



**THE REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE
SOCIAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF ANKARA
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**FOREIGN POLICIES OF HAMAS AND HEZBOLLAH DURING
THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR: SECTARIAN DYNAMICS AND
MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ph.D. Dissertation

Ömer AK

Middle East Studies

September 2024



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**Advisor
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ABSTRACT

Hamas and Hezbollah have adopted divergent foreign policies during the Syrian civil war, despite their historically close relations and strategic collaborations among themselves and with Syria. The prevailing academic literature posits that sectarian factors predominantly account for this disparity. Nonetheless, this study contends that material considerations, rather than sectarian dynamics, were the primary determinants in this divergence.

In line with this argument and drawing upon the theoretical framework of the “Ideational vs. Material” debate, this study conducts a comparative analysis using the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) to analyze the primary research question — what explains the divergent foreign policy choices of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war?

The findings of the empirical study challenge the notion that Hamas’ alignment with Sunni opposition groups was primarily sectarian. Instead, it was driven by pragmatic assessments of strategic interests expected from changing regional dynamics, like the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, support provided by Hezbollah to the Assad regime, often perceived as sectarian loyalty, was also underpinned by material and strategic imperatives, particularly in relation to its ties with Iran.

Overall, this research demonstrates the primacy of material considerations, contrary to prevailing arguments that attribute the divergence to sectarian affiliations, i.e. ideational priorities of these non-state actors. This study also offers new perspectives on how both ideational and material factors influence the foreign policy decisions of non-state actors within comparable geopolitical environments.

Keywords: Hamas, Hezbollah, Syrian Civil War, Non-State Actors, Foreign Policy

ÖZET

Hamas ve Hizbullah, tarihsel olarak yakın ilişkilerine ve hem kendi aralarında hem de Suriye ile olan stratejik işbirliklerine rağmen, Suriye iç savaşı sırasında farklı dış politikalar benimsediler. Hakim akademik literatür, bu farklılığın başlıca nedeninin mezhepsel faktörler olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Bu çalışma, Hamas ve Hizbullah'ın farklı dış politikalarının arkasındaki asıl nedenin mezhepsel dinamikler değil materyal faktörler olduğunu ileri sürmektedir.

Bu argüman doğrultusunda ve “Düşünsel-Materyal (Ideational vs. Material)” tartışmasının teorik çerçevesinden yararlanarak bu çalışma, birincil araştırma sorusu olan “Hamas ve Hizbullah'ın Suriye iç savaşı sırasındaki farklı dış politika tercihleri nasıl açıklanabilir?” sorusunu incelemek için En Benzer Sistemler Tasarımını (Most Similar Systems Design-MSSD) kullanarak karşılaştırmalı bir analiz gerçekleştirmektedir.

Ampirik çalışmanın bulguları, Hamas'ın Sünni muhalif gruplarla birlikte hareket etmesinin mezhepsel nedenlerden kaynaklandığı iddiasını çürütmektedir. Analizin sonuçları, Müslüman Kardeşler'in yükselişi beklentisi gibi bazı stratejik ve pragmatik değerlendirmelerin Hamas'ın Suriye iç savaşına yönelik dış politikasını şekillendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Benzer şekilde, Hizbullah'ın Esad rejimine sağladığı ve mezhepsel kaynaklı olduğu varsayılan desteğin de aslında, özellikle İran ile olan ilişkilerin dayattığı bazı materyal ve stratejik zorunlulukların yansıması olduğu sonucuna varılmıştır.

Araştırmanın sonuçları, bu iki devlet dışı aktörün Suriye iç savaşına yönelik dış politikalarındaki farklılaşmayı mezhepsel bağlılıklara dayandıran yaygın kanının aksine, materyal değerlendirmelerin belirleyiciliğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışma ayrıca, düşünsel ve materyal faktörlerin karşılaştırılabilir jeopolitik ortamlarda devlet dışı aktörlerin dış politika kararlarını nasıl etkilediğine dair yeni bakış açıları sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hamas, Hizbullah, Suriye İç Savaşı, Devlet Dışı Aktörler, Dış Politika

ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Amnesty International
AMAL	Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya (The Brigades of the Lebanese Resistance)
AUMF	Authorizations for Use of Military Force
CJTF-OIR	Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve
DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
ESSA	Eastern Syria Security Area
EU	European Union
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
FPC	Foreign Policy Change
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HAMAS	Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya (Islamic Resistance Movement)
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IR	International Relations
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham
IUMS	International Union of Muslim Scholars
JAN	Jabhat al-Nusra
MDSD	Most Different Systems Design
MSSD	Most Similar Systems Design
NDF	National Defense Forces
NSA	Non-State Actor
NSAG	Non-State Armed Group
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad

PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PMU	Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SANA	Syrian Arab News Agency
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNC	Syrian National Council
UN	United Nations
U.S.	United States
USA	United States of America
VDC	The Center for Documenting Violations in Syria
YPG	People's Protection Units

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Hamas (*Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya* - Islamic Resistance Movement) and Hezbollah (Party of God) found themselves at a critical point of divergence during the Arab Spring, despite their longstanding alliance and shared regional interests. Once-close relations of these non-state actors were shaken dramatically as they each pursued different paths in response to the regional changes. Nowhere was this schism more pronounced than in their contrasting policies during the Syrian civil war. Hezbollah provided direct military assistance to bolster Assad's regime against rebel factions, meanwhile Hamas decided to side with the Sunni dissidents striving to oust President Bashar al-Assad (Hamadi, 2023). In the existing literature, many scholars assert that Hamas' alignment with Sunni opposition groups and support provided by Hezbollah to the Alawite Assad regime were primarily driven by sectarian loyalties. In contrast, this study argues that pragmatic assessments of strategic interests played a more defining role in the policies of both actors.

Stemming from sectarian backgrounds, Hamas and Hezbollah emerged as formidable forces with significant ideological and strategic implications. Historically, they have been integral components of a cohesive but unofficial alliance, alongside Iran and Syria. Nevertheless, during the war in Syria, Hamas decided to provide support to opposition factions aiming to remove President Bashar al-Assad, either directly or indirectly (Karmon, 2013, p. 111). Its decision to back the opposition marked a significant shift, which led to a distancing from its previous alignment within the self-proclaimed "Axis of Resistance". Old allies accused Hamas of participating in the Muslim Brotherhood's agenda to overthrow the Syrian regime and of acting as its local arm during the war. Furthermore, they even claimed that Hamas provided military support to Palestinian militant groups that collaborated with Syrian rebels in confrontations against regime forces in Qusair in early 2013 (Chararah, 2014).

Hezbollah, on the other hand, rallied behind the embattled Syrian government and fought alongside regime forces (Javed, 2019, p. 17). Throughout the conflict, Hezbollah maintained its role as a crucial ally to the Assad regime, furnishing military assistance and actively participating alongside Syrian government troops in combat against numerous rebel factions (Al-Aloosy, 2020, p. 141). Participation in the Syrian conflict enhanced its military

capabilities and provided invaluable experience on the battlefield. As a result, Hezbollah's backing not only cemented its partnership with the Assad regime but also propelled it to become a more formidable presence in the broader region.

Conventional analyses have often attributed this schism to sectarian motivations, emphasizing the Sunni-Shia divide as the primary determinant (Danin, 2012; Fahmy & Al-Mughrabi, 2012; Ghaddar, 2013). Sectarian differences between Hamas and Hezbollah (Ghaddar, 2013), together with the Syrian civil war's sectarian characteristics contributed to this perspective. While some scholars argued that the main dynamic of this rift was sectarian priorities (Slim, 2014; Yetim, 2016), others highlighted the role of ideological parameters (Kaya & Şen, 2014; Saouli, 2013). In fact, these two approaches point to the same underlying phenomenon since the most fundamental element shaping the ideological priorities of these organizations is their sectarian identities.

The Sunni-Shiite divide forms a core aspect of the identity of these organizations, influencing their worldview, goals, and strategies. Hamas, originating in the Palestinian territories, draws its ideological inspiration primarily from Sunni Islamist thought, reflecting the dominant religious identity of the Palestinian population. For Hamas, as a Sunni Islamist organization, its adherence to Sunni Islamic principles and its identification with the Muslim Brotherhood movement are central to its ideological orientation. Hamas' ideology was deeply rooted in the principles of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt until the New Policy Document released in 2017 (Telci, 2017). In contrast, Hezbollah emerged in Lebanon, where Shiite Islam forms the majority religious affiliation, appears to have a Shiite ideology embodied in the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Rabasa et al., 2006, p. 9). Its Islamist ideology, rooted in the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini and the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih (Bowering, 2013, p. 220), strongly shapes its worldview and objectives.

The sectarian perspective has been criticized for its limited capacity to comprehensively address and analyze the diverging foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war. Researchers questioning the determinism of sectarian factors argued that these developments are driven by realist considerations of these non-state actors, overshadowing ideological and sectarian factors (Ghaddar, 2013). Recognizing that ideological and sectarian considerations play some role as well, Dalacoura suggested that their foreign policies were often outweighed by the realpolitik calculations of the involved parties (Dalacoura, 2013, p. 87). Similarly, Gause emphasized the importance of avoiding an exclusive focus on sectarianism

and warned against reducing the Arab Spring to a simplistic “Sunni versus Shia” conflict (Gause III, 2014, p. 5). Additionally, others highlighted the influence of external forces, i.e. Iran and Qatar, in shaping the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah, underscoring the role of external dynamics in shaping their responses to the Arab Spring (Lecocq, 2020).

Nevertheless, a comprehensive examination of these groups’ foreign policies has been lacking even among scholars advocating the idea that the divergence in their foreign policies is not exclusively shaped by sectarian aspects. Instead, their attention has been directed towards dissecting the effects of certain elements like the international system or individual actors on foreign policy. These approaches neglect significant dimensions across various levels of analysis, including the international, actor-specific, and decision-making levels.

Furthermore, such interpretations oversimplify the intricate interplay between ideational imperatives and material considerations shaping the behavior of these non-state actors. A comprehensive analysis of the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah requires an integrated approach that considers ideational imperatives and material considerations together. This dissertation seeks to delve deeper into this phenomenon by interrogating the extent to which material considerations override sectarian affiliations in guiding the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah. Through adopting a theoretical framework that distinguishes between ideational and material dimensions, this study aims to uncover the complex dynamics influencing the strategic calculus of these groups.

In addition, while individual studies have examined each organization separately, there has been a dearth of comparative analysis that systematically compares their approaches, and strategies. Existing literature on both organizations “tend to focus on these groups separately, failing to provide a much-needed comparative perspective.” (Gleis & Berti, 2012, p. 4). However, considering the two organizations comparatively can facilitate understanding the divergence in their foreign policies more accurately. In addition, comparing these organizations using a structured analysis framework can enable conceptual generalizations beyond single case descriptive analyses. In this way, rather than settling for understanding the foreign policies pursued by these organizations, broader insights regarding similar organizations, i.e. Islamist non-state actors can also be possible.

This gap is particularly concerning given the potential insights that could be gained from such comparative analysis, including a deeper analysis of the factors driving their divergent paths, their implications for stability and security in the region, and the broader dynamics of

non-state actor behavior in conflict settings. Addressing this gap in the literature is essential for advancing our knowledge and informing policy responses to ongoing and future conflicts in the Middle East.

Lastly, another dimension of this inquiry is the recognition of the pivotal role played by leadership dynamics in mediating the balance between ideological and material priorities of Hamas and Hezbollah. Leaders within these organizations wield considerable influence in defining the overarching objectives and operational strategies pursued on the international stage. Their ability to navigate the tension between ideological imperatives and strategic interests holds profound implications for regional stability and conflict resolution efforts.

1.1. Research Problem, Research Questions, Scope and Limitations

The puzzle at the heart of this study revolves around the divergence in the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war. Although Hezbollah continued to align with the Assad regime, Hamas shifted its allegiances after years of receiving support from Syria and Iran, aligning itself with the Sunni opposition. While traditional explanations often attribute this divergence to sectarian differences, this study seeks to challenge the prevailing narrative and delve into the complexities of these actors' behavior in the region. This study contends that while sectarianism certainly influenced political dynamics in the region, it is not the sole determinant of the foreign policy decisions of Hamas and Hezbollah. At its core, this research problem revolves around the primacy of material considerations over sectarian affiliations in shaping the behavior of non-state armed groups operating within the region.

While Hamas and Hezbollah espouse ideologies rooted in Sunni and Shia traditions, respectively, their responses to the Syrian conflict demonstrate a willingness to prioritize strategic interests over sectarian solidarity. For Hamas, the decision to align with Sunni opposition groups in Syria reflects a pragmatic calculation aimed at preserving its legitimacy and relevance within the broader Arab Spring movements. Similarly, Hezbollah's support for the Syrian regime underscores its strategic imperative to safeguard its interests in Lebanon and maintain its alliance with Iran.

Furthermore, the divergence in foreign policies between Hamas and Hezbollah highlights the role of leadership dynamics in defining and prioritizing ideological versus

pragmatic objectives. Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the strategic orientations of these organizations, with key figures such as Khaled Meshaal for Hamas and Hassan Nasrallah for Hezbollah exerting significant influence over their respective movements. The divergent responses of Hamas and Hezbollah can be attributed, in part, to the leadership styles and priorities of their respective leaders.

1.1.1. Primary Research Question

Based on the research problem outlined, the primary research question this study seeks to address is: What explains the divergent foreign policy choices of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war? This inquiry seeks to understand the reasons behind the different strategies and alignments adopted by these two organizations, examining how their respective political, ideological, and strategic considerations have shaped their responses to the conflict.

1.1.2. Secondary Research Questions

The secondary research questions of this study aim to operationalize the primary research question, in order to provide a better understanding of the specific aspects the divergent foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war.

- What were the internal ideological debates and strategic considerations within Hamas and Hezbollah that shaped their foreign policy decisions during the Syrian civil war?
- To what extent did sectarian loyalties drive the foreign policy choices of Hamas and Hezbollah?
- In what ways did external pressures and alliances, such as relationships with Iran and Qatar, impact the strategic decisions of Hamas and Hezbollah?
- To what extent did economic and military support from external actors influence their policies?
- What strategic interests led Hamas to support Sunni dissidents in Syria, and how did these interests align with or diverge from its ideological stance?
- How did Hezbollah's strategic calculations shape its decision to provide support to the Syrian government?

- What role did leadership within Hamas and Hezbollah play in shaping their respective foreign policies during the Syrian civil war?

1.1.3. Significance of the Study

This study aims to address a critical lacuna in the literature by challenging simplistic sectarian explanations of the divergence of the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war, and integrating theoretical frameworks that account for both ideational and material dimensions. A significant contribution of this study lies in its theoretical framework, which distinguishes between ideational imperatives rooted in sectarian and ideological identities, and material considerations driven by strategic calculations and *realpolitik*. By integrating these dimensions, this study aims to develop a deeper understanding of how non-state actors navigate regional conflicts and alliances.

Methodologically, this study employs comparative analysis between Hamas and Hezbollah, offering insights beyond single-case studies and enabling coming up with conceptual generalizations (Bryman, 2012, p. 74) about non-state actor behavior in conflict settings. As previously noted, critics of the sectarian approach have provided various analyses explaining the non-sectarian factors influencing the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah. However, there is a notable gap in theory-testing studies that utilize a comparative analysis applying the same factors to both cases. Such comparative research is needed to systematically test these theories and better understand the similarities and differences in the foreign policy behaviors of these two entities.

This research not only enhances scholarly understanding but also provides valuable insights for policymakers grappling with complex regional dynamics in the Middle East. Understanding the factors driving the divergent paths of Hamas and Hezbollah has significant implications for regional stability and conflict resolution efforts. As key players in ongoing conflicts, such as the Palestinian conflict and the civil war in Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah play significant roles in shaping the trajectory of these conflicts and influencing prospects for peace. By analyzing their behavior and strategic calculations, policymakers and practitioners can identify potential avenues for dialogue, negotiation, and conflict resolution, ultimately contributing to efforts aimed at fostering stability, peace and security in the region.

Gaining insights into the dynamics of Hamas and Hezbollah is also essential for understanding broader trends within the Islamist movement and their implications for regional stability and security. Hamas and Hezbollah are emblematic of the broader Islamist resurgence in the Middle East (Dionigi, 2014; Hinnebusch, 2016), which has seen the rise of various non-state actors challenging the dominance of secular regimes and Western powers. By examining the experiences of Hamas and Hezbollah, scholars can identify common patterns, drivers, and challenges facing Islamist movements across the region, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the evolving dynamics of political Islam in the Middle East.

