

US Interests in the Middle East and the Challenges of Islamic Movements: A Study of Hezbollah

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Abstract

This paper titled 'US Interests in the Middle East and Challenges of Islamic Movements: A Study of Hezbollah' discussed the Hezbollah objectives from its sources and the US interests in the Middle East to find out the link between the two constructs. Both primary data like the Hezbollah manifesto and secondary data from books, journal articles and so forth were sourced and utilised while qualitative method is adopted for the analysis. Power politics is adopted as a frame of reference to explain the interplay of the two actors. Attempt was made to find out the points of divergence and convergence between the US and Hezbollah. The US interests in the Middle East include protection of Israel, preventing the rise of a regional hegemon and the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction that negatively affect Hezbollah's interests. Hezbollah mission is guided by its national interests that entail annihilation of the Israel and supporting Iranian and Syrian regimes that also negate the US interests. Therefore, the research finds that, from almost all aspects; the two international players are in head of perpetual conflict in every aspect, except on democratization of Lebanon that both actors recognise as admirable but they refuse to prioritise against other interests that seem more significant to them.

Keywords: *Islamic, Movement, National, Interest.*

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Background to the Study

For one to understand the US interests in the Middle East and how they relate to the Hezbollah mission, it is very significant to contextualise the Islamic Movement and the US interests in the region; The Middle East. Middle East (ME) is the origin of Islamic Movements after the down fall of the Islamic empires consequential to the First World War (Hirano, 2008). The movements started from individuals' calls like Jamaludeen al-Afghani's, who started advocating the main idea of Islamic Movement after the France and the British encroachments and usurpation of some Muslim Lands (Tunisia in 1881 and Egypt in 1882). He used media print to publish his newspaper *urwt al-wuthqah* to call for the unity of the Muslim *Ummah* and to expel the imperialist invasions (Hirano, 2008). Succeeded by Hasan al-Banna who founded an active group of Ikhwan in 1928 that spreads its branches all over the region and beyond and the Islamic revolution in Iran that gave birth to the establishment of an Islamic republic, formation of Hezbollah and some other popular uprisings parallel to the US interests.

Middle East (ME) is also a place where Western powers subjected their hegemonic missions especially Britain that played expansive role in the late of 19th to 20th century against Ottoman Empire '*sick man of Europe*', diminishing only when its prowess became undermined by the Second World War (WWII) that paved way for the US to take over in order to draw 'iron curtain' against Russian expansion (Modigs, 2003). US involvement in Middle Eastern affairs becomes more drastic as from 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait and continues to date (Byman and Moller, 2016). In plain terms, the US key interests until 2025 are: Existence of Israel and complementing peace process in the Middle east; Accessing oil, Preventing the emergence of a regional authoritarian foe; Preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; Winning political and economic reforms, and consequently bolstering internal stability; And fighting terrorism (The commission on America's National Interests, 2000). In order to explain the above subject this paper will be guided by the following questions: What are the main objectives of Hezbollah? How does the Hezbollah mission affect the US vital interests? Finally, the paper shall deliberate on the divergent and convergent points between the US and the Hezbollah party.

Theoretical Issues: National Interest Realist Perspective

From the realist school, it is worthy of note that, international players are compelled by either human nature or the anarchic structure of the system to maximize their power in order to be secure and to survive (Waltz, 1979). According to Morgenthau (1960), "The meaning of national interest is survival – the protection of physical, political and cultural identity against encroachments of other nation-states". By extension other non-state actors such as freedom fighters also struggle for their national interest (regain their national independence) thus National Interest is the motive behind struggles (of the states and non-state actors) in the international system that guides behaviours and actions.

Subsequently, the objectives of Hezbollah can be understood first, as derivations of national interests, then religious, because the struggle was initiated to fight against foreign invasion by Israel in 1948. It was then presumed that the Zionists would evacuate the natives from their

residences and permanently occupy their land as they did to their Palestinian neighbors in 1948. Therefore, the struggle was launched to free the motherland from the invaders. From this perspective, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's current Secretary-General, asserts: "We are a movement born as a reaction to the occupation of the part of our country" (in al-ahed, 2002).

