Hizbullah's Image Management Strategy

By Lina Khatib

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Published by
FIGUEROA PRESS
840 Childs Way, 3rd Floor
Los Angeles, CA 90089
Phone: (213) 743-4800
Fax: (213) 743-4804
www.figueroapress.com

For general inquiries or to request additional copies of this paper please contact:

USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School
University of Southern California
3502 Watt Way, G4
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0281
Tel: (213) 821-2078; Fax: (213) 821-0774
cpd@usc.edu
www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org

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Abstract

The Lebanese paramilitary political party Hizbullah is the leading Islamist group in the world in terms of possessing a sophisticated image management strategy. This strategy is reliant on a number of components, from media outlets and products to public displays to the use of personified politics. Its purpose is to support Hizbullah's political activities and cultivate legitimacy for the group among its target audiences. This paper focuses on Hizbullah's image management strategy over the past five years. It examines the strategy's purpose and components, showing how they have come together to transform Hizbullah into a brand. It also shows how Hizbullah has used this strategy to modify its image over the years to ensure political survival. Hizbullah's most notable achievement in this regard has been the merger of credibility and adaptability, a key characteristic for brand longevity. But the Arab Spring has brought new challenges for the group, and it remains to be seen how Hizbullah's image management strategy might deal with those challenges.

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Introduction

Image management has become a crucial component of political life in the 21st century. States, politicians, and non-state actors are all realizing the importance of the way they are viewed by others—constituents and opponents alike—in political battles. Yes while significant attention has been given to the way individual politicians manage their image, mainly during elections[1], and to a lesser degree, to image management by states[2], non-state political organizations remain relatively overlooked.

Regard for non-state actors in this context is often given to organizations like NGOs when they are viewed as being useful partners supporting government public diplomacy efforts[3], or to international terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda[4], a group that has attracted significant attention on this front due to its reliance on the internet and on video (of leaders like Osama bin Laden and of terrorist operations—the spectacle of September 11, 2001 notwithstanding) to disseminate its messages.[5] Therefore, the consideration that has been given in recent years to the way Islamist groups as non-state political actors[6] engage in image management is normally presented under the umbrella of radicalization and propaganda.[7] When it comes to processes of political marketing, however, attention is driven away from such groups, partly because literature on political marketing has mainly focused on practices and styles of political parties and individuals during election campaigns.

But non-state political organizations from a wide spectrum do have image management strategies, and this trend is growing in a world

where the image has started to play an increasing role in politics. Among Islamist groups in the Middle East, and worldwide, it is the Lebanese political party Hizbullah that stands out as a group with a long legacy of image management. Hizbullah has been remarkable for its consistent attention to the need to reach out to constituents, and intimidate enemies,[8] through a sophisticated communication strategy that has run parallel to the group's political evolution ever since its inception in 1982. Hizbullah has evolved over the years—especially since the July war of 2006—into a prime user of professionalized political campaigns characterized by 'excessive personalization, a political star system, mass media impression management and an increasing negativity'.[9] In doing so, Hizbullah has followed the 'shopping model' of political campaigning[10], adopting certain elements of 'Americanized' politics while infusing them with local elements, resulting in hybridized practices and styles.

Hizbullah's image management merges both propaganda and political marketing. As Margaret Scammell argues:

> Propaganda… tends to begin from the premise that the 'product' is sacrosanct, while public opinion is malleable and can be won over to the propagandists' cause. Political marketing starts from the other side of the communication equation and says that the product is malleable and may be changed according to 'consumer' wants.[11]

This duality in Hizbullah's image management means that it transcends public diplomacy: it does not just target outside/foreign audiences, but domestic ones too, and it not only aims to attract and engage those audiences, but also to construct a menacing image to deter enemies. This combination of the attractive and the menacing in image management has allowed the group to establish credibility among different target audiences—including enemies—and to transform itself from an Islamist militia operating outside the Lebanese political system into a key player in the Lebanese political

scene. As such, image management for Hizbullah can be viewed as a tool supporting the group's political survival as it navigates a changing political landscape in Lebanon and abroad.[12]

Hizbullah's image management strategy is multiplatform and operates through several communication means at once. The group has its own newspaper, al-Intiqad (formerly, al-Ahd), its own satellite television station (al-Manar), several websites, including one for al-Manar offered in multiple languages (Arabic, English, French) and its own radio station (al-NourIt also produces children's games, merchandise, books, computer games, and uses posters and billboards, in addition to the organization of mass rallies, as methods of communicating with its multiple audiences.[13] Its leader Hassan Nasrallah has established a reputation for delivering attention-grabbing speeches. Since the group's rise, it has become more skilful at combining those different communication means creatively. Messages in different mediums reference and reinforce each other, and text, spoken words, and visuals combine seamlessly to make the messages memorable in the minds of their audiences.

As such, one can describe Hizbullah's image management strategy as a constant process of strategic communication, based on 'developing a set of comprehensive messages and planning a series of symbolic events and photo opportunities to reinforce them'.[14] Hizbullah's image management strategy is an example of Blumenthal's 'permanent campaign'; as he puts it, 'the permanent campaign is a process of continuing transformation. It never stops, but continues once its practitioners take power'.[15] The aim of the permanent campaign is to sustain legitimacy and credibility. To do so, Hizbullah follows Blumenthal's statement: 'Credibility is verified by winning, staying in power. And legitimacy is confused with popularity'.[16]

In what follows, Hizbullah's image management strategy since the July 2006 war will be examined, with a focus on Hizbullah's image that targets Lebanese and Arab audiences. One must remember that Hizbullah also has a developed psy-ops and propaganda strategies aimed squarely at Israel and which targets Israeli citizens as well as the Israeli military, which is part of what Zahera Harb calls 'liberation propaganda'.[17] This paper will not address this strategy in detail. Rather, the sections that follow aim to highlight the key elements of Hizbullah's image management strategy, particularly visual ones, and relate them to the political context within which Hizbullah operates.

The Evolution of Hizbullah's Image

Hizbullah's image management strategy has seen the group's image evolve over the past three decades. This image has several constants: Hizbullah as an ally of Iran; its role as a resistance group (to Israel); and its being a religious party representative of the Shiite community in Lebanon. But it has also changed, namely in moving from appealing almost exclusively to the Shiites in Lebanon to addressing a global audience; from operating as a group outside the Lebanese state to a key player within the state, in the process adopting a nationalist tag; and in alternating between a victimized image and a heroic one. The evolution of this image can be understood within the context of the relationship between organizations and the environment. As Dutton and Dukerich argue, organizational actions, decisions, and responses adapt to changes in the external environment, while patterns of organizational action also have a modifying impact on this environment.[18] Hizbullah's image management strategy is a process of negotiation between the group's political aims and the changing political environment in Lebanon and the Middle East. The group's main political aim—to establish itself as the key political player in Lebanon—has been approached with a long-term vision by Hizbullah[19], as a process that

would takes decades to be achieved, which necessitates ensuring that Hizbullah's image at each stage in the process is responsive to the political dynamics of the time. At the same time, the image itself is crafted to effect a favorable change in those dynamics.

Visual products have played an important role in this evolving image management strategy. Created as an anti-Israeli Islamist militia following the invasion of Lebanon by Israel in 1982, Hizbullah's early image management visual products had two key characteristics: First, they were infused with Palestinian and Iranian references. The Iranian influence was particularly seen in the visual style of Hizbullah's posters that it used to disseminate its ideological and military messages, using the same logos and aesthetics as those used by Iranian state organizations like Bonyade Shahid (which Hizbullah launched in Lebanon under the Arabic name 'Mo'assasat al-Shahid'). This borrowing is not surprising as Hizbullah itself is a product of the Iranian Republican Guard, utilizing the same Iranian institutions, and with continuing Iranian patronage; but moreover, the adoption of Iranian revolutionary aesthetics came at a time that coincided with the Iran-Iraq war, which produced similar visual outputs in Iran. This naturalized introduction of Iranian aesthetics into Lebanon can be seen as an attempt at normalizing Hizbullah's links with Iran, so that aspects of Iranian cultural expression blend into Lebanese ones.

