt li al-Saoud* (Death for Al-Saud). He declared that thousands of brave and courageous Yemeni fighters would achieve victory by “rubbing al-Saud’s nose in the sand and make them lose the battle” (Nasrallah, 2016). Ashura “commemorates the idea of resistance and martyrdom,” and this should not be underestimated because it is key to understand Shia maneuvers and mobilization (Worrall et al., 2016, p. 120). It is highlighted here that Hezbollah’s instrumentalization of sectarian identity has been a key top-down mobilizational tool for its various political confrontations across the Middle East, and its engagement in Syria’s sect-coded civil war, that as explained below would not have been possible without implementing such policies.

**Syria’s Sect-Coded Conflict and Hezbollah’s Sectarian Mobilization**

In March 2011, the contagious wave of the Arab Uprisings disembarked in the city of Dar’aa in southern Syria. Consequently, by domino effect, demonstrations spread to almost all Syrian provinces and soon after they turned violent. Gradually, Henry Kissinger argues, “outside powers entered the conflict; atrocities proliferated as survivors sheltered in ethnic and sectarian enclaves” (Kissinger, 2014, p. 126). Kissinger pursued that “regional powers poured arms, money, and logistical support into Syria on behalf of their preferred sectarian candidates: Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states for the Sunni groups; Iran supporting Assad via Hezbollah” (p. 127). Foreign agendas play key roles in deepening sectarian rifts by fueling sectarian identities with political significance. On this matter, Haddad (2020) compares the impact of Ottoman–Persian rivalry to the Western
politicization of sectarian identity in the nineteenth century and post-Saddam Middle East (p. 74).

According to Haddad (2020), sectarian dynamics are driven by both religion and politics, “with the balance between the two being dictated by context” (p. 59). As regional powers deployed their sectarian identity as primary machinery of mobilization, religion and politics overlapped in Syria, turning it into a sect-coded conflict. However, it was hard to determine which power has taken larger space in the war, but sect-based confrontations were leading the scene, especially with the rise of ISIS. Even when standoffs were not originally sect-coded, the nature of the combatants turned them into one. The parallel between these clashes and the Lebanese civil war is that they were both sect-coded, and most of the actors were fighting a geopolitical contest during which sectarian identity was an instrumental factor but not the key driver.

Hezbollah’s engagement was a transitional moment in its history. Although it has engaged in various battlefields such as Yemen, its role was more concentrated on training, arming, and instructing rather than mass-engagement and direct clashes against its rivals. For the first time, Hezbollah’s fighters were deployed to a foreign country to openly engage in a full-scale war in an Arab country and against Arab Sunni foes, participating in deepening the Sunni-Shi’a schism. Nevertheless, the pitfalls of the rebels helped Hezbollah justify its intervention for its supporters. From the outset, the opposition put itself on a collision course with both Iran and Hezbollah by raising slogans and mottos criticizing them and praising their regional rivals. While taking the streets of Homs, the opposition was chanting “no Hezbollah, no Iran,” and “Hezbollah oh Hezbollah, we want king ‘Abdullah”—then the king of Saudi Arabia (Dandash, 2015). In May 2011, demonstrators in Hama burned Hezbollah’s flag (Al-Mayadeen, 2016). Hezbollah sensed a somewhat anti-Hezbollah mood that was unfolding among the opposition and that dynamics were taking a turn for the worse.

Consequently, the rising influence of Islamist groups in 2012, namely Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS; then named Jabhat al-Nusra), and Assad’s appeal of protecting minorities led to the “consolidation of sectarianism” (Pinto, 2017). Accordingly, they started expanding in al-Ghouta, in Damascus’ suburbs, becoming a rebels’ stronghold, and advancing toward the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, daughter of Imam Ali, one of the most important holy symbols for Shia. This was a déjà vu for the Shias. In 2006, the Askari Shrine in Samarra in Iraq was attacked by al-Qaeda, outraging Shias across the region, and when Islamist factions in Syria pledged to destroy Sayyida Zeinab’s mosque if they capture it, Hezbollah found a perfect justification to send its troops (Haddad, 2020, pp. 72–73). Therefore, Hezbollah dispatched some units, along with Abou al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigades, an Iraqi Shia group, to prevent the shrine’s destruction. According to Muhammad Mohsen, Hezbollah started a minor intervention at the beginning to protect Sayyida Zeinab’s mosque after threats by the opposition to destroy it once they take the city (Mohsen, 2017, p. 12). Mathieson (2013) stressed that “Sayyida Zeinab lies at the heart of the strategic relationship between the Assad regime, Iran, and Arab Shia groups.” In the case of Sayyida Zeinab’s
mausoleum, it served as an instrument and a launchpad for Hezbollah and its troops to engage in the Syrian cataclysm.