It is actually this mission that fostered the 'resistance identity,' which would come to be the central component of Hezbollah's ideology from where its objectives were deduced. In the New Hezbollah Manifesto (2009), it is stressed that "the struggle is by no means based on religious confrontation, or racial and ethnic partisanship," but rather on self-defense against Israel's occupation and aggression. This fact was also expressed in an April, 2015 interview that Nasrallah gave on Syrian television when he said that "the problem with Israel is not religious but rather based on the fact that Israel is occupying land that does not belong to it." In another interview with Julian Assange Nasrallah (2012), reiterates that,

Israel is illegal state established on usurping land of others through committing massacre... both Christians and Muslims slain, the progress of time does not justify its legality... we want justice prevail, a one state for Christians, Muslims and Jews living in one place, a democratic state.

Further, from Hezbollah open letter (1985), addressed to all the oppressed of the World, Hezbollah declared its objectives as; to rid Lebanon of all Western influence which US, as an Israeli patron happened to be in the fore. Second, to bring to justice the Phalanges Party; an Israel ally that perpetrated massacre of hundreds of civilians during the civil war. And third, allow the people to decide their fate after the liberation. Preference is given to Islamic system of governance but not through compulsion (in Levitt, 2013). By making close examination on the above points one can deduce that, on the issue of withdrawal of Western powers from Lebanese affairs it is a direct call for absolute national independence. Second, the phalanges butchered Palestinian refugees and Lebanese alike, especially the Shiites that their blood should not be spilled recklessly. Other fellow Lebanese have the right to seek for justice at least to prevent future bloodbath. Third, it is about relegation of power to indigenes to decide on the destiny of their own country without foreign interference. It is now vivid that the three objectives are essentially linked to the National Interest.

On the US part, even though in the past seven decades the US was hosted into the Middle East purposely to draw 'Iron Curtain' against the expansion of the leading communist bloc; USSR as implied by Winston Churchill (in Modigs, 2003), it gradually develops more strategic interests in the region. It is stated in the US Commission on National Interest Report (2000) that, prevention of any authoritarian power from acquiring nuclear in the Middle East, securing oil vessels and protection of Israel, are constructive parts of the vital National Interests of the US. Concerning the first two interests (prevention of a Nuclear Power and Securing oil vessels) it is likely to hurt the US need for energy for domestic consumption and industrial usage it will also hamper the global capitalist system. On the third (survival of Israel), when the cold war was over it appeared that US polices in the region indulged in protecting Israeli National Interest in excess (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007).

The reasons why US vehemently support Israel vary. Despite their variations they all view dominance of Israel as a means to advance U.S. interests in the region. Nerguizian (2015) affirms that, US donate up to \$3.1 billion to Israel and 90% of this aid is in military. In 2015, more than half of the US foreign military aid went to Israel. One can imagine the “excessive support” US gives to Israel that this money doesn't require the senate approval. The rationale is that Israel as a dependent on the U.S. would be more willing to perform tasks, unacceptable to other allies, making it easier for Washington to control for serving U.S. future interests in the region. This could be one reason why the US not has put more effort into forcing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to a conclusion. In addition, Mearshiemer and Walt (2007) see American Israeli Public Affairs Commission (AIPAC) as the real culprit behind the US blind support to Israel.

Furthermore, US interests in Lebanon; the Hezbollah domain, are also linked to the protection of Israel through disarming Hezbollah and rearming Lebanese Armed Force (LAF) as Noe (2009) affirms. Finally, US aims at establishing a plural liberal democratic regime In Lebanon to incorporate the country fully into the world capitalist block and make it a model for other ME countries to emulate, Noe (2009) adds. Hence, links between the objectives of Hezbollah and the US interests will be further expatiated under the following sub-themes.

Hezbollah Challenges against the US Interests: The Survival of Israel.