The Palestinian influence manifested itself in two ways: through Hizbullah's use of heroic videos, and through invoking of the liberation of Palestine as one of the group's key drivers. Hizbullah is one of the first Islamist groups to record its 'martyrdom operations' on video. Beyond the mere recording of personal testimonies by would-be martyrs (which were pioneered in Lebanon by anti-Israeli occupation National Resistance Front groups like the Communist Party and the Syrian Nationalist Socialist Party in the early 1980s), Hizbullah's videos contained footage of the actual anti-Israeli

operations.[20]   Very early on, Hizbullah had learnt that establishing credibility, popularity, and a lasting legacy would be supported by video 'evidence', a lesson passed on from the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which had been a keen producer of 'resistance' propaganda films in the 1970s—films that were in turn inspired by the idea of Third Cinema and the camera as a weapon that emerged from Latin American revolutionary contexts.[21]   The videos are an example of Hizbullah's direct mediation of how its operations would be remembered. As Groys argues, contemporary warriors no longer need artists to represent their heroic acts; warriors have themselves started to act as artists through creating videos with recognizable aesthetics.[22]   In this sense, they themselves become the mediators between reality and memory, often creating iconic images that become part of the collective imagination.

The group's commitment to Palestine is an ongoing attribute, and is publicly communicated through visual outputs and spectacles like the organization of elaborate Jerusalem Day parades every year[23], as well as through invoking the liberation of Palestine constantly in Hizbullah rhetoric. Although this can be read as an appeal to the heart and minds of Palestinians, and even Arabs at large—as the Arab-Israeli conflict is perhaps the most defining conflict of its kind for Arab citizens—it was not until the liberation of Southern Lebanon in 2000 that Hizbullah was able to cement its reputation as a credible resistance force in the eyes of Arab citizens. Yet it could be argued that without having planted the seeds of credibility early, Hizbullah may not have been able to achieve its current iconic status in the region.

The second characteristic is that Hizbullah's videos, posters, rhetoric, and public rallies were heavily invested in Shiite religious references. Hizbullah emerged out of the context of the marginalization of the Shiites in Lebanon (particularly in the South) and the drive for self-empowerment for the community that was

instigated by Imam Musa Sadr in the 1970s, as well as the ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the world's first Islamic republic.[24] Hizbullah's main audience in its early years was the Lebanese Shiites. Hizbullah's communication products were primarily aimed at rallying support for the group among this core community, boosting its potential for a brighter future. In this way, Hizbullah's image in the early and mid 1980s aimed at carving a space for the group in the hearts and minds of the Shiites. The visuals were still raw and crude, but this spoke to the double abjection of the Shiites at the time, a community denied political, social, and economic support by the Lebanese state and attacked by Israel, since most Shiites in Lebanon come from the Israel-bordering South.[25] Hizbullah adopted this marginalization framework along similar lines to those used by Lebanon's earlier Shiite movement Amal (set up by Sadr), but added to this victimized image one of prowess. With the group calling itself the 'Party of *God*', religion was another marker of credibility within the community, and Hizbullah branded its anti-Israeli operations as a jihad in the path of God.

With the end of the Lebanese Civil War that was sealed with the signing of the Taef Agreement of 1989 (which Hizbullah was not part of), Hizbullah found itself in a limited political space that was too small for its growing ambitions. Having amassed a considerable degree of support among the Shiite community, the group decided to enter formal local Lebanese politics for the first time, running for municipal and parliamentary elections. This necessitated a change in the image of Hizbullah, to which it added a nationalist layer in order to appeal to communities beyond the Shiites. To do so, Hizbullah partly relied on a public relations campaign to market itself in nationalist terms.[26] Hizbullah was no longer just a Shiite group; it now became a Lebanese group. Its resistance operations in Southern Lebanon were now not just about liberating the people of the South, but also about liberating Lebanon as a nation-state. Hizbullah started infusing its communication messages with more references to

Lebanon, and its political and media strategy succeeded as the group won a significant number of seats in the first post-war parliamentary election in 1992. This era also saw Hizbullah establish its own terrestrial television station, al-Manar, which started broadcasting in 1991. Al-Manar allowed Hizbullah to communicate directly with the wider Lebanese audience, which was crucial for establishing itself as a key political party. Al-Manar was characterized by Hizbullah as the 'resistance channel'[27], consolidating Hizbullah's image as a defender of Lebanon against Israeli aggression.

Hizbullah's image as a Lebanese nationalist group was bolstered with the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon in 2000 after 18 years of occupation. The liberation of Southern Lebanon was widely credited to Hizbullah's resistance operations, allowing the group to sustain the nationalist tag and claim further clout in the local Lebanese political scene.[28] Hizbullah achieved this through altering its image from the liberator of Lebanon to protector of the country.[29] The liberation also marked the beginning of claiming a space in the pan-Arab imagination, especially as it coincided with the Second Palestinian Intifada, which Hizbullah was quick to embrace. The group had launched the satellite channel of its al-Manar television station that year, allowing it to communicate its messages to a regional audience in the Middle East. All those factors allowed Hizbullah to appropriate the label 'the resistance', so that 'the resistance' became another name for 'Hizbullah'; this labeling is a way of cultivating legitimacy, so that resistance connotations come up every time Hizbullah is mentioned or even thought about, no matter what the context. In adopting this label, Hizbullah can also be seen as using an international framework to appeal to global audiences, as it has branded itself a resistance movement on par with those in South Africa and Latin America.

This label was challenged during the Cedar Revolution of 2005 following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri on

14 February 2005. Widely regarded as an assassination orchestrated by Hizbullah's ally Syria, Hariri's death formed a key challenge for Hizbullah, as mass public mourning for the former Prime Minister became a daily ritual in downtown Beirut. The assassination also resulted in the creation of the March 14 political coalition in Lebanon that challenged Hizbullah and marketed itself strongly in patriotic terms, calling for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanese soil following UN Resolution 1559. Hizbullah once more found itself in a position where further engagement in local Lebanese politics was a necessity. Hizbullah competed with the March 14 coalition in the parliamentary election that ensued in May 2005, allying itself with a Christian political party, the Free Patriotic Movement, in a bid to sustain its Lebanese nationalist tag and to hold on to its political power. Hizbullah was keen to use the Lebanese flag alongside its own flag in its rallies and television broadcasts as a visual indicator of its nationalist sentiment.[30]

Attention to the Cedar Revolution went beyond Lebanon. Arab citizens as well as international observers mostly praised the street protests calling for freedom, sovereignty, and independence (from Syrian control)[31], and Hizbullah's attempts at presenting a nationalist image while being a firm supporter of Syria started to look less than convincing. Hizbullah responded by attempting to redefine public discourse about the meaning of foreign intervention. It orchestrated a rally in downtown Beirut on 8 March 2005 where placards stating 'no to foreign intervention' were carried, and where 'foreign intervention' came to mean American intervention, but not Syrian or Iranian. This message was also mirrored in the media messages that Hizbullah employed, whether through Nasrallah's speeches or al-Manar broadcasts. This redefinition of 'foreign' served to legitimize Hizbullah's connections with Iran and Syria.

In using the spectacle of a rally as a tool to create this redefinition, Hizbullah can be said to have followed Lisa Wedeen's argument

that 'ideologues use spectacles to revise resonant symbols so as to convey current political messages'.[32]   Wedeen also argues that 'spectacles are taken simultaneously to represent dominance and to operate as a means of dominating'.[33]   The rally, then, was also a means for Hizbullah to display its power and exercise it over others. As a spectacle, it served as a visual anchor for political ideas that framed the ways the intended audiences saw themselves.[34]   Through it, Hizbullah asserted its dominance over its political opponents, but also over the way its supporters defined themselves—as Wedeen argues, spectacles are a way of disciplining the bodies of people through enacting political obedience.[35]   The March 8 rally began a phase of stepped up public and private measures by Hizbullah to ensure the undivided loyalty of its followers, and the intimidation of its rivals.

Hizbullah in turn became acutely aware of the need to perform to a regional audience, and even an international one. The Cedar Revolution's visual saturation was embraced by Hizbullah, and since 2005, Hizbullah's current Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah has become the public face of the group in the Arab world and outside, with carefully crafted speeches targeting multiple audiences and a charismatic image[36], and the group's communication strategy became a multiplatform one on a wider scale. But it was the July 2006 war that marked a key transformation in Hizbullah's image.