On the western flank, Sunni-Shia tensions were turning into daily clashes in the countryside of al-Qusayr, a Syrian city that contours Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley, Hezbollah’s historical backyard. Oral consent to avoid clashes and ease tensions had taken place, but sectarian cleavages laid bare the agreement’s weakness. Reconciliations began to flicker; the neighbors started attacking each other; kidnapping became a daily menace; and the truce started waning. A Syrian fighter parading before a camera in Ain al-Damamel, a town in western Qusayr, was filmed shouting after a raid against Shia houses: “Shia have no more lands here” (Al-Jadeed, 2013). Accordingly, Hezbollah started deploying its fighters on the frontlines in these villages claiming to protect them against rebel attacks.

Gradually, Hezbollah (The Party of God) has become in the eyes of Sunni clerics Hezb al-Shaytan (The Party of the Devil) and Sunnis have been appealed to fight in Syria against Hezbollah and Assad (Matthiesen, 2013). Both Sunni and Shia citizens have always lived in peace in these mountainous areas. While these clashes were politically driven but turned sectarian, neither side was fighting on a doctrinal basis. Haddad (2020) best explains this dynamic by stating that “the intersection of sectarian identity and Arab-Iranian rivalry has seen regional strategy instrumentalizing markers of sectarian identity to foster sectarian solidarity and mobilization by portraying geopolitical issues as existential threats confronting all Sunni and Shia” (p. 116).

These acts provided Hezbollah with the perfect justification to instrumentalize sectarian identity from above and begin its gradual sectarian mobilization to marshal arrays of fighters and convince its supporters of this intervention’s significance. Hezbollah’s engagement had become obvious in 2012 but did not declare it until March 2013. Christopher Phillips states three reasons for Hizbullah’s declaration of its involvement:

Firstly, the regime’s inability to repel rebel advances raised the prospect of Assad’s defeat. Secondly, the rise of jihadists and Salafists among the rebels represented a force along Lebanon’s border that would not just be anti-Assad but threatened Shia presence in the Levant. Finally, Iran appealed to Hizbullah for greater help. (Phillips, 2018, p. 157)

Phillips did not confirm the final point, but he referred that “twice in April 2013 the secretary-general [Nasrallah] flew to Tehran to meet both Khamenei [Iran’s supreme leader] and Suleimani [Quds Force commander, the IRGC’s external branch], and soon after he declared Hizbullah’s presence in Syria” (p. 157). Saouli (2019) contends that the rebels “threatened to isolate Lebanon from Syria, thus endangering Hezbollah’s own lines of communication: Beirut–Damascus–Tehran” (p. 192). The geostrategic loss for Hezbollah had the Assad regime collapsed would have been greater than the cost they paid both in the fighters lost in battle and the increasing antagonism among the Sunnis. Hezbollah has depended on this overland route since its emergence, and without it, the transfer of its weaponry can be gravely undermined.
Nevertheless, sectarian tensions fluctuated over time from being primary to secondary motive, and exceptions can be found. For instance, in 1802, Sunni Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia attacked Karbala inhabitants in current Iraq for their mere Shia identity (Trovimov, 2008, p. 14). The British authorities reported that above 5,000 citizens were slain throughout the days of the foray (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 42). Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya, a radical Muslim Sunni scholar, had declared in 1317 “Nusayris” (Alawites) to be “more disbelieving than Jews and Christians” (Farouk-Alli, 2018). Then, Ibn Taymiyya’s edict was based on religious truths and doctrinal beliefs rather than on political motives.