From the foregoing, it is obvious how the protection of Israel falls under the US vital interests in the Middle East. Contrarily, Hezbollah identifies Israel and its invasions of Lebanon and other Arab countries in the region as illegitimate and unacceptable. In the open letter (1985), addressed to all the Oppressed in Lebanon and the World, Israel is viewed as an existential threat to Lebanese and to all Arabs that must be eliminated to terminate its occupation mission:

Our primary assumption in our fight against Israel states that the Zionist entity is aggressive from its inception, and built on lands wrested from their owners, at the expense of the rights of the Muslim people. Therefore, our struggle will end only when this entity is obliterated. We recognize no treaty with it, no cease fire, and no peace agreements, whether separate or consolidated (Open letter, 1985).

It is further added in the same manifesto that:

This entity began its aggression on Lebanon since 1948 from the border to the depth of the country, from the Houla massacre in 1949 to the aggression on the Beirut International Airport in 1968, including long years of assaults on border areas, their land, population and wealth, as a preface to confiscate direct land through repeated invasions, leading to the March 1978 invasion and the occupation of the border area, making its people subject to its influence at all levels, as a prelude to suppress the whole country in the invasion of 1982 (open letter, 1985).

Therefore, Hezbollah has projected Israel as 'aggressive' and 'expanding' as observed at several incidents and Hezbollah party was framed as a defense force against this potential threat that only responds to the aggression proportionately and legitimately. In Nasrallah terms,

Israel was indiscriminately shelling our civilians in villages and towns since 1948 and from 1982 to 1992 we only respond and strictly respond in a way that Israel will stop shelling our civilians. In 1993 there was a treaty; indirect dialogue between Israel and Hezbollah that Hezbollah would stop shelling Israel villages on condition that Israel too would avoid shelling the Lebanese (Nasrallah and Assange, 2012).

By expressing Israel as a transgressor and Hezbollah as a defender, Hezbollah has sought to present its armed struggle as anti-imperialist in nature. To date, Hezbollah stance is to depose all the Jew immigrants to where they came from and let the people of occupied Palestine; including Arab Muslim, Christians and Jews living there prior to 1948 to build a just nation that rights of all will be respected Nasrallah (2012) reiterates that, "...we want justice prevail, a one state for Christians, Muslims and Jews living in one place, a democratic state." (Nasrallah video, after last 11-day war with HAMAS, 2021).

By extension, Hezbollah expresses its stance against the US, as a biased and pro-Israel hostile great power. In Nasrallah's words, "America will remain the nation's chief enemy and the greatest Satan of all" (in Noe, 2007). According to the Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General, "since its establishment in 1982, Hezbollah has observed contemporary US foreign policy and positions as being ultimately geared towards supporting the existence and foundations of the Israeli entity" (Qassem, 2008). In his interview with Assange, Nasrallah (2012) expressed that even the 2006 war, it was the American plan executed by Israel to pave way for her NME hegemonic agenda this can be seen in the incessant supply of American weapons to support Israel, according to Mearshiemer and Walt (2007) during the 2006 war, four million US made *bomblets* were fired in Lebanon by the Israel, a country of less than four million population.

It can be argued that the US' blind support for Israel in the Middle East has created the fertile ground for the Hezbollah's anti-American campaign to be accepted widely in the region. Thus, Hezbollah declares its objectives among others; getting rid of all Western influences on Lebanon which US happened to be in the forefront as an Israeli Patron. This is in line with Imam Khomeini (*Wali faqeh* of Hezbollah, until his demise in 1989) who stresses many times, that "America is behind all our catastrophes, and it is the mother of all vice... When we fight it, we only exercise our legitimate right of defending Islam and the dignity of the *ummah*". He further concludes that, "... US terrorism is the mother of all world terrorism" (in Karagiannis, 2009).