When Hizbullah first emerged as a paramilitary group, its primary target audiences were Israel and Lebanese Shiites. As the group's political aims widened, so did its target audience. Although Hizbullah had been addressing Arab audiences through its al-Manar satellite television channel since 2000, before the 2006 war, this address was presented by a local Lebanese Shiite paramilitary group that was nevertheless a key participant in Lebanese politics; the group's main appeal to Arab audiences was through its constant expressed support for the Palestinian cause.[37]   Israel's reaction to Hizbullah's

kidnapping of two IDF (Israeli Defense Force) soldiers on 12 July 2006 changed this image. Israel launched a military campaign targeting not just Hizbullah strongholds in Southern Lebanon and Southern Beirut but also vital Lebanese infrastructural sites, from bridges to power plants to Beirut's only lighthouse. Israel's attacks resulted in the death of over 1200 people in Lebanon, most of them civilians, and the displacement of one million people—a quarter of the Lebanese population.[38] The 2006 war saw Hizbullah once again market itself as Lebanon's savior from Israeli aggression, but went beyond that—the 24-hour coverage of the war on pan-Arab satellite television widened Hizbullah's network of audiences, and helped Hizbullah transform its image into that of a primarily *Arab* paramilitary group.[39] That Hizbullah emerged defiant after the war allowed the group to develop itself as a heroic brand across the Arab world. Nasrallah became the new Gamal Abdel Nasser, a pan-Arab leader, and Hizbullah came to be widely viewed as the only Arab actor that has succeeded in resisting Israel and 'defeating' it in war.[40]

Hizbullah as a Brand

Hizbullah's double victory—according to its own rhetoric—made the group a household name in the Arab world. It strove to cultivate a sense of legitimacy based on this power, and this combination of power and legitimacy paved the way for Hizbullah's rising authority in Lebanon and its popularity in the Arab world.[41] The group worked hard on getting closer to Arab audiences by utilizing all its communication tools at once. Mass rallies were organized and televised live to celebrate the 2006 victory, where Nasrallah gave speeches that often merged classical Arabic (to appeal to Arab audiences) with the Lebanese dialect (to appeal to the local audience). Flyers, banners, and billboards were created to commemorate the war. Al-Manar broadcast music videos dedicated to the war[42], and Al-Intiqad newspaper carried images from the twice-liberated South on its front pages. Even merchandize commemorating the war was

created. A key characteristic of those communication tools is that they were marked by a high degree of intertextuality and uniformity of message.[43] As such, they have helped construct Hizbullah as an identifiable brand.

Stuart Agres defines a brand as 'an asset of differentiating promises that links a product to its consumers'.[44] The associative aspect of brands is particularly important: strong brands have strong bonds with their target audiences. As Peter van Ham argues, brands serve as emotional appeals to people, granting them a sense of belonging and security.[45] Logos, in particular, serve as visual reminders to followers of their affinity with the brand, cultivating their sense of loyalty. The Hizbullah flag, with a distinct canary yellow background and the image of a rifle held high by an arm extending from the words 'Hizb Allah' in Arabic, acts as one such marker of identity and pride for Hizbullah's followers.

Hizbullah was aware of the importance of engaging with its wider audience after the war on a more personal, everyday basis to sustain brand loyalty.[46] It therefore created war memorabilia like t-shirts and baseball caps bearing its logo and the color of its flag, as well as the picture of Nasrallah. It also issued merchandize that included a dart board featuring Israeli government officials and Israeli towns that the player was invited to throw darts at, and a new computer game (Special Force 2: Tale of the Truthful Pledge) that allowed players to battle Israeli soldiers in the Southern Lebanese villages affected by the 2006 war. As the game's designer said, the game aimed to make players 'feel the victory as if they were taking part in attacks they were cheering for from far'.[47] All those products can be seen as material efforts to associate Hizbullah's image with specific, definite values (defiance, heroism) in the eyes of its audience, no matter how much the values are actually related to Hizbullah's 'real characteristics'[48], because, as Falkowski and Cwalina argue, 'it is

sufficient [for a brand] that they [i.e., the values associated with it] have a definite meaning for the recipient'.[49]

Aaker writes that the strength of brands lies in brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand association.[50] Hizbullah's brand after 2006 scored high on all four levels. Brand awareness is not just about recognition of a brand name, but also its dominance in someone's mind over other brands. Hizbullah worked to achieve this through repetition of its victory messages across all media, which turned slogans like 'the most honorable of people' (in reference to Nasrallah) and 'The Divine Victory' (in reference to the 2006 war) into everyday expressions. The perception of quality was easy to achieve, following the 'victory' outcome of the 2006 war, but Hizbullah was keen to emphasize added value: addressing audiences in the victory rally in September 2006, Nasrallah promised that those houses destroyed in the war would be rebuilt even better than they were before.[51] This promise can be connected with ensuring continued loyalty, as those who suffered great losses during the war could be seen as the most likely to enter a lukewarm relationship with Hizbullah. The group was keen to showcase people's loyalty through rallying thousands to participate in its victory celebrations. Loyalty was also communicated through cultivating the expression 'fida al-sayyed' (meaning, a sacrifice to Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah), which was mouthed by those whose homes were destroyed or who lost loved ones during the war whenever they appeared in the media, to indicate that all those losses were worth it as long as Nasrallah prevailed—an expression of utmost loyalty to the brand no matter how dire the circumstances. This kind of rhetoric is what differentiates Nasrallah from most other Arab leaders; he is not merely the head of an institution who derives his authority from coercion[52], he is a *leader* whom people follow because they 'want to'.[53] This bond with Nasrallah in turn strengthens Hizbullah's brand association, which refers to the emotional bonds that link a person to a brand. Such emotional bonds are important for Hizbullah because through them

people internalize Hizbullah's principles. As Mueller argues, '[l]egitimating rationales, necessary to any system of domination, are effective only if their underlying principles have been internalized by the public, that is, collectively accepted as normative and thus as binding'.[54]

The brand that Hizbullah intends people to form a bond with invokes certain positive connotations like justice, liberty, honor, defiance, and heroism. Those connotations came to the fore during the 2006 war. The war was a media spectacle. While its television coverage highlighted the plight of civilians, al-Jazeera's coverage in particular was marked by taking a clear stance towards Hizbullah.[55] Hizbullah was branded 'the resistance' and its fight against Israel was presented in David-versus-Goliath heroic terms. The channel's normal schedule was suspended as attention was focused on the small villages in Southern Lebanon where the fiercest battles were taking place. There was little footage of actual Hizbullah fighters, but the rhetoric used in the newscasts painted a picture of larger-than-life, almost mythical action heroes. The news reports coupled graphic footage of Lebanese casualties with stories about Hizbullah's defense operations in the South. A similar, if more pronounced, image of Hizbullah could be seen on its own television channel, al-Manar. Merging footage of war-torn villages and civilians with those of Hizbullah fighters in the field, al-Manar disseminated a message of defiance that was bolstered when Israel destroyed the station's headquarters in Southern Beirut on 16 July 2011, only for the channel to continue broadcasting from a secret location after a mere interruption of two minutes to its live transmission. Al-Manar's feat came just two days after Hassan Nasrallah appeared on television promising victory against Israel:

> 'The surprises that I have promised you will start now,' Nasrallah said. 'Now in the middle of the sea, facing Beirut, the Israeli warship that has attacked the infrastructure, people's homes and civilians. Look at it burning'.[56]

As Nasrallah spoke, Hizbullah attacked an Israeli warship off the Lebanese coast, with the camera cutting live to the action. If there ever were a more potent symbolic action for Hizbullah's defiance during the war, that was it. The Hizbullah brand was sealed.

The Divine Image

The end of the war in August 2006 was labeled by Hizbullah a 'Divine Victory' in a multimedia political marketing campaign. Bruce Newman states three main components of political marketing: 'Social Imagery', personality politics, and 'Situational Contingency'.[57] Hizbullah used all three in the 'Divine Victory' campaign. 'Social Imagery' associated Hizbullah with issues relevant to its constituents; personality politics operated through Nasrallah's performances as discussed above; and 'Situational Contingency' was used through presenting hypothetical scenarios that created the illusion that Hizbullah would be better able to deal with them than any other political/paramilitary entity. Writing about Bill Clinton's 1996 presidential election campaign, Bruce Newman highlights a key strategy for Clinton, which he terms 'positioning strategy'. He writes that this strategy constituted 'his ability to convince voters that the American Dream was getting easier to achieve, that he was the person who would give them a sense of control over their own destinies, and that the "age of opportunity" would make that happen for them'.[58] Hizbullah followed a similar model in using situational contingency, as it aimed to convince its people that defeating Israel was getting easier to achieve, that Nasrallah was the person who would give them a sense of control over their own destinies, and that, in Nasrallah's words, 'the age of defeats has gone, and the age of victories has come'.[59]

But Hizbullah was also keen to market the 2006 war as a victory against Israel to an international audience. To achieve this, Hizbullah's image management strategies became more sophisticated

and streamlined, relying on professionally designed visual products. No sooner had the war ended that Hizbullah planted 600 billboards in Lebanon that commemorated the group's achievements, the most prominent placed on the road from Beirut's international airport into the capital.[60]   The billboards had several distinctive characteristics that marked a departure from Hizbullah's previous communication style.