However, in the 1970s, these sectarian hatreds were revived in Syria when the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) accused the Alawites of apostasy legitimizing the attacks against them (Dagher, 2019, p. 81). Abdo (2017) seconds that during that era, the MB had labeled the Alawites as unbelievers (p. 55). In the mid-1970s, Moussa al-Sadr, a close ally of late Hafez al-Assad, issued an edict claiming that the Alawites are Shia Muslims (Farouk-Alli, 2014). These accusations, however, were politically driven because it seemed insurmountable for the religious predominantly-Sunni community to be ruled by an Alawite minority (10% of Syria’s population) (Wimmen, 2017). Religion was hence a primary motive in the fourteenth-century edicts but secondary in the twentieth century. However, when Syria’s 2011 sect-coded conflict erupted, Alawite fighters in the ranks of the Syrian army, the National Defense Forces, and other pro-regime groups got convinced that most rebel groups were extremists and were similar to those who attacked Alawites in the thirteenth century and the 1970s and that they had no choice but to fight them (Dagher, 2019, p. 405). The collective memory of sect-coded confrontations played an instrumental role in the war, causing more damage and brutality across the country.

Indeed, the sectarian card has been exploited by both actors of the Sunni-Shia divide through time. Dabashi (2016) stresses that by the early 1500s, Shah Ismail had adopted Shia Islam as an official religion to counter-balance the Sunni Mughal and Ottoman empires that had encircled his Safavid Empire. Nevertheless, the Safavids were more at odds with the Ottomans than with the Mughals (pp. 11–13). Furthermore, Haddad (2020) unpacked the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry by arguing that “anti-Shi’ism and its underlying body of jurisprudence were invoked by the Ottoman authorities more for reasons of political expediency than religious conviction” (p. 53). He then stresses that the 1578–1590 Ottoman wars against the Safavids were led by a security fear of an alliance between Russians and Iranians. Despite not being a religious war, Haddad (2020) refers to the determination of Sultan Murad on two matters: the acknowledgment of Ottoman rule over the annexed territories by the Safavids and the abandoning of the practice of tabarru’, which consisted of cursing the first three Caliphs and Aisha, the Prophet’s wife. Therefore, he argues that “even when religious or doctrinal drivers are secondary to a sect-coded conflict, the religious doctrine can still be relevant in and of itself as an expression of belief, as a legitimizing tool, as a tool for the assertion of identity or for establishing dominance” (p. 55). That said, the context plays a key role in understanding these cleavages. A common causality to explain these conflicts, such as seeking doctrinal truths, is misleading.
These examples are used here to explain how sectarian dynamics played out in earlier stages and place Hezbollah’s deployment of its sectarian identity in a context that best explains its intervention. To avoid mischaracterizing the situation, sectarian relations can be driven from below, as mentioned earlier, but in Hezbollah’s case, they were deployed from above for geopolitical purposes. In Syria, Hezbollah adopted a policy of sectarian mobilization that was paramount to marshal arrays of fighters. However, in mid-2013, a diversion in Hezbollah’s narrative arose. Undeterred on the battlefield, fighting in Damascus’s suburbs and triumphant in its al-Qusayr’s foray, the rebels’ den, Nasrallah raised the stakes. In June 2013, he candidly declared: “wherever we must be, we will be” (Middle East Observer, 2013). By and large, this sentence was a turning point in Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria’s quagmire as it paralleled with the spread of its fighters from southern Syria via inland up to the north. More importantly, this was an alteration in Nasrallah’s discourse, which was primarily sect-centric to one that is more political-centric, concentrating on the geopolitical interest of the axis that extends from Beirut to Tehran and on the conspiracies against Hezbollah.

The Shifting Discourse: From Sectarian Mobilization to a Candid Geopolitical Confrontation

During the 1990s, Nasrallah stressed that Syria under Hafez al-Assad’s leadership supported Hezbollah, and the latter would stand with Syria against the regional and international pressures (Noe, 2007, p. 73). And as explained earlier, the Iran–Syria–Hezbollah alliance pre-dated Syria’s sect-coded conflict. Further afield, the primary motive for Hezbollah’s intervention in the 2011 crisis, in coordination with Iran, was to safeguard its geopolitical interest and that of the axis. In fact, Hezbollah faced a grave, even existential threat should Assad be toppled. Syria provided it with strategic depth, including the essential supply to Iran, and legitimacy: The Syrian-Iranian alliance was presented as part of a wider resistance on behalf of all Muslims and Arabs against Israel and the West. Like Iran, it feared a Sunni-dominated regime emerging in Damascus, but with further domestic reason: it might shift Lebanon’s delicate sectarian balance in favor of Sunnis, at the expense of the Shia and Hezbollah. (Phillips, 2018, p. 157)

However, its sectarian-based machinery of mobilization was necessary to marshal thousands of fighters amongst its Shia supporters.