According to Hezbollah 2009 manifesto:

The American arrogance has left no choice to our nation and people but the choice of resistance, at least for a better life, and for a humanitarian future, a future governed by relations of brotherhood, solidarity and diversity at the same time in a world of peace and harmony, exactly as

was drawn by our prophets and great leaders throughout history and it is in the expectations and admirations of the human soul.

Consequently, Hezbollah's view on US remains contentious. US is regarded as an imperialist power developing in the expense of other nations. This trend is to be stopped and US must not be interfering in to Lebanese national affairs and Middle East in general.

After a successful framing of Israel as the source of the Middle Eastern volatility, Hezbollah did not find it difficult to propose solution to the problem. Once Israel is recognized as the toothache therefore impeachment of the ached tooth is the solution. Pointing at Israel, the problem of the region, Nasrallah (2021) sent a strong message that the occupiers must leave the occupied land by all means:

To the Israel! You know in your mind and in your scripture, this system (Zionism) is not permanent, what now remain is not much, you are wasting your time as you try to stay more, wasting lives and blood of your youths. You should leave the land to the original owner, otherwise you will leave by force and humiliation. This land is for the Palestinians.

Hezbollah moves to a point that it justifies annihilation of the Zionist entity by all it possesses pertaining military power of military. Shaykh and Williams (2018) uttered that, Hezbollah acquired ballistic, anti-air, antitank and anti-ship missiles useful for deterrence, retaliation and longer military engagements. Its role in the Syrian war raised concern of its acquisition of more sophisticated weapons from Syria, Iran and Russia. Hezbollah rockets and missiles even for more than a decade are estimated to reach at least 130,000 including scud-missile that can reach 300 to 550km while carrying a 600 to 985kg payload that enable the group attack deep inside Israel. On the issue of Hezbollah weapons, Qassem (2021) reiterates:

We are defending, if Israel were to launch an aggression or to attack us, we will respond. We don't have any plan to initiate any confrontation with Israel but we are ready to respond at the maximum level to prevent its aggression, to prevent it from achieving any victory. It is our natural right to defend ourselves from Israeli aggression in the region... Our strength is of a defensive nature and we will continue to increase this arsenal because Israel understands only this language, it cannot be deterred except if we are strong, he adds.

In the above statements both Nasrallah and Qassem did not mention any country beside Israel, this shows that Israel is the main target of Hezbollah which Hezbollah is serious to eliminate as a defense jihad. The destruction mission cannot be taken for granted, throughout its history, Hezbollah has been attacking US spheres of interest which resulted to unbearable consequences on the US part to mention just a few; on October 23, 1983, a suicide bomber drove a truck laden with explosives into the US Marine Barracks in Beirut. Two-hundred twenty marines, 18 navy personnel and 3 army soldiers died in the blast. The attack represented the deadliest single-day death toll for the United States Marine Corps since the battle for Iwo Jima during World War II, as well as, the deadliest single-day death toll for the

U.S. military since the Tet Offensive during the Vietnam War, and the deadliest single attack on Americans overseas since World War II (Norton, 2018).

Hezbollah Support of Rogue States against US:

It is imperative to note that, Hezbollah paid allegiance to Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran as its supreme jurist leader (*wilayat al-faqeh*) and became bonded under ruling of the jurist of the Islamic government as Tufaili declares:

We do not believe in multiple Islamic republics; we do believe, however, in a single Islamic world governed by a central government, because we consider all borders throughout the Muslim world as fake and colonialist, and therefore doomed to disappear. We do not believe in a nation whose borders are 10,452 square kilometers in Lebanon; our project foresees Lebanon as part of the political map of an Islamic world in which specificities would cease to exist, but in which the rights, freedom, and dignities of minorities within it are guaranteed (Tufaili in Noe, 2007).