First of all, as the billboards were meant for the cameras of the international media, they featured images and text in Arabic, English, and French. While Hizbullah had used different languages in its communication messages before (namely through installing billboards in Hebrew on the Israeli border to intimidate the 'enemy', and through al-Manar's multilingual website), this was the first time that the group had used foreign languages in this streamlined and self-knowing way.

Second, a clear distinction between Hizbullah's 'Divine Victory' campaign and previous Hizbullah media campaigns is that the 'Divine Victory' one was less dense, both visually and verbally.[61] *Newsweek* interviewed the creative director of the PR company Idea Creation that designed the campaign in 2006. In the interview, Mohammad Kawtharani revealed the intention behind this:

> The international public 'expects a clear and single message,' he says. 'That's the language of the media these days.' So Hizbullah settled on the simple and catchy 'Divine Victory' slogan, and repeated it over and over.[62]

Third, when using images of casualties, Hizbullah did not choose to display graphic violent images this time, which it had established a legacy of doing:

> [N]ow that the war is over, says Kawtharani, publicizing what he calls the 'more aggressive' visuals can be counterproductive…. The West already considers Hizbullah a 'bloody party,' Kawtharani acknowledges. Continuing to publicize carnage would reinforce this image, especially among foreign audiences.[63]

A fourth distinction is the use of humor, something that Hassan Nasrallah had started employing in his speeches, and which was now translated into a visual form coupled with ironic text:

> Some of Hizbullah's most common ads use a tactic that Kawtharani calls sending 'double messages.' One example: a red banner featuring the slogan extremely accurate targets! juxtaposed against the rubble of Beirut's southern suburbs. 'In advertising, irony is part of the modern style,' says Kawtharani. 'The audience will receive the double message'.[64]

The campaign is also worth examining for its appropriation of religious and patriotic frameworks that Hizbullah had used previously. All of the billboards had a red background, with the words 'The Divine Victory' written in white and green—a reference to the colors of the Lebanese flag. They also featured a logo in the same colors written in a modern Arabic font that spelt the slogan 'Victory from God' at the bottom. The same slogan, logo and colors also appeared on al-Manar, on Hizbullah's websites, and on a variety of merchandize. The choice of words was deliberate: Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah, had, in April 2006, promised victory against Israel, as well as the release of Lebanese prisoners from Israeli jails (hence naming Hizbullah's operation on 12 July 2006 as 'Operation Truthful Pledge'). Nasrallah's surname literally means 'victory from God'. So the media campaign that followed the 2006 war firmly placed the war as an achievement of Nasrallah himself, but also elevated Nasrallah to a quasi-divine status—Lebanon's only savior.

This use of a religious framework for its activities, as stated earlier in this paper, has been a constant for Hizbullah. For example, Hizbullah's first anti-Israeli suicide bombing mission was called 'Operation Khaibar' to connect it with the Battle of Khaibar when the Prophet Muhammad and his army took over a Jewish area. But 'The Divine Victory' took this to another level, allowing Hizbullah to claim a position for itself above all other political parties in Lebanon. This use of religion makes Hizbullah's actions dogmatic and unchallengeable: to contest them would be equivalent to blasphemy. Indeed, in a later speech given by Hassan Nasrallah in 2008, he exclaimed, 'This is the Party of *God*! It is not a regular party. It is the Party of *God*!'. One can understand the need for this dogma as Hizbullah faced a degree of criticism in 2006 and after, both within and outside Lebanon, for recklessly dragging the country to war.

This criticism was also one reason behind Hizbullah's seeking narrative agency over the story of the war. As Hayden White argues, it the presence of contest that produces narrativization of history.[65] Having narrative agency is important because being the narrator allows one control over how a story is presented, which elements of it to emphasize, and which details to overlook. Narrativization is thus not only relevant in the context of competing with political opponents, but also in that of history. As Hegel wrote:

> In our language the term *History* unites the objective with the subjective side… it comprehends not less what has *happened*, than the *narration* of what has happened. This union of the two meanings we must regard as of a higher order than mere outward accident; we must suppose historical narrations to have appeared contemporaneously with historical deeds and events. It is an internal vital principle common to both that produces them synchronously.[66]

White elaborates by highlighting narration's relationship to historical reality, or 'events that are offered as the proper content of historical discourse'[67]:

> The reality of these events does not consist in the fact they occurred but that, first of all, they were remembered, and second, that they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence… The authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself; the historical account endows this reality with form and thereby makes it desirable, imposing on its processes the formal coherency that only stories possess.[68]

Through this claim of authority over the writing of history, Hizbullah placed itself as the sole legitimate narrator of the story of the war. The story was about Hizbullah as the hero of the people, protecting them against aggression by a foreign villain and its sidekick.

This multi-actor story of the war was featured on the billboards celebrating the 'Divine Victory', with individual billboards each focusing on Hizbullah, the Lebanese people, Israel, and the USA. Hizbullah in the story is the protector of the nation and the people, the protagonist and hero, as seen in one billboard that carried the image of a rocket launcher and two Hizbullah fighters as well as the Hizbullah flag, with the caption 'the arms of the mujahideen'. The Lebanese people are the defiant victims. While some billboards depicted casualties, the majority acknowledged the steadfastness of the people of the South (Lebanon and Beirut). A billboard under this theme had the image of an old man with his fist raised in the air, standing in front of a burning bombed home, along with the caption 'with the patience of the steadfast people'. The Israeli army is not just the villain in the story, but also the stooge. Several billboards belittled the Israeli army, such as one showing the picture of Israeli soldiers crying in a huddle, with the caption 'It's Lebanon, you fools!' in Arabic and English. The USA is painted as a menacing Israeli accomplice in the war. A billboard showing a destroyed home had

the caption 'Made in USA' in English, while a red banner erected at the site of a destroyed building stated in English, 'The New Middle Beast', in reference to Condoleezza Rice's speech on 21 July 2006 about the war representing the 'birth pangs of a new Middle East'. A notable feature of the representation of Hizbullah as a 'character' in the story is that the faces of its fighters in the billboards are not shown. Instead, they are anonymous, almost mythical figures. This visual representation contrasts sharply with that of faces of Hizbullah martyrs displayed on posters commemorating their deaths, which have been a regular feature of Hizbullah's visual products in public space since its inception. By choosing to de-individualize its fighters, Hizbullah is appealing to the audience to identify with the group as a unified, larger-than-life entity, but also to imagine themselves as those heroic figures.[69] It is also reserving idealized personification for one individual: Hassan Nasrallah.

The Personified Image

Bergmann and Wickert write: 'In difficult times, a charismatic leader helps to give a sense of direction both at the objective and emotional levels'.[70] He is both 'a director and a leading actor'.[71] Nasrallah, as Hizbullah's leader and public face, plays this dual role. But the 2006 war gave him an additional one; he himself became 'the platform' of Hizbullah.[72] Hassan Nasrallah is Hizbullah's first charismatic leader in the media age. As such, he can be seen as a product of the political and media environment in which he is serving as Secretary General of the Party. Nasrallah's unique image as a leader partly lies in that his public persona is a mediated one but that he also possesses genuine charisma.[73] It is therefore useful to pay attention to those two aspects. On the mediation level, Corner and Pels argue that mediation projects political personhood in three different ways: iconically, vocally, and through kinesis. All three revolve around style: the first referring to the image of the leader; the second to the manner in which he addresses the public (as well as what he says);

and third to his represented (and often choreographed) actions and interactions.[74] Nasrallah excels on all three stylistic levels. On the charismatic level, Hackman and Johnson list five behaviors that help followers attribute charisma to a leader: possessing a unique, yet attainable vision; acting in an unconventional manner; demonstrating personal risk taking; demonstrating confidence and expertise; and demonstrating personal power.[75] Again, Nasrallah's image draws on all five elements.