By 2013, as the regime was losing more ground and Hezbollah’s fighters were prevailing on the battlefield and proving their ability to deliver, they had to expand their military presence across vast swathes of Syria, and this was paralleled by an alteration in Nasrallah’s speech from a sect-centric discourse to a more politics-centric one. “The intervention,” Saouli (2019) emphasizes, “was gradual and dictated by the changing military balance on the ground. The weaker the regime and the higher the threat of its fall became, the more Hezbollah stepped in to fill
the void and to offer the necessary backing” (p. 190). Of course, this did not mean that the regime’s survival depended on Hezbollah. First and foremost, pro-regime groups and the Syrian Arab Army fiercely fought on the ground and were key in the regime’s very survival. Second, Russia’s 2015 intervention turned the balance of power in the regime’s favor and provided Hezbollah leverage on the ground.

By extension, Nasrallah stressed that “Syria is the backbone of the resistance, and Hezbollah would not stand still while its back is vulnerable. If Syria falls in the hands of the Americans, the Israelis, and the takfirists, Lebanon will be surrounded, and we will enter again into the Israeli era”—in reference to Israel’s invasion of Lebanon (Kanso, 2013). Saouli (2019) emphasized that “Hezbollah’s strategy contributed to Syria’s aims to avert strategies of encirclement by its regional adversaries. Hezbollah served to break the encirclement” (p. 151). Hezbollah had always adopted a conspiracy theory narrative to counter every political attempt to undermine it, even on the national level. Hezbollah considers that the West is determined to undermine Islam and is always conspiring against the Islamic world. For instance, colonialism staged a conspiracy to divide the Muslim countries and control the region, starting with the 1917 Balfour declaration that created a Jewish homeland on Palestinian territory.

Moreover, Hezbollah accused the West, namely the US, of generating sectarian animosity and orchestrating the Lebanese civil war in coordination with Israel. It even considers that the American agenda in the Middle East is based on Israel’s interests rather than the American interests (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2002, pp. 90–91). For instance, Nasrallah accused Israel of plotting a conspiracy against Hezbollah by assassinating Rafik Hariri, Lebanon’s former Prime Minister (BBC, 2010). Such discourses reverberate as truths amongst Hezbollah’s supporters, especially when they blindly trust Nasrallah. This conspiracy narrative was resurfacing as Nasrallah’s speeches diverged toward geopolitics rather than focusing on sect-centric narratives.

Moreover, Hezbollah fighters believed that had they not pre-emptively engaged in al-Qusayr and subsequently across Syria, they would have been forced to fight Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in their Lebanese villages because they were planning to expand all over the region and invade Lebanon (Mohsen, 2017, p. 140). To illustrate, since Nasrallah’s 2013 statement, Hezbollah plunged further into the geopolitical confrontation. Some battles were more strategic than others. For instance, Hezbollah and other Shia and pro-regime groups, supported by Russia, Iran, and the Syrian Arab Army, recaptured Deir ez-Zor in September 2017. After the successful offensive, one of Hezbollah’s field commanders, a.k.a Abou Mustafa, appeared before cameras and stated what was written on a small piece of paper: “Deir ez-Zor wouldn’t have been able to resist without the braveness of the entrapped fighters and those who came from the outside to help break the siege on the airport. These forces included all the axis partners: Syrians, Russians, Iranians, and Lebanese. This is a strategic triumph” (Al-Mayadeen, 2017). This appearance was a precedent. First, Hezbollah’s military personnel are known for being reticent about appearing before cameras. Second, he was reading what was written on paper and not improvising. Third and most
importantly, all forces fighting in Syria, including Russia, assigned Hezbollah with the task of sending a geostrategic message to its rivals: Hezbollah is fighting, as an instrumental partner in the axis, as far as Deir ez-Zor. However, in parallel to this transitional discourse, Hezbollah did not abandon its sect-centric agenda. Where possible, both Iran and Hezbollah were keen to protect all Shia citizens across Syria despite their small numbers. Suffice it to say here that this was obvious in five villages as they put whopping efforts to either defend or escort Shia citizens to safety: Busra al-Sham, southern Syria; Nubbul and al-Zahra’, northern Aleppo; Kfarya and al-Fou’a, Idlib. Hezbollah expects such behavior as it was earlier framed as a sectarian party, and its justification for the intervention was sect-centric; therefore, safeguarding Shia citizens was a priority. That said, Hezbollah established a military balance by retaliating against every attack that targeted Shias.