Finally, understanding the dynamics of Hamas and Hezbollah holds implications for broader debates surrounding terrorism, extremism, and violent conflict. As designated terrorist organizations by some governments and entities (Gleis & Berti, 2012; Lecocq, 2020), Hamas and Hezbollah provoke contentious discussions about the nature of terrorism, the efficacy of counterterrorism measures, and the root causes of violent extremism. Through a comparative analysis of their behavior and motivations, developing evidence-based approaches to addressing violent extremism in the Middle East and beyond can become possible.

1.1.4. Case Selection, Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study undertakes two crucial case studies by analyzing the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war. Additionally, it performs a comparative analysis of these cases using a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), a common method in comparative politics used to test or develop theories (Steinmetz, 2021, pp. 176–178). This approach is able to provide a detailed analysis of how two seemingly similar organizations, both Islamist non-state actors with regional influence, diverged in their foreign policy strategies in response to the same conflict. These actors are not only empirically significant but also share enough similarities to facilitate theory testing. Through this comparative framework, the study intends to identify the specific factors and dynamics that have influenced their differing paths, providing deeper insights into the interplay of ideology, geopolitics, and strategic decision-making within militant organizations.

The Syrian civil war serves as a crucial context for understanding the divergent approaches of these organizations, as it represents a significant arena where the interests of Hamas and Hezbollah intersect and clash. The time scope of the study spans from the beginning

of the Arab Spring in 2011 to “Saif al-Quds” battle in May 2021. The reason of limiting the time scope with this battle is that it marks the beginning of coordinated efforts and a closer alignment between the organizations, during which they collaborated in a joint operation center. Thus, this battle represented a clear shift in the relationship between Hamas and Hezbollah.

While the study primarily focuses on the Syrian civil war, it also contextualizes its findings within the broader regional dynamics of the Middle East, including the Palestinian conflict, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry, and the broader Sunni-Shia divide. By situating the divergent foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah within this broader context, the study aims to offer insights into the possible takeaways of their actions for regional stability, security, and conflict resolution efforts.

This dissertation encountered limitations due to the inability to conduct field research in Palestine and Lebanon, primarily as a result of the insecurity prevailing in these regions. The volatile political and security conditions in Palestine and Lebanon posed significant challenges to conducting field research, including the risk to personal safety and restricted access to certain areas. Consequently, the absence of firsthand field data collection limited the depth of insights that could have been gained from direct observation and interaction with local stakeholders. This was addressed through the utilization of reliable secondary data sources. By leveraging existing literature, official documents, policy statements, and other publicly available materials, the study aimed to compensate for the lack of field studies and ensure a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter. While field studies would have provided unique perspectives and detailed insights, the reliance on secondary data allowed for a systematic examination of the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah within the constraints of the insecure environment.

Another limitation stemmed from lack of proficiency in the languages of the case studies analyzed. Being unfamiliar with Arabic, the researcher faced challenges in fully engaging with primary sources and written materials. While efforts were made to compensate for this limitation by relying on translated materials and engaging with researchers and scholars familiar with the languages, the inability to directly access and comprehend original sources may have hindered the depth of analysis and interpretation. Consequently, the findings and conclusions may be subject to constraints imposed by the reliance on translated or interpreted sources, potentially limiting the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the research outcomes.

Despite these limitations, efforts were made to mitigate the impact by rigorously cross-referencing and validating findings from multiple sources to ensure the robustness of the analysis within the confines of the available linguistic resources.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks provide essential lenses through which to analyze and interpret the behavior of actors. This study employs the framework of “ideational vs. material debate” to elucidate the underlying drivers of the divergence in foreign policies during the Syrian civil war. Ideational factors encompass the realm of ideas, beliefs, and values, including religious and sectarian identities, which shape the ideological orientations of these organizations (Basu, 2019; Marsh & Hall, 2016). Materialistic factors, on the other hand, encompass tangible interests, such as strategic alliances, territorial control, and resource acquisition, which influence the pragmatic calculations of non-state actors (Basu, 2019). By examining the interplay between these two dimensions, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics driving the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah.

The ideational dimension of the theoretical framework focuses on the role of sectarian identities and ideological affiliations in shaping the behavior of Hamas and Hezbollah. As Islamist organizations with deep-rooted ties to Sunni and Shia traditions respectively, Hamas and Hezbollah utilize religious narratives and symbols to legitimize their actions and galvanize support from their followers. For Hamas, the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation is framed within the context of Sunni Islam, invoking religious imperatives of resistance and liberation (Hamed, 2023, pp. vii–ix). Similarly, Hezbollah portrays its resistance against Israel and support for the Assad regime as manifestations of Shia solidarity and defiance against external aggression (Yetim & Kalaycı, 2022, p. 210). Examining the ideational dimension enables insights into the symbolic and cultural factors that underpin the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah, shedding light on the sectarian motivations driving their actions.

Conversely, the materialistic dimension of the theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of pragmatic considerations in guiding the behavior of actors. For Hamas, the decision to align with Sunni opposition groups in Syria reflects a pragmatic calculation aimed at maximizing its influence and preserving its relevance within the broader Arab Spring movements. Similarly, Hezbollah’s support for the Syrian government serves to safeguard its

interests in Lebanon, protect its strategic alliance with Iran, and maintain its military capabilities vis-à-vis Israel. Analyzing the materialistic dimension, it becomes possible to uncover the strategic imperatives driving the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah, offering insights into the rational calculations guiding their actions in the pursuit of strategic objectives.

1.3. Methodology

The quantitative and qualitative research traditions represent distinct cultures within the realm of academic inquiry, each characterized by its own set of values, beliefs, and norms (Mahoney & Goertz, 2006, p. 227). Qualitative research is employed in this study since it allows for an in-depth exploration of the specific factors and circumstances influencing the foreign policies of these organizations. When the number of cases is limited, qualitative research allows researchers to uncover substantial amounts of information (King et al., 1994, p. 4). This approach offers valuable tools for comparing the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah by focusing on explaining individual cases through a “causes-of-effects” lens (Mahoney & Goertz, 2006, p. 229). Through examining each case comprehensively and comparatively, qualitative analysis is expected to uncover the intricate motivations, historical contexts, and ideological influences that drive Hamas and Hezbollah’s actions on the international stage.

This research adopts a comparative analysis of crucial cases, combining the thorough analysis characteristic of crucial case studies with the theory-testing component inherent in comparative design (Bryman, 2012, p. 74). The comparative design enhances the analytical framework by facilitating a systematic comparison of Hamas and Hezbollah’s actions, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to their divergent foreign policies. By examining and comparing their foreign policies within the context of the Syrian civil war, this approach enables the identification of patterns, trends, and causal relationships driving their divergent trajectories, while also systematically testing theoretical frameworks across the cases.

A crucial case study is an in-depth analysis of a specific instance, event, organization, or individual that is critical to understanding a broader phenomenon or theory. These studies are often chosen because they offer unique insights, have significant implications, or provide a pivotal example of a particular issue or process. The aim is to use the findings from the crucial case to draw broader conclusions or to test and refine theoretical frameworks.

Key characteristics of a crucial case study encompass several important aspects. First, the case holds substantial importance within its field and can greatly influence understanding or practice. Second, the case may present unique features or serve as an extreme example of a phenomenon. Third, the case has a potential to support, challenge, or extend existing theories. Lastly, the findings from the case can lead to significant insights, policy changes, or advancements in knowledge.

Hamas and Hezbollah are considered crucial cases in this study, deviating from the criteria outlined above. Their actions and decisions during the Syrian civil war offer essential insights into the strategic, ideological, and geopolitical complexities of non-state actors in the Middle East. These cases are particularly important for understanding how different factors—such as sectarian identity, international alliances, and local political dynamics—shape the foreign policies of such groups.

Hamas and Hezbollah's divergent responses to the Syrian conflict illustrate the impact of external pressures and internal considerations on non-state actor behavior. Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime underscores the importance of its alliance with Iran and its commitment to the Shia axis, while Hamas' more ambiguous stance reflects its struggle to balance ideological alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood, pragmatic political considerations, and regional relationships.

These cases are also crucial for examining the broader implications of the Syrian civil war on regional stability and security. Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria had significant consequences for the balance of power in the region, bolstering the Assad regime and reinforcing the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis. On the other hand, Hamas' position affected its relations with key regional actors, influencing its strategic calculations and future alliances.

Furthermore, analyzing these cases contributes to the theoretical understanding of foreign policy decision-making in non-state actors. It allows scholars and policymakers to refine theories related to alliance formation, ideological influence, and the strategic behavior of militant groups in conflict settings. The humanitarian and security impacts of these groups' actions during the Syrian civil war also underscore the crucial dimension of these case studies for comprehending the broader effects of regional conflicts on civilian populations and international stability.

The MSSD employed in this study focuses on identifying significant theoretical distinctions within ostensibly similar systems to explain phenomena, in contrast to the Most

Different Systems Design (MDSD) that seeks maximum diversity among samples (Przeworski & Teune, 1970, p. 39). MSSD is chosen here to mitigate the influence of confounding factors and enable a focused examination of sectarian distinctions as the targeted independent variable. However, MSSD should be viewed as an initial step that directs attention towards essential common factors influencing diverse outcomes.

1.4. Data Collection

Implementing fieldwork in regions affected by insecurity, such as the Middle Eastern countries under study, presents significant challenges. Factors such as terrorism, banditry, extremism, and political and ethnoreligious violence make conducting field research complex and challenging for both foreign researchers and nationals. Thus, relying on secondary data was a practical necessity in this study.

Secondary data sources are typically classified into five main categories: official/public documents, private resources, media resources, nonverbal materials, and data archives (Singleton et al., 1988, p. 345). This research utilizes a variety of sources to ensure a thorough examination of the subject matter. Primary sources such as formal documents published by Hamas and Hezbollah are crucial components of the data collection process. These also include official statements and speeches made by leaders of the organizations. Additionally, secondary sources, i.e. books, articles, web resources, reports, newspapers, and political statements provide valuable insights and analysis on the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah. Some official and open-source quantitative data, such as statistics, are also used to complement the qualitative analysis.

1.5. Structure of the Dissertation

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 serves as the theoretical and methodological foundation of the dissertation. The theoretical framework is grounded in the “ideational vs. material debate” in international relations, which explores the interplay between material interests and ideational factors in shaping the behavior of actors in the international system. The methodological framework adopts a comparative study approach, specifically

utilizing the MSSD, to systematically compare and contrast the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war.

Chapter 3 focuses on examining the sectarian dimensions of the Syrian civil war and their implications for Hamas and Hezbollah. By delving into the sectarian dynamics of the conflict, and sectarian dimensions of the actors, the chapter aims to elucidate how sectarian identities and affiliations influence the strategic orientations and objectives of these organizations.

Chapter 4 provides an in-depth analysis of the foreign policy pursued by Hamas during the Syrian civil war. Drawing upon the theoretical and methodological frameworks established in Chapter 3, this chapter examines Hamas' strategic alignments, alliances, and objectives in the context of the Syrian conflict. Chapter 5 similarly delves into the foreign policy of Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war, analyzing its strategic orientations, alliances, and objectives within the broader context of the conflict. By applying the theoretical and methodological frameworks outlined in Chapter 3, this chapter provides insights into Hezbollah's behavior and decision-making processes during the Syrian civil war.

Chapter 6 synthesizes the findings of the study, offering insights into the factors driving the divergent foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war. By systematically comparing and contrasting their strategic orientations, alliances, and objectives, this chapter aims to identify patterns, trends, and causal relationships that contribute to their divergent trajectories. By revisiting the research questions and objectives, the conclusion chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the contributions of the study and its implications for understanding the dynamics of conflict in the Middle East.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the theoretical underpinnings and analytical approaches that undergird the analysis of the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah. The ideational vs. material debate is the focal point of the theoretical framework of the study, delineating the dialectical relationship between sectarian dynamics and material considerations in shaping foreign policy. This chapter also elaborates the methodological framework that guides research design and data analysis. In this context, the qualitative research paradigm, known for its ability to capture the subtle complexities of political phenomena, is thoroughly explored. Specifically, the MSSD, which isolates key variables and mitigates extraneous influences, is presented as an analytical tool for investigating the multifaceted foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah within the Syrian civil war context.

2.2. Theoretical Framework: Ideational vs. Material Debate

The theoretical framework of this analysis is grounded in the Ideational vs. Material Debate within international relations theory, since it provides a useful framework for analyzing the impact of sectarian and non-sectarian dynamics on the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war. This debate posits that international outcomes are shaped by either ideational factors, such as ideas, norms, identities, and ideologies, or material factors, including economic interests, military capabilities, and geographical considerations.

Sectarian factors involve assertions about the world, causal connections, and the ethical validity of actions. Thus, sectarianism, within the realm of international relations, can be effectively conceptualized as a manifestation of ideological policy (Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 36). The burgeoning scholarly discourse surrounding sectarianism predominantly revolves around the exploration of sectarian identity (Haddad, 2020, p. 126). It entails the division of societies along religious, ethnic, or sectarian lines, often leading to tensions, conflicts, and rivalries.

Consequently, it becomes apparent that ideology serves as the foundational pillar from which the analytical journey ought to commence in comprehending sectarian dynamics. Understanding sectarianism as a form of ideology is crucial and useful in analyzing its impact on international relations, particularly in regions where sectarian divisions are pronounced, such as the Middle East. Ideationally driven analyses would focus on how sectarian identities shape the strategic objectives, alliances, and actions of these organizations in the context of the Syrian conflict. For instance, the ideological alignment of Hamas with Sunni Islamist movements and Hezbollah with Shia interests can be used to analyze their respective positions on the Syrian civil war, as well as their alliances with regional and international actors. According to ideational perspective, the actions and decisions of Hamas and Hezbollah are influenced by their sectarian identities, historical grievances, and ideological commitments within the broader Islamist and regional contexts.

Conversely, non-sectarian factors are material influences, including military capabilities, trade and economic interests, geography, and degrees of dependence. Material considerations, often associated with *realpolitik*, strategic interests, and alliances, are examined through the material lens. This perspective allows for an analysis of how these non-state actors navigate alliances, resource allocations, and strategic partnerships based on immediate material gains and geopolitical realities. Material lens would examine how material factors, such as geopolitical considerations, regional power dynamics, and external support, intersect with sectarian identities to shape the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah. This perspective would consider factors such as Iran's support for Hezbollah and Hamas' historical ties with Sunni states in the region as key determinants of their behavior during the Syrian civil war.

Operationalizing these concepts within a theoretical framework enables a systematic examination of how pragmatic and ideological considerations influence decision-making and strategic behavior. By thoroughly engaging in the ideational vs. material debate, which provides a robust theoretical framework to comprehend and operationalize these pivotal concepts, this study aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how ideational and material factors interact to shape the foreign policy decisions of Hamas and Hezbollah, two significant non-state actors. The next section introduces this ongoing debate in international relations, exploring how these theoretical perspectives illuminate the complexities of foreign policy decision-making. It also explains how the theoretical framework is applied to the analysis of the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah.

2.2.1. Ideational vs. Material Debate

The quest to unravel the complexities of the political world and efforts to guide, interpret, and comprehend the factors that shape the relations between the actors have sparked significant theoretical debates and rivalries in the field of international relations. One of the most notable disputes revolves around the contrasting perspectives of realism and constructivism, highlighting the divide between positivist and constructivist ontological views of the world. Each theory is underpinned by its own unique epistemological assumptions, sparking profound debates within the discipline. These debates reflect fundamental disagreements on how to analyze and interpret the dynamics shaping global politics, illustrating the complexity and depth of the field. Central to these debates is the question of whether ideational or material factors should be privileged in shaping theoretical assumptions.

Ideational constructs encompass the dissemination of ideas and knowledge among states (Wendt, 1999, p. 24), while material factors pertain to the distribution of material resources and capabilities among global actors (Mearsheimer, 1995, p. 91). The crux of the debate lies in determining which set of factors should take precedence in elucidating the intricacies of world politics. Proponents of ideational approaches, such as constructivism and post structuralism, advocate for a perspective that emphasizes the role played by ideas, norms, and identities during the course of international relations. Conversely, realist theories like neorealism underline the material and structural dimensions of the international system (Keohane, 1988, p. 391), highlighting the significance of material capabilities and strategic interactions among states.

Ideational and material serve as fundamental concepts for deciphering and reconciling seemingly disparate rationales, agendas, and policies evident in modern international relations, and act as conceptual tools to elucidate what may initially appear as contradictory choices and behaviors (Gardini & Lambert, 2011, pp. 2–3). This debate underscores broader philosophical divergences regarding the nature of reality and the mechanisms through which knowledge is produced within the discipline. Constructivists and poststructuralists argue that understanding world politics requires exploration of the ideational realm, whereas neorealists prioritize material factors as primary determinants of state behavior.