Hassan Nasrallah assumed the leadership of Hizbullah after the assassination of its Secretary General Abbas Musawi on 16 February 1992. Nasrallah's image in the early years of his leadership was that of a modest and devout man, but this image evolved into a larger-than-life one. The seeds for his heroic image were planted when he lost his 18-year old son Hadi in a military operation against Israel on 12 September 1997. Not only did Nasrallah claim a great deal of credibility by having his eldest son serve on the frontline as a Hizbullah fighter (which gave a huge moral boost to the group's followers), he was also remarkable in his public handling of the death. In a speech televised on al-Manar the day after Hadi's death, Nasrallah fiercely declared:

> I thank God and praise Him for His great bounty, that He generously blessed my family by choosing one of its members for martyrdom, and accepted me and my family as members in the holy assembly of martyrs' families. I used to feel ashamed when visiting the fathers, mothers, wives, and children of martyrs, and I will stay feeling humble in front of them.[76]

Al-Manar's broadcast intercut Nasrallah's speech with footage of him visiting the families of martyrs, and with images of the attending audience in the hall where he gave the speech, where the audience members twice responded to his statements by raising their fists in the air and chanting: 'God is great. Khomeini is the leader. Victory to Islam. Death to Israel. Definitely [reaching] victory. Advancing till

[we reach] Jerusalem', the standard chant that Hizbullah popularized in its public rallies, suggesting that his, and their spirit, has not been broken by this loss, and that their eyes are firmly fixed on their goals.

The liberation of the South on 25 May 2000 was another landmark for Nasrallah. The liberation marked the overriding of the Iranian discourse framing Hizbullah's actions by a Lebanese nationalist one, and the presentation of Nasrallah as an Arab hero. In his speech on the day of the liberation in 2000, Nasrallah addressed the Hizbullah flag-waving crowd in an open-air venue in the Southern town of Bint Jbeil by standing in front of a large Lebanese flag and saying: 'You have proven, and the resistance has proven—in harmony with the Lebanese government—that the people of Lebanon, and the Lebanese state, and the Lebanese resistance, and all the sects in Lebanon are worthy of victory'.[77] He then dedicated the victory to the Arab people: 'We dedicate this victory to our oppressed people in occupied Palestine, and to the peoples of our Arab and Islamic nation'.[78] This appeal to non-Shiite Lebanese and Arabs at large marks a configuration of leadership that can be seen as a move away from traditional politics in the Middle East that is based on a leader firmly embedded within the immediate collective (such as tribal leaders). Instead, what Nasrallah represents is a sense of proximity that is based on an asymmetrical relationship between the leader and the led, but that nevertheless constructs the leader as 'authentic' as the leader tries to bridge this asymmetry.[79]

Nasrallah's image as a charismatic pan-Arab leader was cemented by the end of the 2006 war. His 'extraordinary' deed meant that he became victory personified. This served to both sustain his charismatic position and charismatize his followers. As Schweitzer argues, sustaining charismatic leadership is reliant on extraordinary deeds, and this is mainly demonstrated in times of war, when the leader becomes in possession of heroic charisma.[80] Hackman and Johnson add that through such deeds, charismatic leaders can

in turn help their followers overcome feelings of inadequacy: 'In validating a charismatic leaders' extraordinary ability, followers may experience feelings of empowerment by submerging their own identities in that of a seemingly superior leader'.[81]   Through this two-step process, Nasrallah became a pan-Arab icon. Arab citizens demonstrated against the Israeli aggression in several countries in the region, and often, the image of Nasrallah was used in public space as an identity marker by those demonstrators. But it was the end of the war—and the 'victory'—that marked a new visibility for Nasrallah. As Belt puts it, Nasrallah became 'Islam's most noble [doer]'.[82]   Posters of Nasrallah were carried by people in Bahrain, songs praising him were sung in public gatherings in Egypt, and Hizbullah souvenirs bearing his image could be bought alongside those of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Nasrallah represented a new hope for Arabs in the long battle against Israel, and seemed the perfect candidate to fill the gap for a pan-Arab leader, which had existed since the death of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970. In Egypt in 2006, Nasrallah's picture was carried alongside that of Nasser[83]; the comparison with Nasser was pronounced not only because of Nasrallah's great deed in the 2006 war (which some saw as being on par with Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, and which Hizbullah constantly framed as defeating the largest Israeli operation against an Arab country[84]), but also because of Nasrallah's rhetorical style and charisma, as well as his ability to achieve parasocial intimacy with his followers.[85]   Pels argues that parasocial intimacy between leaders and their followers disturbs the traditional political divide between elitism and populism. This disturbance is based on the linking of difference and familiarity: on one hand, 'only through distance is the representer able to represent'.[86] This is seen in Nasrallah's status as a larger-than-life person. On the other hand, as the representer speaks in the name of the represented, his representation implies a sense of proximity. Nasrallah is thus at once 'one of us' and an untouchable star, displaying an 'extraordinary ordinariness'.[87]

This ambivalence was capitalized on by Hizbullah after the 2006 war through a 'documentary' produced by al-Manar and distributed on DVD called *Al-Abaya* (meaning 'the cloak'). *Al-Abaya* used as its focus a Lebanese Shiite woman called Reem Haidar to construct 'a film about the importance of mutual affinity and commitment between the leader and his people', as she states at the end of the film. Reem Haidar was an 'ordinary' Lebanese woman who was interviewed on television as she walked to a café in Beirut two days into the 2006 war. She made one comment in the interview which turned her into a new 'face' for Hizbullah:

> I want from Sayyed Hassan, when this mess is over, his cloak, that he sweated in while he was defending me and my children, my siblings, and my land. I want it so I can roll around in its sweat, and roll my children around in its sweat. Maybe its pieces can be distributed to people so they can acquire some of its generosity, honor, and dignity.

Hassan Nasrallah's response after the war was to send Reem Haidar one of his cloaks, which she has displayed in her house 'so that people can visit it and be blessed by it'. *Al-Abaya* follows Reem as she talks to people from the areas destroyed in the war, intercutting her exchanges with monologues. The words she uses in the documentary echo those of Nasrallah. Talking to a woman whose home was destroyed in Southern Beirut, Reem says, 'those of us whose homes were not destroyed have been humbled by you'. She then addresses the camera as she walks among the rubble: 'I wish my home were here. Why is it only they who have received this honor?' The film ends with a scene where Reem carefully takes Nasrallah's cloak out of its clear plastic trunk, spreads it as she gazes at it—with the camera zooming on sections of the cloak, inviting us to share this intimate gaze—holds it in her arms twice, then carefully puts it back in its trunk.

Reem's verbal expressions and her embrace of the cloak construct Nasrallah as an object of almost erotic desire. If nuns are 'the brides of Christ', women in the film express a unique affinity with Nasrallah as a man/superhuman/quasi-divine entity. The film is curious for choosing only women to speak specifically about their relationship with Nasrallah (the men interviewed in the film focus on other subjects related to the war and to Reem herself). It shows the women praising Nasrallah: an elderly woman recites a poem comparing him to the sun; a young woman declares that 'what Sayyed Hassan has done could not have been done by any other human being or Arab leader'. Another says 'we have been blessed by God for existing in an era when Sayyed Hassan exists'. This divine quality, according to Weber's theory of charisma, is part of how genuine charisma can exist: the leader must have a belief that he possesses a divine grace, and his followers must share this belief.[88] Through media images like the one invoked in this film, Nasrallah himself becomes a message defined by a heroic act. As Groys puts it, 'The heroic act transforms the hero's body from a medium into a message. Making the body the message requires above all an arena, a stage—or…a public created by the media'.[89] The film then is an example of how Hizbullah uses the media to take its leader beyond familiarity and into the realm of intimacy, where he becomes internalized by the Party's followers.[90]

The Use of Simulacra

The period following the 2006 war and its celebration was politically challenging for Hizbullah. With rising tension over the establishment of a Special Tribunal for Lebanon by the United Nations to investigate the death of Rafic Hariri—which triggered a sit-in in downtown Beirut by Hizbullah and its allies and the resignation of Shiite ministers from the Lebanese cabinet in December 2006 in protest—followed by Hizbullah's closing the road to Beirut's airport in January 2007 after street clashes, and its military takeover of Beirut in May 2008 in an attempt to overthrow the government, the

group needed to assert its political power. Establishing an image of grandeur and dominance was one way of communicating this. This image was targeted at both Israel and Hizbullah's opponents within Lebanon.