Hezbollah’s sectarian identity dictates its maneuvers amid a sect-coded conflict, and, be it tacitly or explicitly, this deepened the Sunni-Shia divide. As Hezbollah and Iran were deploying a sect-centric agenda, a false assumption was drawn that the alliance between Assad’s regime, Iran, and Hezbollah is based on the religious homogeneity of Shia fighting against Sunni rebels (Haddad, 2020, p. 70). Rather, it is a partnership with shared geopolitical interests and small nuances, and Syria does not always share the same agenda with Iran and Hezbollah. For instance, Kissinger (2014) stressed that “in 1974, Syria and Israel concluded a disengagement agreement to define and protect the military front lines between the two countries. This arrangement has been maintained for four decades, through wars and terrorism and even during the chaos of the Syrian civil war” (p. 116). However, the raison d’être of Iran and Hezbollah is driven by their hostilities toward Israel, and any lenient stance in this regard will damage their credibility. This argument is necessary here to dispel the myths engulfing the following interconnected arguments: first, the relationship between Iran and its ideological replicas, namely Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia groups, was bound to a shared geopolitical agenda that did not always match. Second, Hezbollah and Iran adopted a sectarian mobilization agenda for what was, in fact, a bid to prevent the breakdown of the regime, which would have been a strategic defeat.

**Conclusion**

During the twenty-first century sect-coded conflicts in the Middle East, Haddad (2020) opines, “religion can certainly act as a mobilizational force, and religious doctrine, belief, and symbols are capable of inflaming popular emotion” (p. 70). That said, this article argues that Hezbollah is a sectarian party deploying sectarian identity as machinery of mobilization from above from the outset. Most recently, it became a tool to justify its interventions in Syria’s turmoil. History suggests that how sectarian identities meet and interact with politics dictate whether or not politics and sectarian identity yield benign consequences (Sunni–Shi’a cooperation in the wake of the demise of the Ottoman Empire) or malign ones (the instrumentalization of sectarian or religious identities in nineteenth-century
Ottoman Mount Lebanon) (Haddad, 2020, p. 96). In this context, Hezbollah’s engagement is labeled as malign for the stated reasons. Nevertheless, it would have been impervious to convince and mobilize Shia fighters and supporters to fight in Syria without this sectarian mobilization. However, once they plunged into the bloody moor, the sectarian discourse shifted and the expansion of Hezbollah’s fighters to cover more terrain was paralleled with more politics-centric discourse.

A group of researchers compared Syria’s conflict with the 30 years’ war that led to the peace of Westphalia in 1648. They stressed that neither the wars in seventeenth-century Europe were between Protestants and Catholics, nor the twenty-first-century chaos in the Middle East can be best explained by the Sunni–Shi’a schism (Milton et al., 2018, p. 35). The sect-coded and sectarian confrontations were not the primary drivers of the conflict, but the instrumentalization of sectarian identities was a jackpot for the players. The core of the contest was neither sectarian nor religious. Rather, it was a geopolitical competition between a host of domestic, regional, and international actors that politicized sectarian identity for their benefit. For our purposes, Hezbollah provides an example of a sectarian party that intervened in Syria’s havoc, using its sectarian identity as a mobilizational tool to implement the geopolitical agenda of the axis. Despite Hezbollah’s sectarian identity, it did not seek religious truths during the falsely framed sectarian war in Syria. With the unfolding of the Syrian conflict, it became obvious that Hezbollah exploited its sectarian identity in the sect-coded civil war while it was determined, along with the pro-regime forces, Iran and Russia, to prevent tilting the regional balance of power in its rivals’ favor and found in the sectarian dynamics and the escalating sectarian tensions the perfect justification for its early leap in the chaotic conflict.

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1. Ahl al-bayt or People of the House represents the family of the Prophet. When Shia refer to Ahl al-bayt, they mostly name Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter; Imam Ali, his son in law, and his two sons, al-Hassan and al-Hussayn.

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