Realist perspectives emphasize the importance of material power balances, strategic calculations, and state-centric dynamics in shaping regional interactions. These factors are particularly salient in the context of resource competition, security dilemmas, and geopolitical

rivalries prevalent in the Middle East. On the other hand, constructivist narratives highlight the role of ideational factors, such as identity, ideology, and social norms, in shaping actors' perceptions and behavior. In the Middle East, sectarian identities, religious beliefs, and historical narratives often play a significant role in shaping alliances, conflicts, and political agendas. By incorporating these ideational factors into the analysis, a more comprehensive understanding of regional dynamics can be achieved.

The rationale for adopting the “ideational vs. material debate” lies in the inherent complexity of the Middle East, characterized by a convergence of historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors. Hinnebusch’s assertion regarding the necessity of integrating realist and constructivist narratives to comprehend the complexity of Middle East international relations underscores the multifaceted nature of the region's dynamics. The Middle East stands out as the most heavily militarized region globally, characterized by frequent state-to-state conflicts, civil wars, proxy battles, and insurgencies, all contributing to heightened insecurity. Moreover, it serves as the epicenter of intense rivalries between competing identities, a phenomenon that holds significant sway over the regional power dynamics. (Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 37).

In the realm of Middle East international relations, the ongoing discourse finds its reflection in two seminal studies: Steven Walt’s realist treatise, “The Origins of Alliances” (1990), and Michael Barnett’s constructivist study, “Dialogues in Arab Politics” (1998). These foundational texts represent divergent theoretical perspectives, with Walt’s realism focusing on material power dynamics and Barnett’s constructivism emphasizing the role of identity. Traditionally, dominant theories like realism and constructivism have tended to prioritize either material or ideational dimensions, often neglecting the complementary influence of the other. However, scholars increasingly recognize the need to integrate both material and ideational forces into analyses of Middle East international relations (Sørensen, 2008). This acknowledgment underscores the complex interplay between tangible power dynamics and intangible identity considerations in shaping regional politics.

This study utilizes a theoretical framework, drawing upon both constructivist and realist perspectives, to examine the persistent dual facets of the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah. This framework aims to dissect the interplay of material power dynamics and identity contestations within the region. Inspired by the framework developed by Hinnebusch (2019, p. 35), this perspective adopts a synthesizing approach that bridges the gap between ideational factors, particularly sectarian identity, and material factors inherent in the regional

system, leading to pragmatic decisions. The proposed framework underscores the significance of integrating realist and constructivist approaches to international relations, each of which emphasizes distinct factors shaping regional dynamics. Realism highlights the importance of material power balances and pragmatic calculations among states, whereas constructivism foregrounds the role of ideational factors such as identity and shared beliefs. By synthesizing these perspectives, the framework seeks to elucidate how sectarianism intersects with the ongoing regional power struggle, shedding light on the complex interplay between material and ideational forces (Hinnebusch, 2019, pp. 35–36).

2.2.2. Explanation of Material Factors in Foreign Policy

Within the realm of international relations scholarship, the discourse on the materialist and ideational perspectives extends beyond mere theoretical debate, delving into fundamental questions about the nature of society, power dynamics, and the construction of reality (Basu, 2019). Neorealism and Marxism (to a certain extent) stand out for their emphasis on material factors in shaping world politics. Neorealists, exemplified by scholars like John Mearsheimer, prioritize the structure of the international system and the allocation of material capabilities among states (Mearsheimer, 1995, pp. 91–92). According to this perspective, the absence of a central authority in the anarchic international system means that state behavior is inevitably influenced by their relative capabilities. In essence, the material conditions, such as military power and economic resources, play a pivotal role in determining state actions and interactions (Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 37).

Similarly, Marxism, particularly through the lens of historical materialism, underscores the importance of material practices in reproducing the system over time. While economic factors hold a central place in Marxist analysis, it acknowledges that material practices encompass more than just economic aspects. These practices are often socially mediated and can manifest in various forms. Nonetheless, for Marxist theories, the material forces ultimately shapes the trajectory of politics, whether through military might or control over the means of production (Edwards, 2010, p. 284).

These theories offer distinct perspectives on the role of material factors in foreign policy. Neorealists focus on the distribution of power and capabilities among states within the anarchic international system, while Marxists highlight the broader socio-economic structures

that underpin political dynamics. At its core, the materialist viewpoint emphasizes the tangible aspects, such as economic resources, military capabilities, and technological advancements, as primary determinants of state behavior and international outcomes. Materialists argue that these material factors exert a decisive influence on the actions and interactions of states, shaping the power distribution, the pursuit of national interests, and the outcomes of geopolitical contests (Wendt, 1999, p. 23).

2.2.3. Explanation of Ideational Factors in Foreign Policy

Ideational theorists challenge this materialist orthodoxy, asserting that societal structures and political outcomes are not solely determined by material factors, but are also profoundly shaped by ideas, norms, and shared identities (Wendt, 1999, p. 24). From an ideational perspective, the social world is perceived as inherently social and shaped by collective understandings, beliefs, and values. Ideas and identities, including those rooted in religion, culture, and ideology, play a central role in shaping political behavior, shaping perceptions of self and other, and guiding state actions on the global stage (Wendt, 1999, p. 34).

Moreover, the ideational perspective offers an understanding of power dynamics, emphasizing that power is not solely derived from material resources but is also exercised through the construction and dissemination of ideas. In this view, states and non-state actors leverage soft power, cultural influence, and normative frameworks to advance their interests and achieve their objectives in international relations.

Constructivism appeared as a prominent IR theory after the Cold War, placing a significant emphasis on the role of ideas. This theoretical perspective stood in contrast to the neorealist understanding of the international system, which conceptualized anarchy as the organizing principle governing state behavior. Constructivists challenged the prevailing notion of an anarchic system as an immutable reality and instead posited that the identities and beliefs of states are critical in shaping their behavior. In essence, they argued that the structures of the international system are socially constructed rather than solely determined by material factors (Wendt, 1995, p. 71).

It is imperative to acknowledge that constructivism encompasses a broad and diverse range of scholarly traditions. For this discussion, the focus will be on Alexander Wendt's

systemic constructivism. Wendt is well-known for his assertion that "anarchy is what states make of it," which encapsulates the fundamental principle of the constructivist approach (Wendt, 1992). From this viewpoint, the dynamics of anarchy are influenced by the collective ideas held by states, which subsequently inform their actions. In Wendt's theory, anarchy is not a static material reality but rather a variable condition contingent upon the existing frameworks of shared knowledge. He argues that to grasp the social construction of global politics, one must scrutinize the social conditions that create and sustain these structures, thereby molding identities and interests (Wendt, 1995, p. 75).

A major challenge in ideational analysis is demonstrating causal relationships between ideas, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. The concept of state identity is often too broad, necessitating a clearer explanation of how specific conditions lead to particular identities and how these identities influence state behavior (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, p. 399). Furthermore, ideational approaches are criticized for overlooking the potential influence of material forces. Ideas and identities do not exist in isolation but are influenced by material conditions. This oversight is particularly evident in constructivist analyses that downplay the level of uncertainty in the international system.

Materialist theories, like neorealism, express this criticism as the "material objection" to the ideational analysis proposed by constructivism (Sørensen, 2008, p. 11). They argue that the material capabilities of states inevitably shape their behavior, often leading to deception and misrepresentation of intentions and interests. Although constructivism highlights the intricate nature of the social construction of the international system, its ideational approach fails to thoroughly explain the connection between the system's material structure and its social construction.

2.2.4. Discussion on the Interaction between Ideational and Material Factors

Although these prevailing major theories, namely realism and constructivism, often prioritize either the material or the ideational aspects of international relations, neglecting the significance of the other, there has been a growing acknowledgment among analysts that both material and ideational forces, including sectarian identity, play crucial roles in shaping global affairs (Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 36).

Realism traditionally emphasizes material factors such as military capabilities, economic power, and strategic interests as primary determinants of state behavior. On the other hand, constructivism highlights the importance of ideational elements, including norms, beliefs, and identities, in shaping state actions and interactions. However, this dichotomy oversimplifies the complexities of international relations, as evidenced by the growing recognition that both material and ideational forces exert significant influence on the global stage.

Increasingly, analysts are recognizing that material considerations alone do not fully explain state behavior. While economic interests and military power certainly play pivotal roles, they do not operate in isolation from ideational factors. Similarly, constructivists are realizing that ideational forces, such as identity and ideology, are not divorced from material realities but are intricately linked to them.

Identity, in particular, has emerged as a critical factor in shaping state behavior and international relations. Whether based on ethnicity, religion, culture, or ideology, identity influences how states perceive themselves and others, their strategic objectives, and their interactions with the international community. As such, identity cannot be overlooked in analyses of international politics, as it often underpins state motivations and actions.

In essence, while realism and constructivism have historically tended to emphasize either material or ideational factors, there is a growing recognition that both dimensions are essential for a comprehensive understanding of international relations (Basu, 2019). By integrating both material and ideational perspectives into analyses, analysts can better grasp the complexities of global politics and develop more nuanced explanations of state behavior.

The material-ideational debate thus extends beyond a mere theoretical disagreement to encompass broader questions about the nature of agency, structure, and social change in the international system. By critically engaging with these divergent perspectives, scholars aim to deepen our understanding of the complex interplay between material and ideational forces in shaping global politics and contribute to the development of more holistic and nuanced theories of international relations. In the context of the Syrian civil war, understanding these dynamics is crucial for analyzing the foreign policies of actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah, whose actions are influenced by a complex interplay of sectarian, pragmatic, and ideational considerations.

2.2.5. Application of the Theoretical Framework

Based on the ideational vs. material debate, this dissertation deviates from the conventional understanding in order to offer a more refined approach to analyzing the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war. It delves deeper into the specific context of the Syrian civil war to elucidate how these intertwined material and ideational factors influence the strategic decisions and actions of Hamas and Hezbollah. It examines how geopolitical considerations and sectarian ideologies intersect to shape the foreign policies of these organizations within the Syrian conflict landscape. In this sense, it aims to contribute to the broader scholarly discourse by highlighting the complex nature of state behavior in conflict-ridden environments and underscores the importance of adopting interdisciplinary approaches to studying international relations.

The material-ideational debate framework serves as a foundational lens through which to analyze the behavior of Hamas and Hezbollah within the context of the Syrian civil war. This framework posits that actors' behavior is influenced by a combination of material interests and ideational factors, such as ideas, beliefs, and identities. By applying this framework, the study aims to examine how material considerations, such as strategic alliances and resource acquisition, intersect with ideational factors, such as religious ideologies and sectarian identities, to shape the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah.

What delineates material from ideational foreign policy? Evidence indicates that countries seeking greater respectability and influence within established international frameworks often adopt pragmatic stances, tailored to align with the preferences of existing members while advancing their own interests within the system. Conversely, nations aiming to challenge or disrupt prevailing norms may prioritize ideology and assertive actions, emphasizing change and confrontation with the status quo and its proponents (Gardini & Lambert, 2011, p. 18).

The availability of resources also shapes foreign policy approaches, with more industrialized and wealthier nations typically having greater flexibility to pursue pragmatic options, while those with limited resources may resort to ideologically driven alignments or rejections (Gardini & Lambert, 2011, p. 19). Moreover, individual decision-makers play a crucial role in shaping foreign policy, as their beliefs, perceptions, and preferences influence

the blend of ideology and pragmatism guiding a country's external relations (Gardini & Lambert, 2011, p. 23).

Examining the foreign policy process reveals additional factors at play, including regime type, the inclusivity of decision-making processes, the influence of various stakeholders, and the weight of domestic considerations. Open and inclusive processes often yield more effective and consistent foreign policies grounded in pragmatism (Gardini & Lambert, 2011, p. 25). Furthermore, historical and political contexts significantly influence foreign policy conduct, with national character, historical legacies, and institutional frameworks shaping international behavior domestically, while the configuration of the international system impacts interactions between states internationally.

The application of material factors within this framework emphasizes the importance of tangible interests and strategic calculations in guiding the behavior of Hamas and Hezbollah. Material factors encompass considerations such as territorial control, resource acquisition, and strategic alliances, which play a significant role in shaping the strategic orientations and objectives of these organizations. By analyzing how material interests intersect with broader geopolitical realities, the study aims to uncover the ways in which material factors influence Hamas and Hezbollah's foreign policies during the Syrian civil war.

The application of ideational factors within the material-ideational debate framework highlights the role of ideas, beliefs, and identities in shaping the behavior of Hamas and Hezbollah. Ideational factors encompass religious ideologies, sectarian identities, and other non-material considerations that influence the strategic orientations and objectives of non-state armed groups. By examining how ideational factors intersect with material interests, the study aims to identify the ways in which religious beliefs and sectarian identities shape Hamas and Hezbollah's foreign policies and their implications for regional dynamics.

Given the complexity and interrelatedness of these variables, comprehensive explanations can only be derived from specific case studies. In such a complex reality, the traditional distinction between levels of analysis in foreign policy loses some explanatory power, necessitating more flexible categories and analytical concepts conducive to multi-level analysis. This approach encourages debate over whether Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) should adopt a specialized, compartmentalized approach or pursue a more holistic and pluralistic method, or perhaps a combination of both (Gardini & Lambert, 2011, p. 30).

The forthcoming section underscores the imperative highlighted above by delving into the analytical framework employed in this study. Recognizing the limitations of traditional distinctions between levels of analysis in the realm of foreign policy, the framework outlined here seeks to address this by embracing more flexible categories and analytical concepts conducive to cross-level analysis. At its core lies the utilization of the MSSD in conjunction with a multi-level analysis approach.

2.3. Analytical Framework: Comparative Analysis and the Most Similar Systems Design

This study advances through a sequential application of two crucial case studies and a comparative analysis, harnessing their respective strengths to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the sectarian and material dimensions of the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war. The purpose of triangulating these approaches is to leverage the in-depth examination characteristic of case study methodology and combine it with the theory-testing element inherent in comparative design. This integration allows for a detailed exploration of each case while simultaneously facilitating the systematic testing of theoretical frameworks across multiple cases.

Crucial case studies offer an in-depth exploration of select “most-likely” cases (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 176; Eckstein, 2000, pp. 148–149) deemed pivotal in elucidating key phenomena, i.e. causal mechanisms (Gerring, 2007, p. 238). The method can be employed to assess the feasibility of hypotheses concerning causal relationships or patterns of social interaction (Kurtulus, 2017, p. 3). Through the examination of crucial case studies, this research endeavors to uncover and analyze the intricate interplay between sectarian factors and the strategic choices made by Hamas and Hezbollah in their foreign policy endeavors. These case studies allow for a focused investigation into specific events or policy actions undertaken by these organizations, providing insights into how sectarian considerations may have influenced their decision-making processes.

Complementing the crucial case studies, the comparative analysis allows for systematic comparisons across multiple cases, facilitating the identification of patterns, similarities, and differences. By juxtaposing the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah within the Syrian civil war context, the study aims to discern commonalities and divergences in their approaches, shedding light on the broader dynamics of sectarianism, pragmatism, and ideology in the region.

The rationale for this choice is that prevailing literature tends to examine these groups individually, omitting a crucial comparative viewpoint (Gleis & Berti, 2012, p. 4). The comparative analysis of these two organizations can offer a more precise insight into the factors behind their differing foreign policies.

2.3.1. Rationale behind Comparative Design

A research design serves as a blueprint that outlines the structure and strategy for conducting a study, guiding researchers in the collection, organization, and analysis of data, while a research method refers to the specific techniques or procedures employed by researchers to gather data (Bryman, 2012, p. 46). Research design encompasses the overall plan for investigating a research question or hypothesis, including the selection of participants, data collection methods, and analytical approaches. In essence, the research design provides a roadmap for researchers to systematically address their research objectives and draw meaningful conclusions from their findings. Research design is not restricted to a specific data collection method and can incorporate qualitative or quantitative data (Bryman, 2012, p. 68). Thus, research design concerns the structured organization of an investigation, focusing on architecture rather than execution (de Vaus, 2001, p. 16).

There are various research designs available to researchers, each tailored to different research questions, objectives, and contexts. Five common research designs include experimental design (manipulating one or more variables to observe their effects on an outcome of interest), cross-sectional or survey design (collecting data from a sample of participants at a single point in time), longitudinal design (collecting data from the same sample of participants at multiple points in time), case study design (in-depth investigation and analysis of a single case or a small number of cases), and comparative design (comparing two or more groups, conditions, or cases to identify similarities, differences, and patterns of variation) (Bryman, 2012, pp. 50–77). This study employs a combination of comparative and case study designs. By integrating these two approaches, the research provides an in-depth investigation and analysis of individual cases while also comparing multiple cases to identify similarities, differences, and patterns of variation.

Case studies can be utilized in both qualitative and quantitative contexts (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999, p. 373). They fulfill various purposes within research endeavors, and serve as

invaluable tools for not only developing and constructing novel theoretical frameworks but also refining existing theories or empirically testing established ones. They enrich existing human experiences and foster deeper insights into the issue at hand (Stake, 2000, p. 24).