One element of this image management was the almost mythical persona of Imad Mughniyeh. In contrast to the organic materiality of Nasrallah, Imad Mughniyeh—Hizbullah's head of external operations who was otherwise known as Haj Radwan—was an enigmatic figure whose existence Hizbullah had originally denied. His assassination in Damascus in February 2008 happened at a time when Hizbullah was presenting a defiant, anti-American and anti-Israeli image following the 2006 war, and his death became a useful tool, enabling Hizbullah to disseminate stories about him that benefit this defiant image. It was only after his death that Hizbullah claimed him as one of its own, and confirmed his responsibility for masterminding various attacks, some being attacks the group had never associated itself with before, like that on U.S. Marines in Beirut in 1983. Mughniyeh's death was both operationally and symbolically useful for Hizbullah.

Very little was known about Mughniyeh in the public domain at the time of his death, not even the way he looked. But after his assassination, Hizbullah swiftly moved to add Mughniyeh to its public historical repertoire. To commemorate Martyrs' Day on 11 November 2008, the photo of Mughniyeh was added to those of Ahmad Kassir (Hizbullah's first martyr), and assassinated former leaders Ragheb Harb and Abbas Al-Musawi in a banner appearing on Hizbullah's website. He was given the title 'Prince of the Caravan of Martyrs'. Selected photos of him were uploaded on a special section of the website. And banners and billboards commemorating his death appeared on the road to Beirut's airport and elsewhere. The banners carried another title for Mughniyeh: 'Leader of the Two Victories' (in reference to 2000 and 2006). Almost out of nowhere,

the liberation of the South and the 'defeat' of Israel in 2006 now had one mastermind.

One banner of Mughniyeh in Beirut had his photo, wearing military fatigues and a baseball cap, in front of the Hizbullah logo, and displayed the phrase: 'the grace of conclusive victory'. Another stated, 'our wound is the pulse of weapons'. A series of other banners in the South had his photo with the phrases: 'Karbala is my weapon'; 'my blood is for Jerusalem'; 'our enemy is one: Israel'; 'the key will is my will'; 'Jerusalem is ours'; '[our] position is a weapon— my position'; 'my country is my spirit and blood'; 'Palestine is my cause'; 'Israel will be annihilated'; and 'my blood is victorious'. In another set of yellow banners celebrating the release of the detainees and displaying the 'Victory from God' logo used in the 2006 'Divine Victory' campaign, the impression of Mughniyeh surrounded by the halo of the sun was depicted along with the words 'the liberation of detainees is the achievement of God with our hands'.

An intriguing aspect of the phrases and slogans used in those banners is that none of them have been attributed to Imad Mughniyeh himself. Instead, they are a collection of pronouncements by other Hizbullah martyrs/leaders. 'The key will' for example is a phrase from a statement once given by Sayyed Abbas Musawi, when he said that 'the key will is the preservation of the resistance'. And '[our] position is a weapon' was a statement by Hizbullah notable Sheikh Ragheb Harb, who was assassinated by Israel in 1985. By associating the image of Mughniyeh with the words of Hizbullah's martyred leaders, the story of Mughniyeh as another figure in the Hizbullah leadership was being weaved. This was cemented visually through banners showing the image of Nasrallah above that of Mughniyeh, as if looking down upon him and looking out for him—a visual layout normally used by Hizbullah in representing the relationship between the Shiite Supreme Leader and the Hizbullah

leader (in the hierarchy, the Supreme Leader (first Khomeini and now Ali Khamenei) is always highest and depicted visually as such).

But unlike other Hizbullah leaders, who had known public personas, Mughniyeh as a man was unknown. Hizbullah sought to create an individual persona for him by making his death the theme for celebrating the second anniversary of the 'Divine Victory' in 2008. For the occasion, Hizbullah created an exhibition titled 'Leader of the Two Victories' in a square in Nabatiyeh in Southern Lebanon. The exhibition was set against the backdrop of a huge banner displaying Mughinyeh's photo on the right and a coffin covered with an Israeli flag on the left with images of injured Israeli soldiers in the middle, under the phrase: 'The martyr will remove them from existence'. The exhibition featured items presented as having belonged to Mughniyeh: his rifle, clothes, shoes, prayer rug, cap and beads, hair brush, eyeglasses case, bag, torch, and office chair and desk, upon which his now-trademark baseball cap was laid. As Laleh Khalili argues, such a display of quotidian 'non-heroic' objects serves to lend the martyr familiarity in the eyes of the viewer.[91] In Mughinyeh's case, the display also serves to ground the myth in material reality.

Yet Mughniyeh's absence is a useful component in the myth, creating a hyper-image. As Fuery and Fuery argue, '[t]he hyper-image…can become the defining image for that which it comes to represent because it is such an extreme version…What we do not see [in hyper-images], however, are the people themselves'.[92] In this way, the hyper-image of Mughniyeh has come to stand in for resistance as it is based on the absence of the man himself. Absence serves to keep the myth alive: 'The hyper-image relies on absences to construct and retain part of its power. Through these absences it seduces the spectator into a contributory role. In other words, the hyper-image self-perpetuates by convincing the spectator of its status'.[93] In this way, 'Imad Mughniyeh' becomes a postmodern tool for Hizbullah's

image. It is a simulacra, a sign without a referent whose existence is derived through referencing other signs.[94] The sign's usefulness is because of the fluidity of meaning that can be ascribed to it. As Baurdrillard says, 'simulation threatens the difference between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary"'.[95] 'Imad Mughniyeh' as simulacra functions as a tabula rasa upon which Hizbullah can project whatever messages it wishes to disseminate. As Ajemian argues,

> the mystery surrounding Mughniyeh's life and activities provided a blank slate for Hezbollah's media apparatus to mold the myth of Mughniyeh through ceremony, discourse and imagery that frames his death, not as a defeat, but as an omen of victory that is part of a greater history of defiance.[96]

'Imad Mughniyeh' is a sign that serves 'cultic purposes'; it continues to be invoked by Hizbullah in its public messages as a rallying, intimidating, and legitimating tool, even though Hizbullah no longer relies on the physical/visual display of Mughniyeh's image in abundance; as Walter Benjamin argues, the presence of such signs 'is more important than the fact that they are seen'.[97]

A Larger-Than-Life Image

Mughniyeh's persona is part of a wider strategy to construct a larger-than-life image for Hizbullah. This image is manifested in a series of public visual displays. Three key displays form part of this strategy. The first is the organizing of public rallies and protests to commemorate the 'Divine Victory' and the ensuing release of Lebanese prisoners from Israeli jails in July 2008. The second is the series of billboards that Hizbullah installs on the road from Beirut's international airport—which has now become an area for the exclusive display of Hizbullah messages—and in Southern Lebanon. And the third is the establishment of a permanent visitor

site in Southern Lebanon called Mleeta which opened in 2010, which evolved out of a temporary exhibition in Southern Beirut called 'Spider's Web' that took place in 2007.

Public rallies have been a constant tool for Hizbullah since its inception. But after 2006, the rallies became larger in scale and more streamlined. Because of the threat to Nasrallah's life, most of his live addresses to the crowds have since had to be delivered through video on giant screens placed in football fields and other large community spaces. But there have been exceptions. The most notable one is the rally that took place in July 2008 to celebrate the release of Lebanese prisoners from Israeli jails—an occurrence that Nasrallah had 'promised' as the outcome of Operation Truthful Pledge in 2006. Standing next to Samir Kuntar, Lebanon's longest serving prisoner in an Israeli jail who had been released after 29 years (and who hung a Hizbullah scarf around his neck at the rally), Nasrallah appeared in person for the first time in almost two years, and addressed the crowd using the same phrase he had coined in 2000 and which had become one of his trademark slogans: 'the age of defeats has gone, and the age of victories has come'. Behind them stood a huge yellow banner displaying the words 'Operation Radwan'. 'Operation Radwan for the Release of Prisoners and the Return of Martyrs' Remains' was a shrewd choice of name for the event, as it referenced Imad Mughniyeh as the original planner of the operation, thereby immediately lending the event a larger-than-life status. Spectacular rallies have now become an established component of Hizbullah's image management strategies, used to comment on specific political developments.