This is totally in contrast to US mission of weakening Iran as an authoritarian regime and wiping out its influence in the region. It also contradicts the US long term dream of establishing a pacific zone of democratic countries under US hegemony. Another point of contention is the issue of universality of the *wilaya* (Khomeini, 1970). According to Hezbollah, Iran is to assume the leadership of the Muslim *Ummah*, meaning it will be a mighty Islamic Republic, inevitably an American counterpart and a threat against US interests in the region. The more powerful Iran is, the more threat to the US interests in the region and to the existence of Israel by association. The bond between Hezbollah and Iran appears to be solidified as witnessed from the structure of Hezbollah, the Hezbollah Supreme Council is comprised of six Lebanese and one Iranian. More, on the bond between Hezbollah and Iran, Hezbollah manifesto (1985) states:

Iran should be perceived as the mobilization base and strategic center of gravity, a model for sovereignty, independence and liberalism, a supporter of the contemporary Arab-Islamic independence plan, and a force that strengthens the power and imperviousness of our region's countries and peoples.

Hezbollah loyalty to Iran reaches a point that, it expresses its will to participate in Third World War if Iran's nuclear become target of attack. "Attack on Iran nuclear could ignite the whole region in flames and initiators of the aggression will bear a big responsibility and also bear a responsibility of large-scale reaction" Qassem, (2021) adds. Furthermore, US designated Iran and Syria as rogue States in the ME and sanctioned them from having a nuclear power beside numerous sanctions. Conversely, Hezbollah describes Iran and Syria as components of axis of resistance that must be supported all over and all the times. Hezbollah support to Syria is exemplified in its involvement in the Syrian war seen as US agenda to topple the Assad's regime and install a friendly regime that will negotiate with Israel and thwart the resistance activity.

Syria is regarded as a backbone of the resistance to the extent that if it fails, the resistance alliance will have a great lost. To save the alliance Hezbollah for the first time participated in a foreign battle ground and backed Assad wholeheartedly. They endured loss of lives and properties that if not because of Hezbollah's sacrifice Assad's regime would have fallen. Consequently, Syria remains a permanent ally of the resistance, at least for its survival. As a result, the US mission to overthrow Assad, dismantle the resistance arc and make Israel more secure woefully failed.

US interest of securing oil vessels is still not free from Hezbollah threat. Hezbollah as an Iranian ally and bonded through the *wilayat al-faqeh*, poses potential threat against free flow of Energy. There is every tendency for Hezbollah to disrupt the US vessels by the Lebanese border at the Mediterranean Sea if receives order from Iran. Even though this is predicted to be an insignificant threat (Byman and Moller, 2016). A significant disruption is thus perceived, had the Iran blocks the strait of Hurmuz, Hezbollah would reinforce Iran to make matter more complicated. Thus, Hezbollah mission vis a vis US interests is troublesome.

Finally, looking at convergent points, from its Lebanonisation programme in 1992, Hezbollah expresses the zeal to bring to an end to confessional consociation democracy that reflects sectarianism and the need to have representation under national umbrella (Norton, 2018). On the other hand, as a precondition for Lebanon government to receive US aid, US need to have a liberal democratic government in Lebanon free from sectarianism (Noe, 2009). Therefore, if US would open door for dialogue with Hezbollah through this passage, promotion of cooperation between the two rival groups would be possible.

Conclusion

From the above deliberations it could be instantly recognizable that the interests of US in ME that US works to actualize is what Hezbollah works to destroy, especially the survival of Israel. Hezbollah also strengthens the rogue States of Syria and Iran that US wants to dismantle. US wants global liberal democracy and capitalism to prevail, Hezbollah sticks to the ideology of *wilyat al-faqeh* under Iranian clerical leadership. Therefore, from almost all aspects; the two international players are in head of conflict in every aspect considering the convergent points mentioned above. Nonetheless, Hezbollah expresses the zeal to bring to an end to confessional democracy that reflects sectarianism and the need to have representation based on pluralism in Lebanon. On the US part, it is one of the preconditions for Lebanon government to receive US aid to have a liberal democratic government in Lebanon free from sectarianism. If US would open door for dialogue with Hezbollah through this passage, promotion of peace would be possible. Except that both actors refuse to prioritise this notion against other interests that seem more significant to them.

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