While the significance of case studies is widely acknowledged across all phases of theory development, they are particularly invaluable during the stage typically regarded with less emphasis: the testing of candidate theories (Eckstein, 2000, p. 119). Case studies serve as potent tools for subjecting theoretical propositions to empirical scrutiny and evaluation within real-world contexts. They provide an opportunity for in-depth examination and exploration of multifaceted phenomena in their natural settings. By meticulously examining specific cases and analyzing the intricate interplay of variables, researchers can uncover rich empirical evidence that either supports or challenges theoretical assumptions. Thus, their unique ability to illuminate the intricacies of actor behavior and contextual dynamics makes them indispensable assets in the rigorous evaluation and refinement of theoretical propositions.

The argument advocating for the use of case studies in theory-building gains particular traction when applied to the domain typically associated with the subfield of comparative politics (Eckstein, 2000, p. 120). Comparative politics, by its very nature, revolves around the examination of similarities and differences in political phenomena across different contexts, regions, or countries. This emphasis on comparison inherently aligns with the methodology of case studies, which excel in elucidating the complexities of specific cases or instances within a comparative framework.

Case studies offer a unique advantage in comparative politics by allowing researchers to delve deeply into individual cases, thereby uncovering the intricate interplay of factors that shape political outcomes. Through detailed analysis and comparison of specific cases, researchers can identify patterns and causal mechanisms that contribute to theoretical development. Furthermore, comparative studies enable researchers to assess the generalizability of theoretical propositions across diverse contexts. By examining how theories manifest in different settings and under varying conditions, researchers can refine and enrich theoretical frameworks, enhancing their applicability and robustness.

Through leveraging the strengths of case studies in exploring specific cases within a comparative framework, researchers can generate detailed theoretical insights that contribute to our understanding of political phenomena across diverse contexts. The comparative design offers a valuable approach for delving into the intricacies of Hamas and Hezbollah's foreign

policies during the Syrian civil war. By capitalizing on its distinctive characteristics and strengths, this method enables a detailed exploration of how these organizations navigate the complexities of the conflict. Through a detailed analysis of these cases within a broader framework, it can be possible to uncover patterns, causal relationships, and contextual factors that shape their foreign policy decisions.

A comparative design involves analyzing distinctions by directly comparing a limited set of cases, without employing statistical probability evaluations. It is particularly advantageous for enhancing comprehension when situations do not permit control through variable-focused quasi-experimental research designs (Bukve, 2019, p. 161). Employing a structured analytical framework to compare these organizations can facilitate conceptual generalizations that extend beyond descriptive analyses of individual cases. Consequently, this approach allows for conceptual generalizations pertaining to the foreign policy landscape of similar non-state armed groups as a whole.

2.3.1.1. Limitations of the Comparative Studies

Comparative study, when applied to the analysis of the foreign policies of non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah, can offer valuable insights but also face several limitations. One inherent limitation is selection bias, as the cases chosen for comparison must be sufficiently similar to allow for meaningful comparison, yet distinct enough to highlight differences. For instance, comparing Hamas' alignment with Syrian opposition groups to Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime illustrates how differing strategic calculations can influence foreign policy outcomes.

Additionally, the complexity and dynamism of the political environments in which these actors operate can introduce confounding variables that are difficult to control for, potentially affecting the validity of the comparison. For example, shifts in regional alliances or changes in leadership within Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war may have influenced their respective foreign policy decisions in unpredictable ways. These factors underscore the challenge of isolating specific causal factors and ensuring the validity of comparative findings.

Another challenge in comparative studies is the asymmetry of available information for each case. Access to reliable data on non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah can vary

widely, with certain aspects of their foreign policies being more opaque or less documented than others are. For instance, while there may be extensive reporting on Hezbollah's military activities and support for the Syrian regime, there might be less detailed information available about Hamas' internal decision-making processes or its diplomatic engagements during the same period.

Furthermore, the dynamic nature of these organizations and their political contexts complicates the analysis (Berti, 2012). Both Hamas and Hezbollah adapt their strategies in response to evolving regional and international dynamics. For example, Hamas' shifts in alliances from supporting Syrian opposition groups to realigning with Iran and Syria during the Syrian civil war demonstrate how external pressures and internal considerations can prompt strategic recalibrations. Similarly, Hezbollah's actions are influenced by its longstanding ties with Iran and strategic imperatives to protect Shiite communities, illustrating how contextual changes shape their foreign policies over time.

In summary, while comparative studies of Hamas and Hezbollah's foreign policies can yield important findings, challenges such as selection bias, the complexity of the political environment, asymmetrical information, and the fluidity of the actors' strategies need to be observed. These limitations must be carefully considered to ensure that the conclusions drawn are robust and reflective of the realities these non-state actors face.

To mitigate the limitations of this study, and enhance the reliability, as well as the validity of the findings, data from multiple sources and perspectives have been used to cross-validate information and minimize the impact of asymmetrical information by drawing on diverse sources of evidence. While this study acknowledges its inability to comprehensively address the issue, it serves as a stepping-stone toward understanding the factors contributing to the divergence in the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah. Drawing from numerous research articles, newspapers, and books concerning the Syrian civil war, the analysis aims to shed light on the underlying reasons.

2.3.2. The Most Similar Systems Design

Comparative studies can be structured using two principal approaches. The underlying principle of MSSD is that significant theoretical distinctions can be identified within ostensibly

similar systems and employed for explanatory purposes (Przeworski & Teune, 1970, p. 36). In contrast, the MDSD aims for a maximal level of diversity among the samples. According to this design, there will only be a restricted set of variables or relationships in which the populations display disparities, despite extensive diversity across systems (Przeworski & Teune, 1970, p. 39).

This study employs the MSSD to identify and compare similarities and differences in the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah. Employing the MSSD aims to isolate the impact of a particular, individual variable (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 41). While simple qualitative comparative analysis primarily centers on understanding how a certain outcome (Y) occurred, the MSSD takes a different approach by focusing on identifying differences to address the question, "does X have an impact on Y?" (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 33). In essence, while qualitative comparative analysis delves into the circumstances leading to a particular outcome, MSSD seeks to isolate specific variables (X) and determine their influence on the outcome (Y). By comparing cases that show similarities in many aspects but differ in terms of the variable of interest, MSSD aims to uncover causal relationships between independent and dependent variables. This methodological distinction allows researchers to move beyond describing how an outcome occurred and instead focuses on understanding the causal mechanisms underlying it. Through rigorous comparative analysis, MSSD facilitates a more nuanced exploration of the factors shaping various outcomes, contributing to a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena.

MSSD involves selecting cases that are similar in relevant aspects, but differ in terms of the independent variable (Anckar, 2020, p. 39), which in this case is the sectarian identities of these non-state actors. By examining these similar systems, the study aims to isolate the effects of the independent variable and discern its impact on the foreign policy outcomes. Through this comparative approach, the study seeks to identify patterns, trends, and differences in the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of factors that may contribute to their divergence. The MSSD methodology is particularly valuable in this study as it helps to control for other potential factors and enables a detailed analysis of sectarian differences.

In the MSSD, cases that share an outcome variable also tend to share the value of the variable assumed to exert a causal effect, while exhibiting differences in other variables. Conversely, the MDSD involves cases with varying outcomes also showcasing differences in

the variable believed to influence the outcome, while displaying agreement in terms of other variables (Schutt, 2019, pp. 402–403).

The MSSD aims to “control for concomitant variation” (Berg-Schlosser, 2012, p. 172; Mitchell, 2000, p. 175). In social research, establishing cause-and-effect relationships can be challenging. For instance, when examining why one country exhibits enduring stability as a democracy while another does not, numerous factors come into play. One potential explanation lies in the disparate historical backgrounds of the two countries. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the answer may not be solely attributed to one cause but rather stems from a combination of complex and multi-causal factors. To address this complexity, many researchers utilize the MSSD. By selecting units, such as countries, that closely resemble each other, researchers can effectively control for numerous other potential causes that may contribute to the observed divergence in outcomes across the political phenomenon under scrutiny.

Figure 1 visually explains these designs. In a three-case illustration, the left diagram exemplifies MDSD, in which distinct conditions of the systems are depicted by white areas, signifying what sets them apart. The shaded segments, encompassing two or three cases, highlight shared similarities among them that might provide insights into the shared outcome. In MSSD, the commonalities between cases are represented by white areas, while shaded portions indicate distinct features accounting for differing outcomes. In MSSD, two or more cases are relevant for comparison due to shared elements (Berg-Schlosser, 2012, p. 35).

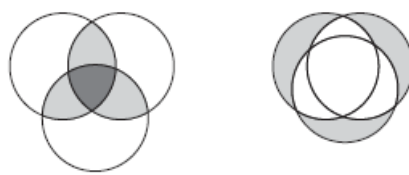


Figure 1. Most different (left) and most similar (right) systems designs (Berg-Schlosser, 2012, p. 36)

MSSD focuses on finding dissimilarities among similar systems (de Meur & Berg-Schlosser, 1996; Przeworski & Teune, 1970). The assumption is that even among similar systems, it is possible to identify theoretically significant differences, which could have a vital role in offering explanations for diverse outcomes (Przeworski & Teune, 1970, p. 39), i.e., the divergent foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah. Taking into account the attributes of these

approaches, along with the potential they offer, this research utilizes the MSSD, since the significant similarity between Hamas and Hezbollah highlighted above, coupled with a crucial sectarian distinction (Koss, 2018a, p. 2) renders them highly appropriate for a comparative analysis using the MSSD approach.

MSSD entails selecting cases that share pertinent characteristics yet diverge concerning the independent variable (Anckar, 2020, p. 39). According to MSSD, by choosing closely resembling units, researchers can effectively control for various potential factors that could contribute to the observed differences in outcomes related to the examined political phenomenon. Researchers seek the primary independent variable (sectarian differences in this case) that systematically varies within similar cases (Hamas and Hezbollah) and elucidates the distinct political outcomes (divergent foreign policies during Arab uprisings).

The significance of the MSSD methodology in this study lies in its capability to mitigate the influence of alternative factors and facilitate a concentrated examination of the targeted independent variable, specifically the sectarian distinctions. Nonetheless, MSSD needs to be perceived as an initial step directing the attention towards essential common factors influencing distinct results. Subsequently, these recognized variables should be linked to relevant theoretical concepts and assessed in tandem with historically rooted insights from each case, alongside authoritative sources (de Meur & Berg-Schlosser, 1996, p. 463).

This method relies on comparing cases that are very much alike but have different results. Essentially, when two systems or processes yield markedly disparate outcomes, the inquiry centers on discerning the underlying reasons. The premise underlying this approach posits that by juxtaposing similar cases that yield divergent outcomes, researchers can more effectively manage factors that deviate between the cases. When comparing two similar cases, numerous control variables—elements fostering similarity between the cases—are implicit, while only a few elements differ. Within these differing elements likely resides the independent variable responsible for the occurrence or non-occurrence of the dependent variable.

It is also important to highlight that in utilizing the MSSD, the cases under scrutiny do not demand an exceptionally high level of similarity. Similarity of general characteristics that facilitates effective comparison is sufficient. Some examples carried out using MSSD to date includes studies on the different responses of Poland and Hungary to the Ukrainian War (Leof, 2023), European integration processes of Portugal and Spain (Schmitter, 2003), recruitment tactics of Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab and ISIL (Visser, 2021), digitalization of electoral integrity

in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda (Shayo, 2017) and democratic transitions of China and Soviet Union (Guo, 1998). Similarity levels of these comparisons shows that the shared characteristics of Hamas and Hezbollah, such as their status as non-state armed entities, their prioritization of resistance against Israel, their involvement in a common regional alliance alongside Iran and Syria, and their shared emphasis on Islamist ideology, offer substantial basis for employing the MSSD in evaluating their foreign policies.

2.3.2.1. Rationale for Using the MSSD: Similarities between Hamas and Hezbollah

Hamas and Hezbollah are important actors in the Middle East. Both organizations have a high representation capacity in terms of Islamist characteristics and sectarian differences (Gleis & Berti, 2012, p. 3; Koss, 2018b, p. 2). These are non-state actors where religious and sectarian dynamics come together in the most intense way. Both emerged primarily as armed actors with active armed organizations, and then they became involved in the electoral processes through their political wings.

They have managed to integrate into the political system in their countries and use legitimate political mechanisms since the middle of 2000s. Hamas and Hezbollah, widely labeled as terrorist organizations by many Western countries, particularly the USA, have nevertheless been acknowledged as political entities within their respective nations. Hezbollah has been in the Lebanese parliament since 2005 and has representatives in the government. Hamas has also maintained *de facto* control in Gaza since the 2006 elections. As a result, they possess significant power to shape the dynamics both within their own countries and across the region.

For many years, they pursued similar regional policies, but surprisingly, their foreign policies diverged following the Arab uprisings. The distinct divergence in their foreign policies during the war in Syria is generally attributed to their sectarian differences. Despite having many similarities, their distinct sectarian identities are considered as the source of their differing foreign policies pursued during the Syrian civil war. Thus, analyzing the divergent foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah offers important insights into evaluating the influence of sectarian differences on foreign policy. As a consequence of their sectarian differences, both possess distinct and well-defined identities and ideologies (Gleis & Berti, 2012, p. 1).

What makes the comparison of these two organizations so significant is the abundance of similarities they have despite their fundamental sectarian differences. Hamas and Hezbollah share commonalities in their organizational structures, grassroots support networks, and opposition to Israeli occupation (Ghaddar, 2013). Both groups have adopted a dual-track approach, combining militant resistance with political participation to advance their objectives and maintain legitimacy among their respective constituencies (Kaya & Şen, 2014, p. 450). The observed similarities between the groups under examination renders the adoption of a MSSD for this investigation.

The following significant similarities between these organizations make their comparison particularly meaningful, as it enables an examination of their foreign policies using sectarian differences as an independent variable.

First, both organizations are considered as non-state armed groups (NSAGs). Put simply, this concept denotes armed organizations with an ideology and operational autonomy, employing violent methods to seize control of territory or communities in pursuit of their political objectives, while operating independently of state authority (Yeşiltaş & Duran, 2018, p. 14). NSAGs are structures that act independently of the state, inside or outside the borders of the country, and do not prioritize the interests of the state (Josselin & Wallace, 2001, p. 1).

The increase and expansion of non-state armed groups are fueled by factors such as conflicts based on ethnicity and religion, civil wars, armed confrontations, economic disparities, interventions by regional powers, territorial disputes, and past injustices of a historical, social, and political nature. The decline of state institutions in the Middle East is a major factor contributing to the spread of these NSAGs across the region (Yeşiltaş & Kardaş, 2018, p. 11).

NSAG is a broad and ambiguous term that encompasses a wide range of groups, including terrorist organizations and militias. Various researchers, including Krause and Milliken (2009) and Aydinli (2015), have proposed classifications that are widely referenced in the field. Non-state armed groups can take different forms, such as guerrilla formations, rebel groups, global criminal organizations, mercenaries, warlords, paramilitary forces, and terrorist organizations. The common characteristic among these groups is their use of weapons to pursue their specific objectives (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 15). Non-state armed groups are capable of employing a variety of armed tactics, ranging from traditional acts of terrorism to large-scale attacks targeting mass casualties (Falode, 2018, p. 161).

Their emergence and expansion in the Middle East escalated due to several significant factors, including the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which led to the gradual disintegration of the Iraqi state structure. Furthermore, the region witnessed localized civil wars following the Arab Spring, ranging from Libya to Yemen, and the Syrian civil war spilling over into neighboring countries (Yeşiltaş & Duran, 2018, p. 21; Yetim et al., 2020, p. 7). These events played important role in strengthening of influential NSAGs such as Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), People's Protection Units (YPG), and Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) in the region. Consequently, the field of international relations had to revise its understanding of actors to include non-state entities, prompting discussions on the foreign policy capabilities of these non-state armed groups.

While there are significant instances of non-state armed groups engaging in foreign relations with other organizations and states (Balci, 2017; Darwich, 2021), and even influencing the foreign policy behavior of nation-states (Ataman, 2003, p. 59), the foreign policies of sectarian NSAGs and their role in international relations have not been adequately explored (Tinas & Tür, 2018, p. 130). The regional norm in the Middle East has seen a diminished emphasis on sovereignty within state structures, as evidenced by the reduced significance of this concept (Halliday, 2009, pp. 15–16). Additionally, the intricate and predominantly conflict-driven interactions between various actors in the region (Yetim, 2018, p. 361) necessitate an examination of the foreign policies of non-state armed groups alongside those of states.