The billboards that have been used to line the sides of the road to Beirut's international airport have varied over the years: in 2007, they retained the red, white, and green colors of the Lebanese flag, but in later years, they reverted to the canary yellow of Hizbullah's flag, asserting the group's contribution to a 'free' Lebanon, which

serves as a message to Hizbullah's Lebanese political rivals. But the most striking visual display of power was through the opening of the Mleeta visitor center in the spring of 2010. Perched on a hill close to the Israeli border and overlooking several villages in Southern Lebanon, the visitor center, under the title 'Mleeta: The Story of the Earth to the Sky', is an ultramodern exhibition of Hizbullah's military operations and capabilities. Its message is a simple one: power—and as such, it is both an example of strategic warfare communication and internal propaganda.[98]

The exhibition comprises of two parts. An indoor space is dedicated to military information about Israel. A banner of Nasrallah raising his finger with the slogan, 'if you hit, we hit' is placed facing the entrance. A second banner shows the map of Israel with key areas that could form military targets for Hizbullah highlighted. Another map shows the location of Israel's military bases. Other banners display Israel's anti-aircraft missile capabilities, and information about Israeli drones and tanks. A flowchart illustrates the structure of the Israeli army. This part of the exhibition is a pure example of power in the Foucauldian sense, as a producer of knowledge.[99]   It also places Hizbullah on an exalted level in relation to Israel, as it boasts the Party's epistemological superiority over its enemy. This superiority is coupled with representing the 'enemy' as weak. The indoor space contains Israeli military equipment displayed in glass cases. Stripped of its power, the equipment is rendered an exotic object to be gazed at. The space also harbors a banner dedicated to Israel's 'special forces' that is illustrated with the photo of a distressed, wounded Israeli soldier supported by another. Another banner titled 'the Israeli enemy army's battle ideology' is illustrated with a photo of seven Israeli soldiers crying. The display of such images is an example of cotemporary political force going back to the use of 'the political sublime'[100]   in the sense presented by Edmund Burke in 1756. Burke used the term 'sublime' to refer to horrifying images, such as those of beheadings and torture in the

pre-Enlightenment period, which invoke in the viewer a sense of intense emotion that is experienced as delight and awe.[101] The visitor to the Mleeta site is similarly invited to engage in delight and awe at Hizbullah's reduction of the supposedly powerful Israeli army to a bunch of crying, injured men.

The second part of the exhibition is a vast outdoor space. A round, sunken area displays several Israeli military vehicles that Hizbullah took over after its many confrontations with the IDF. The vehicles are displayed in a way that signals impotence: one tank has its canon twisted, and military vehicles are placed upside down, tilted, or embedded in rocks, their bombs scattered for viewers to stare at, becoming paralyzed, wounded, broken objects of the gaze. Tens of Israeli soldier helmets are arranged on the ground in a neat display, subjected to the ordering power of Hizbullah. Nearby, a path through the woods, where Hizbullah fighters engaged in live battles with Israeli soldiers, invites the visitor to walk in the fighters' footsteps, imagining their deeds and internalizing them. The path is lined with displays of Hizbullah's missile power, with signs showing photos of different missiles and descriptions of their capabilities, along with specimen of the actual missiles. The outdoor space is immaculate and minimalist in its style, showing the aesthetic of war to full effect. It is a reminder of Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto of 1909:

> War is beautiful because it ushers in the dreamt-of metallization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a meadow in bloom by adding the fiery orchids of machine-guns. War is beautiful because it combines rifle-fire, barrages of bullets, lulls in the firing, and the scents and smells of putrescence into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates fresh architectures such as those of the large tank, geometrical flying formations, spirals of smoke rising from burning villages, and much else besides.[102]

Mleeta can thus be read as a propaganda site. Mowlana argues that the sociopolitical effect of propaganda is that it becomes autonomous, leaving no space outside the ideology it disseminates.[103] The presence of Mleeta in Lebanon is an attempt at expressing this totality of Hizbullah's ideology. It is also a 'permanent' record of symbolic victory which serves as a political and military deterrent. As Jervis argues, in relation to states, 'A symbolic victory can lead others to see high resolve and risk-taking in a state's behavior. This image is apt to make other states retreat or act cautiously in conflicts with the first state'.[104] If Hizbullah is viewed as a state metaphor in this way, Mleeta becomes a cautioning message to Hizbullah's political opponents within and outside Lebanon.

The Victimized Image

The image management strategy used by Hizbullah in reference to the points above has served to cultivate a high level of legitimacy for the group. Suchman defines legitimacy as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions'.[105] Hizbullah has cultivated this perception among the Shiites, the Lebanese at large, and Arabs by linking its behavior to shared beliefs among those different audiences, centered on ideas of freedom, dignity, and justice. Hizbullah's supporters believe the group to be trustworthy, and the group in turn views this growing support as a sign that it could persevere in its chosen course of actions.

Hizbullah had weathered the storm of the Cedar Revolution through the 'Divine Victory', but the fall of 2006 signaled the start of a politically challenging period as the United Nations headed to endorse the establishment of a Special Tribunal for Lebanon to investigate the death of Rafic Hariri, according to a UN Resolution originally issued in March 2006. Hizbullah had also lost the

parliamentary elections of 2005, achieving only around 45% of the seats with its allies. Empowered by the 'Divine Victory', Hizbullah's ministers and their allies resigned from the Cabinet in November 2006 in an attempt at halting its expected approval of the UN Resolution, and when that failed, on 1 December 2006, Hizbullah and its allies started a series of anti-government sit-ins in downtown Beirut that paralyzed life in the area, as well as the normal functioning of the government.

Hizbullah tried to place the sit-ins in a patriotic framework similar to the one used during the Cedar Revolution. The Lebanese flag was hung across the sit-in area and was carried by the protesters. Tents were erected in Martyrs' Square, populated by young people, creating a quasi-carnivalesque atmosphere, and the Free Patriotic Movement ensured that its supporters were photographed alongside those of Hizbullah—an image of sectarian unity against a divisive government. The protest camp saw the use of political posters to discredit the government. One large poster depicted US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as a primary school teacher instructing Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora at the 'School of the New Middle East' in courses on 'corruption', 'sectarianism', 'the removal of sovereignty', 'meddling with security', and 'rigging elections'. It also saw the erection of posters carrying the image of Nasrallah. The 'Lebanese National Opposition' became the new title for the political coalition led by Hizbullah, and took as its logo the sign of a rainbow—a reference to its claimed anti-sectarian agenda.

But the protest camp soon became a ghost town as most protesters left the area, although the tent city itself and the protest movement remained for almost 18 months, after which the tension escalated into a violent confrontation as Hizbullah took over the Western area of Beirut—the stronghold of Hariri—in May 2008. Hizbullah responded to criticism of its actions by framing the events as necessary to halt an American-backed conspiracy against it. This

discourse was first declared by Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah in a speech on the 8th of May 2008. Taking his cue from this speech, on May 15 Hizbullah's political bureau chief Ibrahim al-Amin used this discourse strategically to defend Hizbullah's actions on the ground, declaring that they were necessary to prevent more serious events from occurring later on, meaning another civil war. Al-Amin created parallels between the May events and the 2006 war, expanding on Nasrallah's speech by implying that both events prevented further, bigger planned attacks on Hizbullah from being carried out.[106] This association between the two events also aimed at transferring the meaning of an event with positive connotations (the July 2006 war) into a controversial one. This adaptation of discourse aimed to re-brand the May 2008 events as an act of self defense (something stated by Nasrallah himself in his speech). Instead of being the aggressor that took over West Beirut, Hizbullah became the victim of an international conspiracy. The violence ended when Qatar intervened to mediate between all groups and orchestrated the signing of the Doha Accords that granted Hizbullah and its allies the right of veto in a newly formed Cabinet headed by Saad Hariri, Rafic Hariri's son.