The current focus in international relations studies is primarily on nation-states, neglecting the foreign policies of non-state actors. This study contends that Hamas and Hezbollah possess their own distinct foreign policies, challenging the notion that NSAGs cannot be considered a unit of analysis. The Arab uprisings has had enduring consequences due to the reactions of both states and non-state actors to these transformative events. Particularly, the policies pursued by Islamist non-state actors wield significant influence over regional developments. Overlooking these factors hinders the comprehension of regional developments and the ability to make accurate predictions. Addressing this gap, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the foreign policy of Islamist non-state actors.

Another similarity between Hamas and Hezbollah is their emphasis on Islamic identity and religious references. They have a common objective of taking the power and establishing an Islamic administration in the countries where they were founded (Gleis & Berti, 2012, p. 189). During the Cold War, NSAGs in the Middle East were mostly Arab nationalist and left

leaning, as in the case of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The emergence of the Islamist revolution in Iran in 1979 and its adoption of the revolutionary discourse played an important role in bringing the Islamist movements to the fore. Since the 1980s, the number of NSAGs who prioritize Islamic discourse and symbols has increased. The fact that Hamas and Hezbollah were founded in the 1980s and that both actors have strong relations with Iran can be cited among the empirical realities that support this assumption (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 20).

Although Hamas has close ties with Iran within the Axis of Resistance, it was originally established as the Palestinian arm of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood Organization (Ihwan) which is considered as the beginning of modern Sunni Islamism. Modern Sunni Islamism was institutionalized in the 19th and 20th centuries, but its history goes back much further. Ibn Hanbal (780–855) and al-Ghazali (1058–1111) are among the philosophers and religious thinkers on which Sunni Islamism is based (Mozaffari, 2007, p. 25).

Fight against Israel is another common feature of these organizations. Both organizations originated in response to Israeli invasions. Hamas emerged during the late 1980s amidst the First Palestinian Intifada, while Hezbollah was established following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Hamas and Hezbollah believe that an armed struggle should be waged with Israel in order to regain the occupied lands in Palestine. This can be considered among the basic founding principles of both organizations (Hroub, 2002, pp. 43–84; Saouli, 2013, pp. 37–38). In a way, “their identity and *raison d’être* is embedded in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict (Gleis & Berti, 2012, p. 185). This identity is also the main dynamic that brings these two organizations together in Axis of Resistance.

These organizations were established to fight Israel, but they also struggled with secular groups in their own countries such as Fatah (Palestine) and AMAL (Lebanon) (Kurtulus, 2011, p. 481), which they claimed did not fight Israel adequately. Following an alternative political strategy to secular political organizations during this struggle, Hamas and Hezbollah developed a nationalist discourse that puts Islamism at the center in Palestine and Lebanon, in order to gain the support of local populations (Gleis & Berti, 2012, p. 186).

Following the U.S.-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003, a division surfaced between the Axis of Resistance and Gulf countries. Iran's influence in Iraq has grown, partly due to its predominantly Shiite population. Iran has also developed serious relations with Palestinian resistance organizations in this process. The concept of "Shiite Crescent" was introduced to draw attention to Iran's increasing influence. While Hezbollah and its allies prefer to use the

phrase "Axis of Resistance" in almost every field, the traditional Arab league, especially the Gulf countries, has adopted the term "Shiite Crescent".

Thus, two rival poles were formed in the region: Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, which call themselves the "Axis of Resistance" on the one hand, and the Gulf countries, Jordan and Egypt on the other. This polarization in the Middle East was clearly revealed during Israel's attack on Lebanon in July 2006 and its military operation against Gaza in December 2008. While the Arab regimes defending the status quo accused Hezbollah and Hamas of provoking Israeli attacks and acting as Iran's satellites, Iran and Syria expressed their support for the struggle of these organizations within the framework of "resistance". These reveal that this "natural alliance" has also impact on the regional balances (Cafiero & Certo, 2014).

The level of autonomy they have is another common feature of Hamas and Hezbollah. Non-state armed groups increase their capacity to challenge the state by expanding their areas of autonomy within the society they address. Hamas and Hezbollah have been involved in the political struggle since the day they were founded. Even when they were not in power, Hamas and Hezbollah had a state-like or quasi-government nature by providing many services that the state had provided to the public (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 17).

Hamas and Hezbollah transcend their roles as mere armed organizations by establishing intricate systems of governance in the territories they control. This includes their involvement in political processes, management of economic activities, and provision of social services. Their ability to govern demonstrates their comprehensive influence and organizational capacity within their respective regions (Berti, 2016, p. 1).

Hezbollah and Hamas are both state-sponsored groups. Hezbollah receives military support from Iran, with Hamas receiving a lesser degree of military assistance from Iran as well. However, Hamas also receives economic and diplomatic backing from Sunni countries like Türkiye and Qatar (Shamir, 2021, p. 278).

However, the main and most important factor distinguishing these two organizations from other NSAGs and makes them similar to each other is that Hamas and Hezbollah can become the legitimate representatives of the society they are addressing, even partially or completely, in domestic and foreign policies. In other words, the levels of autonomy could partially become equivalent to the level of a state on official or informal levels (Dionigi, 2014, p. 137).

	Hamas	Hezbollah
Actor type	NSAG	NSAG
Regional alliance	Axis of Resistance	Axis of Resistance
Worldview	Islamism	Islamism
Main goal	Fight against Israel	Fight against Israel
Level of autonomy	High	High
Organizational structure	Political + military wings	Political + military wings
Independent variable: Sectarian identity	Sunni	Shia
Dependent variable: Foreign policy during the Syrian civil war	Against the Assad regime	Support for the Assad regime

Table 1. Overview of the MSSD

The utilization of the MSSD offers a methodologically comprehensive framework to explore the subtle complexities of foreign policy of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war, particularly in light of their disparate sectarian identities. While both organizations share overarching similarities in their regional alliances, Islamist worldview, and primary goal of combatting Israel, the salient divergence lies in their sectarian affiliations, with Hamas representing Sunni Islamism and Hezbollah embodying Shia Islamism. This sectarian dichotomy potentially manifests in divergent foreign policy orientations; particularly evident in their respective positions vis-à-vis the Assad regime during the Syrian conflict.

The MSSD enables researchers to delineate and analyze cases—Hamas and Hezbollah—that exhibit remarkable similarities across various dimensions apart from their sectarian identity. This controlled comparison permits a meticulous examination of the causal influence exerted by sectarian affiliations on the foreign policy trajectories of these organizations amidst the Syrian civil war's complex geopolitical landscape. By isolating the variable of sectarian identity and contrasting its impact on the foreign policy conduct of Hamas and Hezbollah, it becomes possible to discern deliberate patterns and discernible trends that elucidate the role of sectarian dynamics in shaping regional alignments and strategic posturing. Moreover, the MSSD framework fosters a systematic exploration of alternative hypotheses and counterfactual scenarios, thereby enriching scholarly discourse and contributing to a deeper understanding of the interplay between sectarian dynamics and geopolitical exigencies in the Middle East.

In sum, the MSSD approach offers a rigorous and systematic analytical framework to unpack the multifaceted dimensions of sectarian influence on the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah within the context of the Syrian civil war. By juxtaposing highly similar cases with divergent sectarian identities, this methodological paradigm enables nuanced insights into the intricate interplay between ideological imperatives, regional dynamics, and strategic calculations, thereby advancing scholarly discourse and informing policy deliberations in international relations and Middle Eastern studies.

2.3.2.2. Strengths and Limitations of the MSSD

Adopting the MSSD approach has both considerable strengths and potential limitations. The design's strengths include its capability to analyze interactions between variables on a systemic scale, employ a deductive research approach, and maintain a consistent dependent variable throughout its operations (Anckar, 2008, pp. 394–396). MSSD allows for a focused comparison of cases that share similarities, enabling researchers to draw meaningful conclusions about the impact of specific variables within a consistent framework.

MSSD empowers researchers to pinpoint and scrutinize a specific variable, such as the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah, while controlling for other factors that might sway outcomes. This meticulous isolation aids in identifying the precise impact of ideological and pragmatic decisions on the foreign policies of these organizations. By handpicking cases (Hamas and Hezbollah) with akin attributes (e.g., ideological underpinnings, regional influence), researchers can more effectively attribute variations in foreign policies to the variable under examination, namely, the organizations themselves. In addition, The MSSD strategy lends greater credence to causal inferences. Through focusing on cases exhibiting high degrees of similarity except for the variable being scrutinized, researchers can construct more compelling arguments regarding cause & effect relationships.

The method has its limitations as well. Although the objective is to select comparable cases, identifying cases that are indistinguishable in all aspects except for the variable of interest can prove deterring. Subtle discrepancies may persist, potentially influencing outcomes. In addition, its findings may exhibit restricted applicability to alternative contexts. The conditions facilitating case similarities may not hold true for other scenarios. To address this concern, researchers can opt for either a more stringent or lenient application of the MSSD model. This

allows for a spectrum of similarities, ranging from closely aligned to more loosely associated, contingent upon the specific characteristic under examination. The degree of similarity selected will inherently shape the trajectory and outcomes of the research endeavor.

Achieving complete isolation of a solitary variable can pose challenges within intricate real-world scenarios. External factors beyond the researcher's control may still exert influence on outcomes. Potential biases in case selection is another limitation. Researchers may inadvertently introduce biases if cases fail to genuinely encapsulate the intended similarities and differences. To address the design's shortcomings, significant effort has been devoted to selecting cases that closely match predefined criteria of similarity, while also considering possible variations. Chosen cases closely reflect the intended similarities and differences in relevant aspects.

Recognizing the limitations of generalizability, the specific contextual factors that may influence case outcomes have been acknowledged. Extensive research has been undertaken to review the literature, aiming to identify and comprehend the broader dimensions of the Syrian conflict. This includes examining existing scholarship on the conflict, regional dynamics, and the ideologies and goals of Hamas and Hezbollah. Alliances, rivalries, and regional power dynamics that may affect the foreign policy decisions of Hamas and Hezbollah has been analyzed. Internal dynamics of Hamas and Hezbollah, including their organizational structures, leadership dynamics, and ideological orientations have been explored. The evolving dynamics of the Syrian civil war have been acknowledged for their impact on the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah over time. This recognition is crucial for addressing the challenges associated with generalizing their respective cases.

Another measure to deal with the limitations of the design was the multi-method approach. Multiple research methods, including qualitative data analysis, archival research, and content analysis have been used to complement the MSSD approach and provide additional insights into the complexities of the foreign policies under study.

2.3.3. Level of Analysis

A multi-level approach is employed for examining the divergence of Hamas and Hezbollah's foreign policies during the Syrian civil war due to the complex interplay of factors

at different levels. This approach is based on the claim that there is no single level of analysis that is more important than the others are. In other words, a multi-level approach does not give priority to the international system like neoclassical realism, or the individual and actor levels like the FPA approach (Benli Altunışık & Martin, 2023, p. 80). Instead, it posits that levels of analysis interact synergistically to bring about changes in foreign policy. It acknowledges that foreign policy outcomes are shaped not by singular factors but by a complex interaction of multiple factors.

Neoclassical realism welcomes the significance of all three levels of analysis but considers the systemic-level factors more influential than other levels. Placing primary emphasis on systemic-level factors, neoclassical realism contends that states and their attributes function as conduits through which external imperatives influence the foreign policies of states (Darwich & Kaarbo, 2020, p. 231). Although FPA also considers other levels, it tries to understand the effects of these levels on decision-makers. Thus, FPA gives priority to the decision-makers, behaving individually or within groups.

The literature on Foreign Policy Change (FPC) presents an important approach in this sense. The FPC literature brought to the agenda by researchers such as Hermann (1990) and Rosati et al. (1994) following the Cold War. They argued that it was necessary to look at all levels, not just a specific factor or level, to understand foreign policy change. Hermann's pioneering work underlined the lack of priority among these levels, suggesting that the decision-maker level, domestic level and international levels should all be focused on (Hermann, 1990).

In light of these discussions, this study borrows the multi-level analysis approach from the FPC literature, in order to analyze the divergence of the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Arab Spring. Analyzing the individual level allows for an understanding of how key decision makers within each organization shape their respective foreign policies. Ideologies, personal experiences, and strategic calculations of decision makers can significantly influence policy choices.

However, since the state-level is not a relevant level of analysis for non-state actors, this study focuses on the ideology-level instead. This type of actors lack the conventional structures of states and their ideologies become paramount in shaping their actions on the international stage. Thus, understanding their foreign policies requires delving into their identities and ideologies. Examining the identities of Hamas and Hezbollah provides insights into their fundamental goals, values, and allegiances. Hamas, as a Sunni Islamist organization, may

prioritize Sunni Muslim interests and perceive the Syrian conflict through a sectarian lens. In contrast, Hezbollah, a Shia Islamist group, may align with the Assad regime due to shared sectarian affiliations and strategic interests.

On the systemic level, geopolitical and strategic dynamics are pivotal in influencing decisions regarding foreign policy. Analyzing regional power dynamics, alliances, and security threats provides context for understanding the behavior of Hamas and Hezbollah within the broader Middle Eastern landscape. Factors such as the influence of Iran, the actions of Israel, and the broader Sunni-Shia divide contribute to the complexities of their foreign policies.

2.4. Non-state Armed Groups (NSAG) and Foreign Policy

In the simplest terms, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) refer to armed organizations that have the capability to carry out systematic acts of violence (Yeşiltaş & Duran, 2018, p. 10). They aim to establish dominance over both the state and society, leading to the control of territory, exploitation of natural resources, and the subjugation or displacement of indigenous populations. They seek to develop illicit economies by instilling fear and resorting to extreme acts of violence (Yeşiltaş & Kardaş, 2018, p. 4). The common characteristics of NSAGs can be expressed as follows: organizing and operating outside state control, resorting to violence to achieve political and military objectives, possessing an irregular and unorthodox military action pattern, and exhibiting a quasi-state structure (Yeşiltaş & Duran, 2018, p. 15).

NSAGs can be categorized into various groups. First, there are rebel groups that engage in armed resistance against established authorities or governments. Second, militant groups that employ violent tactics to promote their ideological or political agendas. Third, urban gangs and warlords within urban settings, exerting control through criminal activities and armed force. Fourth, private militias, police forces, and security companies operating outside the traditional state apparatus. Finally, transnational groups that operate across national borders, often driven by religious, ideological, or ethnic motivations (Krause & Milliken, 2009, pp. 204–205).

Another commonly used typology for NSAGs is as follows: Firstly, insurgents that challenge and seek to overthrow established authorities or governments. Secondly, other domestic militant groups with specific political or ideological agendas operating within a country. Thirdly, warlords and urban gangs that exert control over specific territories or urban areas through a combination of force and criminal activities. Fourthly, private militias and

military companies operating independently from the state, often providing security services or engaging in armed conflicts on behalf of clients. Fifthly, terrorists that employ violence and fear-inducing tactics to achieve political or ideological objectives. Lastly, criminal organizations primarily driven by illicit activities such as drug trafficking, human smuggling, or organized crime (Aydinli, 2015, p. 427). This categorization provides a framework for understanding the diverse nature and types of NSAGs.

NSAGs in the Middle East engage in activities to survive by seizing natural resources and strategically significant locations to establish an illicit economic network, in the fragmented geopolitical atmosphere of the Middle East and within the emerging security architecture. In doing so, they employ a combination of territorial control, oppressive violence, and a form of "demographic engineering" that displaces the local population who do not comply (Yeşiltaş & Duran, 2018, s. 9-10). It is evident that terrorist organizations, especially in the Middle East and Africa, employ diverse forms of terrorism, encompassing traditional acts of terrorism as well as attacks aimed at causing mass casualties (Falode, 2018, 158-162).

Hamas and Hezbollah are among the prominent ones of these organizations, with their capacity to carry out systematic acts of armed attacks in pursuit of their respective political and ideological goals. Hamas, based primarily in the Palestinian territories, has been involved in armed resistance against Israeli occupation and has conducted numerous attacks targeting Israeli civilians and military forces. Hezbollah, based in Lebanon, has a similar history of armed resistance against Israel and has engaged in regional conflicts, such as the Syrian civil war, where they support the Syrian government. These organizations exhibit characteristics of NSAGs due to their armed nature, non-state affiliation, and involvement in violent actions to achieve their objectives.

To analyze the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah, it becomes essential to address the question of whether non-state armed groups possess or implement foreign policies. While various definitions of foreign policy exist, there is no universally accepted definition in the literature. For example, Hermann defines foreign policy as "the discrete purposeful action that results from the political level decision of an individual or group of individuals." For him, foreign policy is the observable result of a decision at the political level; the implementation of the decision taken (Hermann, 1978, p. 34). This perspective views foreign policy as a conduct that can exclusively be carried out by nation-states.

According to Modelski, foreign policy is “the system of activities evolved by communities for changing the behavior of other states and for adjusting their own activities to the international environment” (1962, p. 6). He suggests that only those aspects of politics that aim at change in the current behavior of states as the primary objectives of foreign policy.

Tayfur contends that states, operating through their designated institutions and representatives within the international system, engage in specific actions directed toward other states. These actions lead to reciprocal interactions between states, shaping the dynamics of their relationships. It is through these interactions foreign policy is formed, emerging as a direct outcome of these exchanges. In essence, foreign policy can be understood as a phenomenon rooted in and characterized by this ongoing process of mutual interaction between states (Tayfur, 2000).

Frankel also defines foreign policy as the deliberate efforts made by a state to manage and navigate its relationships with other states (1963). According to this view, foreign policy encompasses the strategies and actions a state undertakes to influence, negotiate, and maintain its position in the global arena. This definition emphasizes that foreign policy is not merely reactive but involves proactive measures designed to shape the state's interactions with the international community. Through these efforts, a state seeks to protect its interests, promote its values, and achieve its objectives on the world stage.

Hill offers a broader definition of foreign policy, describing it as the totality of formal diplomatic and international relations conducted by an independent actor within the global arena. While Hill acknowledges that these independent actors are typically states, he does not restrict agency solely to them, recognizing that entities such as international organizations or non-state actors, can also play significant roles in foreign policy. Despite this inclusivity, Hill emphasizes that states remain the primary independent actors in the conduct of foreign policy, underscoring their central role in shaping international relations (2003, pp. 3–4).

In these definitions, the state is widely acknowledged as the dominant, and often considered the sole actor within the international political system. However, this perspective overlooks the presence of other significant actors in the international arena, such as international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and multinational corporations, which engage in complex interactions with one another and with states. The concept of "actorness" becomes crucial in this context, as it highlights the capacity of these entities to behave as independent

actors on the global stage. A deeper examination is necessary to understand the roles and influence of these non-state actors within the broader international system.

Contrary to the perspective that views the state as the sole actor in international relations, some scholars argue for a broader understanding of international actorness that extends beyond just states. For instance, Young defines international actors as organized entities created by groups of people that are not entirely subordinate to any other actor within the global system (1972, p. 140). These entities, while maintaining a degree of autonomy, actively engage in power dynamics with other actors on the international stage.

Another perspective is provided by Dougherty, who posits that an international actor is an organized entity endowed with the capacity to undertake autonomous actions within the global arena (1976, p. 600). According to Dougherty, these actors are distinguished by their ability to operate autonomously within the international system, influencing global events and interactions through their independent decisions and initiatives. This definition broadens the scope of what constitutes an international actor, recognizing that entities other than states—such as international institutions, corporations, and even transnational advocacy networks—can also exert significant influence in the international arena through their independent actions.

Hopkins and Mansbach define an actor as a relatively autonomous entity that possesses the capacity to influence the actions and decisions of other autonomous actors within the international system (1973, p. 4). Their definition highlights the ability of these entities to operate independently while engaging in interactions that shape the behavior of other actors. This perspective underscores the dynamic nature of international relations, where various actors, whether states or non-state entities, exercise influence and negotiate power within a complex web of interdependencies.

From these definitions, it can be inferred that an international actor possesses two fundamental characteristics. First, it must demonstrate a degree of independence, operating with relative autonomy. Second, it must have the capacity to engage in power dynamics with other actors, meaning it can exert influence on other autonomous entities within the international system. The concept of "autonomy" is particularly salient in this context, as the ability to function independently is a critical criterion for defining actors within the international system. This emphasis on autonomy underscores its central role in distinguishing entities that actively participate in and shape international relations.

The most basic element common to different definitions of foreign policy is that foreign policy can be followed by states towards other states and the international system. However, it is an undeniable fact that non-state actors also have a role and importance in international relations and this importance is increasing gradually (Baumann & Stengel, 2014, p. 489). Non-state actors can engage in actions that are effective nationally, regionally or globally, and change the behavior of states, using a multitude of tools, including lobbying, advocacy, perception management, terrorist attacks, geographic occupation and control, both locally and internationally. The relations of NSAGs with other states are very effective in reshaping the regional geopolitical order (Yeşiltaş & Duran, 2018, p. 18).

Aydinli (2015) also states that one of the most important changes in global politics today is that nation-states gradually lose their importance and non-state actors became more prominent in international relations. Governance power is transitioning away from the state's predominant influence and toward the increasing significance of non-state actors. Especially after the Arab Spring, non-state actors began to threaten the monopoly claim of nation-states, which are accepted as the sole and main actor of international relations in the Westphalian system (Yeşiltaş & Kardaş, 2018, p. 10).

Modern state structures in the Middle East were established relatively late and still have problems of institutionalization. For this reason, the sovereignty claim of the states in the region is weak, whereas the challenges of non-state actors are more felt and strong (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 183). As a result, in many modern conflicts in the Middle East, NSAGs oppose the monopoly of states to use force as a result of state weakness (Yeşiltaş & Duran, 2018, p. 20).

Scholars have also emphasized that NSAGs employ tactics and strategies that extend well beyond mere violence. Coggins, for instance, characterizes “rebel diplomacy” as the strategic communication conducted by rebel groups with foreign governments, agents, or occupying powers that they view as external to their own context (2015, p. 107). Huang (2016) similarly identifies that rebel groups engage in proto-diplomacy to achieve visibility, credibility, and international recognition, paralleling the diplomatic practices of states. Additionally, research by Arves et al. (2019) shows that rebels utilize “public diplomacy” not only to target foreign governments but also to influence external public opinion. Bob (2005) introduces the concept of “rebel marketing,” which encompasses the strategic use of social media and rebel broadcasting to build an international brand. Jones and Mattiacci (2019) explore how Twitter serves as a unique form of public diplomacy for rebel groups seeking

international support. Similarly, Bos and Melissen (2019) analyze both public and digital diplomacy efforts by rebel groups, which enhance their international influence and strengthen their position within ongoing conflicts (Darwich, 2021, p. 4).

In line with above discussion, this study is grounded in the recognition that the traditional state-centered approach to foreign policy has become increasingly inadequate due to the rising number and growing influence of non-state actors. In response to this shift, the field of international relations has had to reconfigure its understanding of the actor problem to incorporate non-state entities, like non-state armed groups. This revised perspective acknowledges that these NSAGs are now actively engaging in foreign policy activities and interacting with other international actors. Consequently, the discipline must account for the ways in which these entities formulate and pursue their own foreign policies, influencing global interactions beyond the scope of state-centric models.

Darwich (2021, p. 2) presents compelling evidence suggesting that non-state actors engage in activities akin to foreign policy, actively forming and sustaining relationships with both nation-states and other non-state entities, irrespective of whether they are in periods of conflict or peace. These actors are not merely challenging but are fundamentally reshaping the concept of sovereignty. By altering and influencing traditional notions of state sovereignty, NSAGs are creating a novel form of sovereignty and exercising authority in ways that parallel state behaviors. This phenomenon has led to the development of what can be termed as a “non-state foreign policy,” a concept elaborated by Yeşiltaş and Duran (2018, p. 13), which highlights how NSAGs adopt strategies and practices traditionally associated with state diplomacy.

Additionally, the low salience of sovereignty, which has increasingly become a norm of modern state structures, underscores the need to incorporate both states and non-state actors in the study of foreign policy (Halliday, 2009, pp. 15–16). This shift is further supported by the focus on the concept of autonomy in defining international actors. As illustrated in the analysis of Hamas and Hezbollah in this study, both organizations have attained a significant degree of autonomy. Their influence extends beyond domestic social and economic spheres, as they also play notable roles in various regional events across the Middle East. This expanded role highlights their capacity to impact international relations, affirming the necessity of including such actors in foreign policy analyses.

Hamas and Hezbollah have become regional powers in the Middle East as non-state armed groups. For example, Hezbollah is an actor of undeniable importance in the struggle of

the Palestinians against Israel and the Syrian Civil War, as well as being effective in Lebanon where it was founded. Studies examining the impact of Hezbollah's relations with Israel and other regional actors on the change in the organization's identity are important in this respect (Dionigi, 2014; Saouli, 2019). Hamas' relations with the EU also shed light on what kind of state practices this organization has put forward that can be considered foreign policy (Pace & Pallister-Wilkins, 2018). The foreign policies of both actors were shaped by their social positioning as "in-between categories" (Darwich, 2021, p. 7).

Hezbollah's foreign policy during the 2006 Lebanese war serves as another example. By initiating a cross-border attack that led to a conflict between Lebanon and Israel, Hezbollah acted as an autonomous and sovereign entity, displaying a concrete foreign policy action as a NSAG. Israel, as a sovereign actor, responded to Hezbollah as if it were a legitimate and recognized presence within Lebanese territory. Throughout the war, Hezbollah emerged as a quasi-state foreign policy actor. Notably, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice primarily engaged in negotiations with Nabeh Barri, representing Hezbollah, rather than the Lebanese Prime Minister (Tinas & Tür, 2018, pp. 130–141).

In conclusion, the presence and influence of non-state actors, particularly in the Middle East, have grown significantly in recent years. The Arab uprisings resulted in the emergence of non-state armed groups with more power and influence, the disintegration of state structures, and the reinforcement of multiple relationships of sovereignty (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 22). NSAGs have become able to develop their own foreign policies. Factors such as changing power dynamics, regional conflicts, diplomatic engagement, economic influence, proxy relationships, and global governance challenges all contributed to the growing prominence of non-state actors in shaping foreign policy. The tumultuous and challenging years during the Arab uprisings led to an augmentation in the effectiveness and influence of non-state actors.

This era of upheaval provided a strategic opportunity for organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah to enhance their roles on the international stage. Their actions during this period underscore the necessity of examining their foreign policies academically. Both groups, amidst the regional chaos, engaged in activities that mirrored traditional state diplomacy. They navigated complex political landscapes, formed alliances, and exerted influence in ways that align with conventional understandings of foreign policy. Hamas and Hezbollah not only adapted to the shifting geopolitical environment but also actively shaped it. Their involvement in regional conflicts, interactions with other states and efforts to build international support

reflect a sophisticated approach to foreign policy. This demonstrates that their actions are not merely reactive or limited to local contexts but are strategically aimed at achieving broader objectives on the global stage.

Thus, studying the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah is not only relevant but also essential for a comprehensive understanding of contemporary international relations. Their ability to operate with a degree of autonomy and their involvement in significant geopolitical events affirm that their strategies and interactions can be analyzed in academic terms, similar to the foreign policies of recognized state actors.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, the theoretical framework, which is centered on the Ideational vs. Material Debate in international relations, has been introduced, serving as a foundational cornerstone for understanding the divergent foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war. This theoretical framework aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of these organizations' foreign policy decisions by distinguishing between ideational factors, primarily sectarian identity, and material factors like strategic and geopolitical dynamics.

Subsequently, an analytical framework has been constructed, employing a multi-level approach to scrutinize individual, identity, and system levels. This approach facilitates an exploration into the underlying reasons for the divergence in foreign policies. Furthermore, the adoption of the MSSD as the research methodology enables the comparison of these similar and crucial cases, thereby isolating the influence of sectarian identity on foreign policy trajectories.

The next chapter on the conceptual framework delves into the Syrian civil war as a sectarian conflict, illustrating how sectarian dynamics have shaped its trajectory. Additionally, Hamas and Hezbollah are presented as key actors within this context, exploring their roles as sectarian entities.

CHAPTER 3: HAMAS, HEZBOLLAH, AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR UNDER THE LENS OF SECTARIANISM

3.1. Introduction

The Syrian civil war, as a sectarian conflict, has profoundly influenced regional dynamics and the actions of key actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah. While these groups are frequently characterized by their sectarian identities, this study posits that their foreign policies during the Syrian civil war were predominantly driven by material considerations rather than sectarian affiliations. To understand this complex interplay, it is essential to delve into the sectarian dimensions of the war and to focus on the characteristics of Hamas and Hezbollah that render them sectarian actors.

This chapter aims to establish a solid foundation by offering a thorough exploration of sectarianism, preparing the groundwork for a detailed examination of its impact on shaping the distinct foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah within the tumultuous context of the Syrian conflict. This examination will provide the necessary conceptual framework to explore how and why material interests took precedence over sectarian motivations in shaping the foreign policy decisions of these actors.

It is challenging to identify a term more inherently ambivalent in its meanings than 'sectarianism.' Providing a precise definition for the term proves to be a challenging task, since it is inherently flexible and ambiguous (Makdisi, 2017, p. 4), and prone to conceptual stretching (Haddad, 2017, p. 188). It originates from the concept of a sect, representing a collective with distinct religious, political, or philosophical convictions. The term frequently carries religious implications, and it has acquired a pejorative sense over time, referring to a group that isolates itself from the broader society, thereby heightening tensions. In addition, sectarianism mostly intersects with factors such as ethnicity, minority status, religion, nationalism and economic class, which makes the situation even more complex.

Analyzing 125 studies (62 in English, 63 in Arabic), Haddad contends that the overwhelming majority (83) did not make any effort to define 'sectarianism' at all (2017, p.

366). He argues that the term “sectarianism” has evolved into a “wastebasket” since the 1920s where everyone dispose of anything that displeases them. Due to the absence of a precise definition, he emphasizes that the term has become a repository for various ideologies and disputes (Haddad, 2017, p. 382). Furthermore, burdened with inherently negative implications, the term has been exploited as a means to suppress political dissent, stigmatize individuals based on their religious identity, and delegitimize otherwise lawful forms of expression and mobilization (Haddad, 2017, p. 363). Consequently, the concept became overly politicized, extensively employed, deeply associated with negativity, and emotionally loaded with different meanings, making its effective rehabilitation difficult, according to Haddad (2017, p. 364).

The historical explanation of sectarianism is relatively straightforward, as it involves tracing the roots and development of religious divisions over time. Shortly following the demise of Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD, a dispute arose within the early Muslim community concerning the issue of succession. One faction, later identified as the Sunnis (derived from the term *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama‘a*, signifying the people of tradition and consensus of opinion), advocated for the selection of the next leader from among the close companions of Muhammad. Conversely, another faction, later known as the Shia (stemming from the term *shi‘at ‘Ali*, denoting partisans of Ali), contended that the new leader should emerge from the immediate family of the Prophet. This early contention centered on the appropriate role of a Muslim leader and the broader question of the ethical foundation of legitimate political and religious authority in Islam. Over the subsequent 1,400 years, this disagreement gave rise to the two principal branches of Islam, each characterized by overlapping yet distinct theologies and conflicting interpretations of history that trace their roots back to this schism in the seventh century (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 1).

The “sectarian wave washes over the Middle East” (Byman, 2014, p. 79) is much more complex to understand and explain. The notable upsurge in sectarianism in the Middle East (Abdo, 2017; Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019) emphasizes the need for a thorough understanding of its intricate dynamics. Divergent perspectives mark discussions about the roots of this phenomenon. Some argue that it is a deep-seated and inherent occurrence, rooted in historical animosities and long-standing religious differences. Conversely, others posit that sectarianism is a deliberate instrument employed by rulers to exert control over the masses, a tool carefully crafted for political manipulation. The subsequent section delves into a comprehensive evaluation of these contrasting viewpoints, shedding light on the complex nature of sectarian dynamics in the region.

3.2. Dimensions and Manifestations of Sectarianism

The subsequent analysis delves into the complex and multifaceted nature of sectarianism, addressing several key dimensions. These dimensions encompass the dichotomy between primordialist and instrumentalist perspectives, sectarianism as a modern concept, the recent escalation of sectarian tensions, and the contemporary manifestations of sectarianism. By thoroughly exploring these aspects, this section aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the various factors and processes propelling sectarianism in the Middle East. Such an in-depth examination will shed light on how historical, social, and political factors interplay to shape the sectarian dynamics that influence the region's conflicts and political landscape.

3.2.1. Primordial vs. instrumentalist dichotomy

This dichotomy revolves around two interconnected questions (Haddad et al., 2022, p. 183): Does sectarianism constitute an inherent and primordial characteristic of the actor, deeply embedded in historical and cultural dimensions? Alternatively, should it be regarded as a tool utilized by regimes with the strategic objective of exerting control over the masses? To put it another way, this dichotomy includes a critical examination of whether sectarian tensions are organically rooted in history and identity or strategically manipulated by those in power for political advantage.

Primordialist perspective characterizes sects as fundamental, uniform, and self-contained entities of analysis that play a pivotal role in determining significant political outcomes. In this framework, the violence associated with sectarianism, ranging from conventional warfare to terrorism, is perceived as a natural consequence stemming from the irreconcilable disparities between conflicting sects (Haddad et al., 2022, p. 184). Primordialists trace the tensions between Sunnis and Shias back to deep-seated historical animosities. The roots of sectarian conflict are seen as entrenched in a historical context, where animosity is seen as an inherent aspect of their identities, reflecting longstanding religious and doctrinal differences.