The trail of events summarized above shows how, in addition to the larger-than-life image that Hizbullah had created to cultivate legitimacy, it also resorted to victimization as an image management strategy to justify a departure from norms. This method of image management relied on a number of components. First, it used self-referential discourse that highly capitalized on Hizbullah's heroic legacy. Second, it used adaptable discourse that reframed events positively. Third, it relied on 'support erosion'[107] to destroy public support for the STL through equating Hizbullah's domestic opponents with Israel. Fourth, it made use of Hizbullah's legacy and legitimacy to 'get away with' this departure from norms. As Suchman argues, 'legitimacy is resilient to particular events, yet it is dependent on a history of events. An organization may occasionally depart from societal norms yet retain legitimacy because the departures are

dismissed as unique'.[108] Fifth, it relied on the strength of Hizbullah's brand to get through a controversial act. Peter van Ham argues: 'Branding acquires its power because the right brand can surpass the actual product as a company's central asset'.[109]   In this case, the positive connotations invoked by Hizbullah's brand superseded the actual 'product' it had become, a group involved in a violent attack on other Lebanese. Finally, it relied on Nasrallah's charisma, which had transformed the devotion of Hizbullah's followers into a sense of duty, leading those followers to obey his wishes regardless of the objective reality.[110] This is related to Nasrallah's success, as a charismatic leader, in building a relationship with his followers through presenting himself as a visionary, influencing his followers to the extent that they do not question their decisions or actions.[111]

   The return to the discourse of victimization that began with the May 2008 events marked the start of a new phase in which victimization became a key tool for the group over the next three years as the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) investigations took off. Hizbullah engaged in a dedicated multi-platform media campaign to discredit the STL as an American and Israeli conspiracy against 'the resistance'. Al-Manar's and al-Intiqad's news coverage of STL developments consistently presented the court as non-credible, while criticizing the Hariri government which backed the tribunal. On 9 August 2010, Nasrallah gave a televised speech whereby he attempted to show that Israel is actually responsible for the murder of Rafic Hariri. What is notable about this speech is that it utilized a number of visual tools. Nasrallah screened video footage intercepted from Israeli drones to show that Israel had closely followed the path taken by Hariri in his daily commute. The speech also included recorded reports using PowerPoint slides referencing Israeli statements to the STL as well as presenting key points about Lebanese collaborators with Israel. The reports and videos were intercut with Nasrallah's live commentary on them as he assumed the air of a professor or a legal investigator. In an answer to a journalist

from the Iranian Arabic-language Al-Alam television channel in the question and answer session following the two-hour speech, Nasrallah spoke directly about the necessity of image management:

> The main aim of the indictment is to tarnish the image of Hizbullah and to show Israel as being innocent. So there is a battle of public opinion. Some spent 500 million dollars, only in Lebanon—what they had spent in other countries or on other satellite stations they didn't say— […] for the sake of tarnishing the image of Hizbullah. So there is a war of image, of public image and public opinion. We are very cautious and we very much want to uncover the truth and we are also very much concerned, in waging this war of public opinion, to say that the resistance is subject to injustice.[112]

Hizbullah went on to 'confirm' this injustice in October 2010 when two STL investigators visited a gynecological clinic in Southern Beirut to obtain some documents. The investigators were attacked by an angry mob of women and the incident was framed by Nasrallah as a response to an insult to women's honor. The attack was also presented by Hizbullah as a 'spontaneous' reaction by wronged 'ordinary people'.[113] In doing so, Hizbullah extended the sense of victimization from itself to the Shiite community as a whole.

The Challenge of the Arab Spring

Hizbullah's return to the victimization framework became a useful tool when the Arab uprisings started in December 2010. Hizbullah initially praised Arabs who had finally risen to claim their rights, reserving the most attention to the people of Bahrain—a Shiite majority country—as the protests began in Manama and were met by a crackdown by the Sunni government. Careful not to invoke sectarianism, Hizbullah's discourse on Bahrain was cloaked in nationalist terms. Its website carried a banner declaring 'Save the people of Bahrain', and Nasrallah blamed the Bahraini regime for

painting the protests in sectarian terms. In doing so, Hizbullah was attempting to capitalize on an opportunity to reach out to a wide audience across the Arab world, and this was driven by a sense of marginalization: The Arab Spring had stolen the limelight from Hizbullah as its status as the sole representative of Arab dignity had been shattered. Hizbullah's efforts faced a further challenge when anti-regime protests started in Syria, one of its key allies. Hizbullah took the Syrian government's line in blaming the protests on 'foreign forces', and tried to spin the uprising as an American-Israeli conspiracy, using its familiar self-referential frameworks—a similar strategy to the one used to discredit the Green Movement in Iran in 2009. In an article on its main website on 28 June 2011, Naziha Saleh wrote:

> The US went back to its planning room to work on its ever existing project of the 'New Middle East' – after the 'Israeli' failure in achieving it in the July war 2006, and after the US failure in hitting the stability in Iran, which is considered as the supporter of the resistance. To choose Syria because it is the protector of the resistance and the only Arab country that still stands in the face of 'Israel' for the Arab rights. In striking Syria, the US can achieve its goal and make the dream come true to isolate Iran geographically and politically after the UN economic sanctions resolution.[114]

Hizbullah paralleled this discourse about an American-Israeli plot with another audiovisual attack on the STL after indictments naming four Hizbullah members as involved in the murder of Hariri were issued in July 2011. Nasrallah gave another speech on 2 July displaying images of documents he claimed linked the tribunal to Israel.

Conclusion

The near future presents a set of complex challenges for Hizbullah's image management strategy. Audiences across the Arab world are too concerned with the Arab Spring to pay much attention to Hizbullah, and the fall of the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia has derailed the centrality of the image of Hizbullah as an Arab hero. Although Hizbullah tried to change this dynamic through openly supporting Palestinian popular movements inspired by the Arab Spring, such as the marches to the Israeli borders that took place on 15 May and 4 June 2011, it has not succeeded in redirecting attention towards itself. In fact, this support backfired as Palestinians in Syria publicly rallied against the Palestinian factions allied with Hizbullah, that had encouraged them to march to the Golan Heights on 4 June 2011 because, like on May 15, their march was met with the firing of bullets by Israel. The marchers accused their leaders of putting their lives in danger without there being a sound plan for action. The STL indictments are also likely to create a sense of doubt about Hizbullah's trustworthiness in the eyes of some of its non-Lebanese supporters. Hizbullah's takeover of the Lebanese government has resulted in calls for measures towards isolating the government in the United States, which characterizes Hizbullah as a terrorist group. While Hizbullah can be expected to spin this as proof of the existence of a conspiracy, this becomes harder to 'sell' to Arab audiences as the flow of visual evidence from Syria attesting to the brutality of the regime against its people continues, forming a likely source of embarrassment for Hizbullah in its utter support for the Baath regime.

The Arab Spring, then, has put Hizbullah at a crossroads, and the line it will choose to take will have a big impact on its credibility in the Arab world. Hizbullah's evolving image management strategy is part of the Party's place within a larger political opportunity structure[115], where 'fixed or permanent institutional features combine

with more short-term, volatile, or conjectural factors to produce an overall particular opportunity structure'.[116] Until the Syrian uprising began, Hizbullah had been largely successful at taking advantage of changes in the political environment to carve a favorable image, and simultaneously, to adapt its image according to changes in the environment. It remains to be seen whether it will apply the same principles in the period to come.

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Author Biography

Lina Khatib is the co-founding manager of the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. In this role, Dr. Khatib leads research projects on political and economic reform in Lebanon, Egypt, and Yemen, as well as on political activism and democratic change in the Arab world. She is also a Research Fellow at the USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School. She is an expert on Middle East politics and media and has published widely on topics such as new media and Islamism, political media and conflict in the Arab world, and the political dynamics in Lebanon and Iran. Dr. Khatib is author of *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (IB Tauris 2006), and *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (IB Tauris 2008). She has recently finished writing a book titled *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (IB Tauris 2012). The book examines the power struggles among states, other political actors, and citizens in the region that are expressed through visuals, and focuses on case studies from Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Iran, with a focus on the role of the image as a political tool in the Arab Spring. Dr. Khatib is a frequent commentator on the Middle East in the media with appearances on *Al-Jazeera* (Arabic and English), CNN, BBC, ABC and other media outlets across the globe.

As a CPD Research Fellow for the 2010–2012 term, her project for the Center is titled: 'The Use of Public Diplomacy by Non-state Political Actors in the Arab World'. This paper partially fulfils the requirements of the CPD Research Fellowship. To learn more about this program, visit www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org.

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Diplomacia Pública

公共外交

Δημόσια Διπλωματία

Публична дипломация

Public Diplomacy
USC Center on
at the Annenberg School