Instrumentalists, on the other hand, begin with the foundational assumption that sectarian identity is dynamic, not singularly defining, and not inherently inclined toward

conflict. Instead, they consider sectarian identity to be a contextual and complex form of group affiliation, which is consciously constructed. This sense of belonging arises from either voluntary association or external classification as a member of a specific sect within a particular domestic or geopolitical setting (Haddad et al., 2022, p. 185). This perspective posits that sectarianism arises from economic, social, and political contestation. Political elites exploit sectarian identities as a means of mass mobilization and for achieving political gains according to instrumentalist approach.

Instrumentalists posit that the “ancient hatreds” thesis faces a temporal challenge. They question how one can reconcile the notion of a presumed constancy in a culture's propensity for violence with the observed significant fluctuations in civil conflict over brief periods (Hamid, 2014). They highlight the strategic manipulation of sectarian sentiments by political actors for pragmatic objectives. This approach underscores the dynamic and utilitarian nature of sectarianism in contemporary contexts.

Sectarianism, regardless of whether it is viewed as a primordial force rooted in ancient identities or as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by historical and political contexts, is often analyzed through an ideational lens that considers it a fundamental driver of foreign policy. In such readings, sectarianism is treated as an independent and influential factor, one that shapes how actors perceive and respond to regional and international dynamics. This perspective suggests that sectarian identities and loyalties are not merely secondary considerations but are central to the decision-making processes of states and non-state actors alike. Consequently, these ideational frameworks posit that foreign policy choices are heavily informed by sectarian affiliations, which act as primary lenses through which global and regional alliances, conflicts, and strategies are understood and pursued. This approach underscores the significance of sectarianism as a potent and enduring referent that consistently influences the direction and substance of foreign policy.

The literature on sectarianism has experienced significant growth recently. Scholarly debate has progressed beyond the binary framework of primordial versus instrumental explanations. Instead, scholars have delved into an array of dynamics surrounding the sectarian phenomenon in the region. For example, Hinnebusch argues that while political identity is malleable, displaying a lack of rigidity or permanence, it cannot be haphazardly fabricated (2016, p. 122). Its credibility and widespread appeal hinge on recollections of extensive historical experiences and shared elements passed down through generations, such as language.

These elements are only shaped over an extended period. Once formed, identity transforms into an enduring social fact, becoming an integral part of the structure that limits agency.

Scholars are now exploring a myriad of dynamics associated with the modern sectarian phenomenon in the region. The challenge lies in reconciling these perspectives to form a comprehensive understanding that incorporates historical context while acknowledging the dynamic and strategic dimensions of contemporary sectarian dynamics. Ultimately, these discussions contribute to highlight the complexity of sectarianism, requiring a multifaceted approach to comprehend its various dimensions and drivers accurately. Next section focus on these approaches, considering sectarianism as a modern phenomenon.

3.2.2. Sectarianism as a Modern Phenomenon

Sectarianism is frequently depicted as a violent and illiberal expression of longstanding religious identities, which stems from a static and depthless perception of identity, assuming that affiliations such as Sunni and Shia are enduring constants ingrained in the historical fabric (Makdisi, 2017, p. 2).

Despite the historical and religious references used in various definitions of the concept, scholars focusing on contemporary periods often view sectarianism as a modern phenomenon that should not be retroactively applied to historical contexts (J. Daher, 2018). In this sense, the idea and practice of sectarianism are considered attributes of the modern era. It is plausible to argue that several current conflicts, often portrayed as age-old, such as the Israeli-Palestinian or Arab-Iranian tensions, are, in fact, outcomes of modern times (Potter, 2014, p. 4).

Positioning sectarianism as a contemporary phenomenon is useful in emphasizing that a significant portion of what is commonly labeled as sectarianism is a result of modern politics rather than ancient religious affiliations, thereby preventing the imposition of a primordial and “medieval” framework on the subject. However, this perspective can only partially unravel the diverse meanings associated with sectarianism. Criticisms of this approach include its intrinsic top-down perspective on sectarian dynamics and its neglect of belief or doctrine as a potential catalyst for sectarian relations and antagonisms (Haddad, 2020, p. 125).

3.2.2.1. Definitions and Formal Interpretations

The term sectarianism poses a multifaceted and complex challenge in its definition, even as a modern phenomenon (Haddad, 2017; Potter, 2014; Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 6). It prompts questions about whether it is a sentiment, a practice, a mindset, or a policy. Moreover, its association with identity-centric politics and intercommunal animosity adds to the ambiguity.

A sect represents a community adhering to specific religious doctrines originating from historical beliefs. Sectarianism, on the other hand, encompasses any religious or sectarian divide founded on inherited beliefs that foster animosity towards the "other" (Shams & Kaileh, 2014a). Essentially, sectarianism transforms diversity into conflict, perpetuating a cycle of division and hostility. Sectarianism today often relies on outdated narratives of ancient conflicts, divorced from their historical socioeconomic and ideological underpinnings. By essentializing these narratives, contemporary sectarian rhetoric perpetuates division and animosity, hindering efforts towards genuine understanding and reconciliation.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'sectarianism' as "adherence to the doctrines, principles, etc., of a particular religious or political group, especially in a rigid or zealous way". According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, it is a "very strong support for the religious or political group that you are a member of, which can cause problems between different groups". Oxford Reference describes 'sectarianism' as a rigid and narrow loyalty to a specific sect—whether political, ethnic, or religious—which frequently leads to conflicts with those who belong to other sects or hold differing beliefs (Dixon, 2017, p. 16).

The lack of clarity surrounding the term 'sectarianism' often leads to confusion among scholars of Middle Eastern politics regarding the precise focus of their studies and discussions. For instance, researchers examining Lebanon often interpret the term within an institutional framework, emphasizing the allocation of public offices and state access along confessional lines within the Lebanese political system. Other perspectives approach sectarianism through the lens of religious doctrinal differences and the phenomenon of "Othering." Constructivist historical viewpoints analyze sectarianism as a product of the interplay between local dynamics and the strategies employed by colonial powers. Some studies frame it as a result of authoritarian regimes manipulating sectarian identities for their own ends. Alternatively, certain

perspectives characterize sectarian identities using normatively negative terms, associating them with pre-modern or religious affiliations (Haddad et al., 2022, p. 188).

Consequently, sectarianism is a concept that strongly leans toward a religious explanation for conflict, particularly when applied to the Middle East. It implies that the root cause of violent conflict lies in an excessive and intolerant adherence to religious beliefs (Dixon, 2017, p. 16). Hardly any group openly identifies itself as “sectarian.” Nonetheless, numerous individuals or groups find themselves labeled as exhibiting sectarian behaviors. This stigmatization establishes a moral hierarchy wherein specific groups and nations consider themselves superior to others, asserting the responsibility and right to pass judgment or intervene in societies deemed “sectarian” (Makdisi, 2017, p. 5).

Some scholars have attempted to devise conceptual frameworks that capture the intricate nature of the subject under consideration. This frequently involves creating typologies of “sectarianisms”, with each tailored to a specific context.

Haddad et al. categorizes the diverse meanings of sectarianism into six general categories, encompassing a spectrum from broad to narrow interpretations: A comprehensive term covering all aspects related to sectarian dynamics, an inclusive term for all forms of intersecting— and occasionally broader intergroup— hostilities, whether doctrinal, political, or otherwise, a term encompassing various manifestations of sect-centricity, ranging from benign to banal or aggressive, the sect-based equivalent of racism, the convergence of sectarian identity and politics, whether on a domestic or international scale, and a multidimensional concept that defies confinement within a single definition, hence, at times, relying on typologies of "sectarianisms." (2022, p. 188).

Makdisi classifies sectarianism into five categories (2017, p. 4): Primarily, the term is employed to signify widespread forms of bias, historical alliances, the association of oneself with a religious or ethnic group as though it were a political entity, or the mechanisms through which social, economic and political demands are articulated in communities with diverse religions and ethnicities. Second, political scientist Arend Lijphart coined the term “consociational democracy to describe the capacity of elites to forge stable political agreements across sectarian, confessional, or ethnic divides. This concept is exemplified by historical agreements such as the 1943 National Pact in Lebanon or the multi-member executive branch in Switzerland. However, sectarianism is also used to describe the favoritism shown to one group over another, whether in hiring, renting, or job allocation. This bias can extend to the

unequal distribution of state resources. Such practices are similar to racial discrimination and profiling. Sectarianism is also used to characterize the emotions that fuel intense communal mobilization, leading to intercommunal conflicts and genocidal violence inflicted by one group upon another. These sentiments often drive large-scale, violent clashes between different communities. Lastly, sectarianism can also be viewed as a colonial tactic, where powers like Britain, France, Israel, and the United States (U.S.) have historically exploited the region's religious and ethnic diversity. These nations have routinely manipulated these divisions to further their imperial ambitions. By doing so, they have used sectarianism as a tool to maintain control and influence in the region.

According to Hinnebusch, sectarianism is a nuanced phenomenon, exhibiting variations in politicization and intensity, leading to three major variants: banal, instrumentalized, and militant sectarianisms (2016, pp. 123–124). Banal sectarianism is relatively un-politicized, functioning at the local level in multi-sectarian societies, with limited national implications, making it compatible with coexistence and broader identities like Arabism. Instrumentalized sectarianism involves the politicization of sectarian differences for instrumental purposes, as seen in Lebanon. It has little doctrinal implications and is inherently incompatible with coexistence, serving as a tool in intra-state competition for resources. Identity, constructed to reflect interests, becomes an ideational interest defended during insecurity, facilitating defensive collective action, exemplified by minorities in the Syrian civil war.

Militant sectarianism, prominent in the Muslim world through jihadism, holds an intense normative content, seeking to impose a universal, often fundamentalist, interpretation of religion in the public sphere. It demonizes non-compliers as infidels, often embracing martyrdom. The denunciation of others as unbelievers, subjected to persecution, distinguishes militant sectarianism from instrumental pursuits, as a public religious vision is less amenable to compromise.

Despite the earnest endeavors of numerous scholars, the definition of sectarianism persists in being as flexible as notions of good and bad, as subjective as perceptions of beauty, and as elusive as the concept of evil (Haddad, 2017, p. 367).

Sectarianism as a concept is frequently equated, often implicitly, with hate speech, discrimination, and violence (Malmvig, 2021, p. 5). The detrimental implications attached to the term 'sectarianism' have provided states and politically conservative social factions with a tool to delegitimize forms of political activism that would otherwise be considered legitimate.

By invoking the label, these entities taint and dismiss certain political activities, capitalizing on the negative connotations associated with sectarianism (Haddad, 2017). This maneuver allows them to discredit dissent or opposition movements, often stifling voices that might challenge existing power structures or advocate for social change. Consequently, the term's negative baggage has become a potent instrument for undermining genuine political engagement.

Sectarianism is often perceived primarily as a challenge to notions of state-centered or national cohesion. Alternatively, it is depicted as an external ideology manipulated either from above, within the state apparatus, or from outside influences (Malmvig, 2021, p. 4). This is sometimes reflected in scholarly literature, particularly in the Arab world, where the mere investigation of sectarianism can be construed as indicative of a 'sectarian bias.' (Haddad, 2011, p. 31).

In an effort to mitigate potential biases and avoid perpetuating the negative framing of 'sectarianism,' this study adopts a more neutral definition. Rather than adhering to the conventional understanding laden with unfavorable connotations of this “essentially contested concept” (Haddad et al., 2022, p. 188), this research opts to define sectarianism as "politics organized along sectarian lines" (L. Khatib, 2019, p. 3). This definition seeks to disentangle the term from its pejorative associations, emphasizing a more nuanced examination of political activities organized around sectarian identities without automatically casting them in a negative light. By adopting this approach, the study aims to foster a clearer understanding of the political dynamics at play within the realm of sectarianism, free from undue stigmatization.

Describing sectarianism as 'politics organized along sectarian lines' goes beyond a simplistic acknowledgment of the existence of multiple sects within a state. This definition places a deliberate emphasis on the active engagement of political processes shaped by sectarian affiliations. It suggests that sectarianism manifests not merely as a passive coexistence of various religious groups but as an organized and strategic alignment of political activities with these sectarian identities. By adopting this perspective, the definition underscores the dynamic nature of sectarianism, highlighting its role in shaping the political landscape rather than being a static characteristic of the social fabric.

Within this conceptualization, primordial and sectarian identities are regarded as intervening variables. This implies that these identities are not inherent or fixed characteristics but rather dynamic and contingent factors that come into play within specific situations. They are fluid, adapting to changing circumstances, and thus should not be treated as explanatory

variables for state behavior. This approach recognizes the complexity of sectarian dynamics, acknowledging that a range of factors beyond fixed, primordial identities influences political actions organized along sectarian lines.

This definition goes beyond a simplistic acknowledgment of the presence of diverse sects within a state. Instead, it underscores the dynamic interplay between political actions and sectarian affiliations, highlighting how these organizations strategically align their political endeavors with sectarian identities. By adopting this definition, one can better analyze and understand how the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah are intricately woven into the political landscape shaped by sectarian considerations. It allows for a nuanced examination of the role played by sectarian dynamics in guiding the political choices and strategies of these organizations on the international stage.

3.2.3. The Recent Surge of Sectarianism

Conflicts among religious groups in the Middle East have been a recurring phenomenon, evident even in the recent past. Historical events such as Ibn Saud's conquest of the Kingdom of the Hijaz in the 1920s, the 15-year civil war in Lebanon starting in 1975, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution all contributed to sectarian violence (Byman, 2014, p. 83). However, these differences have often played a minimal role, and in recent decades, periods of tolerance have outweighed instances of violence.

The recent rise in sectarian violence is not primarily due to a renewed focus on religious doctrine. Instead, it largely stems from the instability and weakness of governments in the Middle East. The strength of a government inversely correlates with the prevalence of sectarianism; stronger governments leave less room for sectarian tensions (Byman, 2014, p. 83). Weak governments of the region resulted in a period encouraging expression of self-identity among these communities. For example, the fall of Saddam Hussein led to Iraqi Shi'ites airing long-suppressed grievances, revealing atrocities such as discoveries of mass graves and expressing prominent Shia identity symbols. A similar phenomenon occurred during the Arab Spring, when newly liberated groups began to assert their sectarian identities.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution sparked a temporary debate regarding the level of activism or quietism within different strands of Islam. However, in the 1990s, the predominant focus

shifted towards the broader inquiries into how Islam or Muslims, in general, intersected with issues such as politics, democratization, secularism, violence, and more. With the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War and the ensuing Iraqi civil war, the question of Shia/Sunni Islam garnered renewed attention, evident in concerns about the emergence of a “Shiite Crescent.” Although the issue of sectarianism took a backseat in the early stages of the Arab uprisings, it resurfaced prominently, particularly in the context of developments in Syria, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia (Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019, pp. 4–5; Wehrey, 2017, pp. 3–4).

The “sectarian narrative” has gained prominence as an explanation for conflicts in the Middle East, particularly with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011. This narrative attributes the descent into civil war in post-invasion Iraq to the age-old conflict over the Prophet's succession between Sunni and Shia Muslims, dating back to the seventh century (Dixon, 2017, p. 11).

The region's history has seen periods of coexistence, where sectarian differences played a limited role in shaping political landscapes. However, the recent upsurge in sectarian violence reflects a shift in dynamics, with religious identities becoming more salient in the political arena. The weakening of central authorities, exemplified by Saddam Hussein's fall and the aftermath of the Arab Spring, created opportunities for communities to assert their sectarian identities, which were often suppressed or downplayed in more stable times.

The aftermath of Saddam's regime witnessed the emergence of grievances, both historical and contemporary, among Iraqi Shi'ites. Mass graves containing evidence of past atrocities were unearthed, bringing to light the suppressed trauma of the community. The promotion of visible symbols of Shia identity became a means of asserting presence and demanding acknowledgment. Similarly, the Arab Spring provided a platform for communities in the Middle East to express their long-suppressed identities in the wake of political changes. The liberation of communities that had been under repressive regimes allowed for the resurgence of sectarian affiliations.

The correlation between governmental strength and sectarian tensions is evident in the inverse relationship described by Byman. As governments assert control and maintain stability, sectarian identities often take a backseat to broader national or political affiliations. However, when governments falter or collapse, as seen in post-invasion Iraq and during the Arab Spring, the vacuum created allows for the resurgence of sectarian identities. This resurgence is not necessarily a result of deep-seated ancient hatreds but rather an outcome of political and power

vacuums that enable communities to assert their identities in the absence of strong central authority.

The “sectarian narrative” has gained traction as a lens through which to interpret the conflicts in the Middle East. The historical Sunni-Shia divide, rooted in the early years of Islam, is often cited as a fundamental source of tension. However, this narrative oversimplifies the complex dynamics at play. It neglects the role of political, economic, and social factors in fueling conflicts and reinforces a deterministic view that attributes the region's turmoil solely to ancient religious disputes.

In conclusion, the recent surge in sectarian violence in the Middle East is not solely a result of age-old religious animosities but is intricately linked to the weakening of governments and the subsequent resurgence of suppressed identities. While historical Sunni-Shia tensions exist, they are manipulated and exacerbated in times of political instability. Understanding the nuanced interplay of political and religious dynamics is crucial for devising effective strategies to address the root causes of conflicts in the region.

3.2.4. Manifestations of Sectarianism

In the contemporary discourse surrounding sectarianism in the Middle East, the nature of the debate has shifted significantly from the pre-2011 discussions on Shia/Sunni sectarianisms. The central controversy today is not whether sectarianism is a relevant factor in regional politics, as even former skeptics now concede that 'sectarianism is a real factor in politics' (Gause III, 2013). The focus has evolved towards a more intricate exploration, delving into questions about the essence of sectarianism, its manifestations, underlying causes, and its implications for the 'new Middle East' (Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 6).

Addressing the 'what' question proves to be a challenging endeavor, as defining sectarianism is acknowledged notoriously difficult and fraught with considerable ambiguity. Scholars propose alternative terms such as 'confessionalism' or 'communalism' to capture the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon (Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 6). This nuanced approach recognizes the complexity inherent in understanding sectarianism, moving beyond simplistic binaries to embrace the intricate layers of its definition.

Turning to the 'where' question, scholars generally agree that the prominence of sectarianism exhibits regional variations. It is most pronounced in contemporary 'sectarian hot spots' such as Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and to a certain extent, Yemen. Moreover, countries with mixed populations of both Shia and Sunni Muslims, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Lebanon, experience heightened sectarian tensions (Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 6). This regional differentiation emphasizes the dynamic nature of sectarianism, indicating that its salience is influenced by a myriad of factors specific to each context. The evolving discourse aims to unravel the intricate dynamics of sectarianism, providing a comprehensive understanding that extends beyond broad generalizations, recognizing the nuanced regional variations that shape its manifestation.

The forthcoming section of the chapter delves into the intricate variations that shape the expression of sectarianism, through an analysis of Hamas and Hezbollah as sectarian actors, along with an exploration of the Syrian civil war as a sectarian conflict. The goal is to unravel the complex dynamics that contribute to the manifestation of sectarian tensions in these specific contexts, providing a nuanced understanding of the role played by these actors and events within the broader framework of sectarianism.

3.3. Hamas and Hezbollah as Sectarian Actors

This section seeks to explore and argue that both Hamas and Hezbollah, despite their diverse historical backgrounds and regional influences, can be characterized as sectarian actors. By examining their rhetoric, actions, and organizational structures, this section aims to shed light on the sectarian underpinnings that shape their identities and fuel their agendas. A thorough comprehension of the sectarian nature of these groups is imperative for elucidating and analyzing both the sectarian and material dimensions of their foreign policies.

Hamas and Hezbollah both trace their roots to Islamist ideologies, embracing political Islam as a fundamental component of their organizational identity. For Hamas, its origins lie within the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist movement with a global footprint. The group's charter explicitly defines its mission in religious terms, emphasizing the role of Islam as a guiding force for its resistance against the perceived occupation of Palestinian lands. The influence of Islamism within Hamas is evident in its commitment to establishing an Islamic state in historic Palestine, reflecting a religiously motivated vision for governance.

Similarly, Hezbollah, with its roots in the Lebanese Shia community, is deeply intertwined with the principles of political Islam. The group emerged as a response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and has since positioned itself as a defender of the Shia population. Its leaders openly embrace the concept of Wilayat al-Faqih, the governance of the Islamic jurist, as a cornerstone of their ideology. This religious motivation is integral to Hezbollah's resistance against perceived external threats and its vision for an Islamic state, displaying the intertwining of political and religious objectives.

While the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is predominantly framed in the context of resistance against a Jewish state, the sectarian identities of Hamas and Hezbollah add nuanced layers to their motivations and alliances. Hamas operates in a predominantly Sunni Palestinian territory, yet its affiliations with Sunni movements are complex. Historically, tensions have arisen between Hamas and other Palestinian organizations like Fatah, DFLP (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine), or PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), reflecting not only political differences but also underlying sectarian dynamics.

Hezbollah, on the other hand, is unabashedly Shia, drawing its support primarily from the Lebanese Shia community. The group's close ties with Iran, a Shia-majority nation, further solidify its sectarian identity. While both groups may frame their struggles in nationalist terms, their actions and alliances often reflect the Shia-Sunni dynamics that characterize the broader Middle East.

In essence, the religious motivation of Hamas and Hezbollah is deeply rooted in political Islam, while their sectarian identities, though not always immediately salient, manifest in complex ways, influencing their alliances, rivalries, and overall geopolitical positioning. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the multifaceted nature of the conflicts in which they are engaged.

3.3.1. Sectarian Dimensions of Hamas' Identity

Officially, Hamas does not define itself as a sectarian organization. When the political principles of Hamas as mentioned in its internal documents are examined, the following points regarding its political principles come to the fore (Hamas, 1988, 2017; Hroub, 2002, p. 154; Meshaal, 2012):

- Unity of the people: Hamas declares that it believes in the unity of its people, both domestically and internationally, regardless of religious (Muslim and Christian), political, and intellectual differences. The movement is committed to the unity of its constituents.
- Positive relations with all Arab and Islamic parties: Hamas aims to establish positive relations with various Arab and Islamic entities, regardless of their ideological or political stances, sects, or racial backgrounds.
- Non-interference in internal affairs: Hamas refrains from interfering in the internal affairs of Arab or Islamic states, and it rejects external involvement in its own policies, positions, and internal matters.
- Non-aggression towards Arab or Islamic parties: Hamas is not in a state of war with any Arab or Islamic party, maintaining a policy of not attacking any such entities.
- Anti-Zionist resistance: Hamas positions itself as an Islamic national movement that collaborates with its people, national Islamic forces, and groups worldwide to resist Zionist occupation. The goals include opposing the Zionist occupation, liberating territories, including Jerusalem, and securing the return of refugees and displaced individuals.
- Focus on Palestine as the struggle arena (limited scope of resistance): Palestine is considered the primary arena for the struggle against the enemy, and Hamas avoids extending the conflict beyond the occupied Palestinian territory. However, it does not condemn acts of jihad against the Zionist occupation outside Palestine.
- Establishing relations for resistance support: Hamas communicates that its purpose in establishing relations with any party is to garner support for its resistance against Israeli occupation, emphasizing that these relations are not directed against any specific regime or organization.
- Avoidance of alliances at others' expense: Hamas commits not to join alliances targeting other groups and ensures that its relations with Arab or Islamic parties do not come at the expense of others.
- Non-discrimination based on religion or ethnicity: Hamas proclaims that it does not have issues with anyone based on religious, racial, sectarian, or ideological grounds. The primary concern is with occupiers and aggressors. The movement asserts its right, in accordance with divine laws and international law, to resist through various means, including armed resistance.

In summary, Hamas frames its actions and objectives in the context of national liberation and resistance against occupation, emphasizing its non-sectarian stance. The resistance is claimed to be specifically directed against those perceived as aggressors and occupiers, not against individuals based on their religious or ethnic identities. It is important to acknowledge that Hamas has made efforts to distance itself from sectarianism, aiming to build a broader support base, emphasize national unity, and enhance its international standing. These efforts are driven by several factors.

First, Hamas perceives that avoiding sectarianism may enable it to garner broader support on the international stage. By presenting itself as a non-sectarian organization, Hamas seeks to facilitate collaboration with both Muslim and non-Muslim countries, potentially strengthening its diplomatic and political influence.

Second, Palestinian society encompasses various sectarian, ethnic, and religious groups. Hamas recognizes the importance of embracing this diversity and seeks to appeal to a wide range of constituents by positioning itself as a non-sectarian entity. This approach allows Hamas to maintain support across diverse segments of the Palestinian population.

Third, Hamas identifies Israel as its primary adversary, viewing it as an occupying force responsible for the oppression of the Palestinian people. Rather than emphasizing sectarian differences, Hamas prioritizes conveying a message of unified resistance against the Israeli occupation. By focusing on common enemy identification, Hamas aims to mobilize support and solidarity among Palestinians, irrespective of sectarian affiliations.

These factors underscore Hamas' strategic calculus in labeling its non-sectarian identity, emphasizing broader objectives of resistance, national liberation, and international engagement. On the other hand, there remains a discourse regarding the sectarian dimensions of the organization. While Hamas emphasizes its resistance against perceived aggressors and occupiers rather than targeting individuals based on their religious or ethnic identities, various arguments suggest a sectarian undertone to its ideology and actions. These arguments underline historical context, ideological roots, regional affiliations, and operational dynamics of Hamas, exploring how these factors intersect with sectarian identity and influence the organization's behavior and objectives.

Above all, Hamas is an "Islamic movement", which is clearly evident in the covenant it declared eight months after its establishment (Hamas, 1988). The first article of the covenant, filled with verses and hadiths, explicitly defines Hamas' program as "Islam." Islamic thought

underpins every aspect of Hamas' resistance strategy, encompassing political, charitable, and armed actions. However, Islamic thought extends beyond mere resistance; it functions as a lens through which many Palestinians understand, interpret, and navigate their everyday lives. Consequently, the Islamism advocated by Hamas and the visible religious devotion of its leaders strongly resonate with a significant portion of the Palestinian population. This deep connection to Islamic principles ensures that Hamas' ideology and actions are aligned with the cultural and religious values of many Palestinians, enhancing its influence and support among the people (Dunning, 2015, p. 18).

The Islamism of Hamas is characterized by its fluid, dynamic, and evolutionary nature. Hamas functions as a *tajdid* (renewalist) organization, dedicated to "restoring society from within through education, and merging Western scientific and technological advancements with traditional Islamic values and principles" (Dunning, 2015, p. 19). This blend of modernity and tradition positions Hamas as a distinctly modernist entity despite its Islamic foundations. This approach, termed "Islamicized modernity," reflects Hamas' advocacy for democracy and a free-market economy, provided that fair distribution of resources is maintained.

The name "Hamas" derives from the Arabic acronym "*Harakat al-Muqawamma al-Islamiyya*," translating to the Islamic Resistance Movement in English. Additionally, the word "Hamas" itself holds religious connotations, signifying "zeal" or "courage" in Arabic, often associated with the pursuit of specific religious or political objectives (Abu-Amr, 1993, p. 11). This religious dimension of the name underscores the organization's ideological underpinnings and its commitment to Islamic principles in its resistance efforts.

From its establishment in 1987, Hamas has symbolized Islamic resistance in the context of the Palestinian issue. The organization views Palestinian resistance against Israel as a religious duty and has consistently advocated for the retention of occupied territories. Its ideological foundation traces back to the Muslim Brotherhood movement, known as *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, which advocated for Islamic principles and social justice across the Arab world. It is important to underline that the Muslim Brotherhood promotes Islam as the solution to political and social challenges, encapsulated in its slogan 'Islam is the solution' (Koss, 2018b).

Hamas' ideology is deeply intertwined with Sunni Islamism, as reflected in its emphasis on nationalism and Islamism as the two main pillars of its ideology. Religion plays a central role in shaping Hamas' rhetoric and actions, serving as both a justification for its goals and a source of legitimacy for the organization. Similar to other militant religious political

movements, Hamas invokes religion to define its identity, regulate internal behavior, and legitimize its resistance against perceived adversaries, particularly Israel. Hamas intertwines the legacy of the Muslim Brotherhood with the distinct Palestinian struggle, forging a unique identity deeply ingrained in religious and nationalist sentiments (Sarı, 2020, p. 147). As time has passed, Hamas has emerged as a key and influential actor in shaping the discourse surrounding the Palestinian question.

Hamas' Sunni background is evident from its foundational documents, ideological influences, and religious affiliations (Gleis & Berti, 2012, pp. 134–137). Hamas disseminated a Charter on August 18, 1988, a document that “manifests its form, reveals its identity, states its position, clarifies its expectations, discusses its hopes, and calls for aid, support, and members.” (Maqdsi, 1993, p. 123). The Charter consists of thirty-six articles distributed among five chapters, which integrate both nationalist and Islamic tenets. Hamas characterizes itself in the initial chapters of its charter as an Islamic resistance movement, tracing its origins to the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood.

Hamas' charter prioritize the role of Islam in shaping Palestinian identity and resistance against perceived injustices, particularly the Israeli occupation. This emphasis on Islam aligns with Sunni Islamic doctrine, which emphasizes the unity of Muslims and the establishment of an Islamic state governed by Sharia law. Within Sunni Islam, there is a tradition of solidarity among believers, stressing collective action in upholding religious principles and resisting oppression. Hamas' adherence to Sunni doctrine not only reflects its ideological roots but also aims to mobilize support among Palestinians who identify Islam as a fundamental aspect of their identity. Moreover, by framing its struggle within an Islamic framework, Hamas seeks to appeal to broader Muslim sentiment, both regionally and globally, thus garnering international support. This integration of religion into its resistance narrative strengthens Hamas' legitimacy and underscores its commitment to foundational principles amidst ongoing geopolitical challenges.

The second article of the Charter states that its interpretation of Islam mirrors that of the Muslim Brotherhood (Sarı, 2020, p. 148). This alignment underscores Hamas' ideological roots in the teachings and principles espoused by the Brotherhood. It asserts its identity as inclusive of all Muslims dedicated to Allah, emphasizing their obligations to themselves, their faith, and their homeland, welcoming those who “embrace its doctrines and ideology, implement its program, safeguard its secrets, and aspire to join its ranks” (Maqdsi, 1993, p. 123).

Hamas' origins within the Muslim Brotherhood provide a strong foundation for understanding its sectarian characteristics. The Muslim Brotherhood, "the soulmate of Hamas" (Danin, 2012) was one of the most influential Sunni Islamist movements globally, advocating for the establishment of Islamic governance based on Sunni principles. Hamas emerged as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, inheriting many of its ideological tenets and organizational structures.

Additionally, Hamas' ideological stance on martyrdom, which it considers honorable and desirable, also aligns with Sunni Islamic tradition (Gleis & Berti, 2012, p. 136). Within Hamas' ideology, the concept of martyrdom holds great significance. It draws upon Islamic teachings regarding martyrdom and its enduring impact on the community, even beyond death. This emphasis on martyrdom is deeply rooted in Sunni beliefs and serves to distinguish Hamas as a Sunni Islamist organization, characterized by its militant dimension (Litvak, 2010, p. 716).

Martyrdom is also important, even more important in Shia religious traditions. However, as argued in a comparative study on martyrdom in Sunni and Shia traditions, while the number of Shia suicide bombings started to decline in the 1980s, Sunni groups started to "rewrite their history and reinvent 'martyrdom' to suit their own contemporary political goals" during the same years (Kafeyan, 2010, p. v). Martyrdom operations were predominantly a Shiite phenomenon, historically deployed in defense of their homeland over centuries of tradition within Shia Islam. However, a notable reversal occurred in recent history, where Sunni groups significantly increased the frequency and widened the scope of suicide attacks. This propaganda was crucial during the Palestinian Intifadas, serving to sustain a cultural framework that facilitated recruitment for future bombings. The heightened prevalence and symbolic manipulation of martyrdom by Sunni groups in recent years serve as compelling indicators of the concept's strategic deployment for political and sectarian purposes.

Hamas' historical trajectory and ideological underpinnings further underscore its sectarian orientation. The founding leaders of Hamas, such as Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, emerged from within the Sunni Islamist movement, demonstrating a clear alignment with Sunni principles and values. Their advocacy for the incorporation of Sunni Islamist ideals into the Palestinian resistance movement solidified Hamas' sectarian identity, positioning it as a proponent of Sunni Islam within the broader landscape of Palestinian politics. Additionally, Hamas' extensive network of educational and social welfare institutions, integral to its grassroots support base, actively promote Sunni Islamic teachings and norms. This

pervasive influence of Sunni ideology within Hamas' organizational structure and community outreach efforts reaffirms its sectarian character and underscores its adherence to Sunni principles in both ideology and practice.

Ultimately, Hamas' sectarian identity has intricately shaped its historical trajectory and ideological framework. Its affiliation with the Sunni Islamist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, serves as a cornerstone of its identity. The principles outlined in its founding charter reflect a commitment to Sunni Islamic ideology, emphasizing the role of Islam in Palestinian resistance against perceived injustices, particularly the Israeli occupation. Additionally, prominent figures within Hamas leadership, such as Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, emerged from the Sunni Islamist movement, further solidifying its sectarian orientation.

Beyond its ideological foundations, Hamas' organizational structure and grassroots networks are imbued with Sunni Islamic teachings and values (Cragin, 2009, p. 576). Educational and social welfare initiatives, integral to its support base, disseminate Sunni Islamic principles and foster a sense of sectarian identity among its constituents. This sectarian dimension not only shapes Hamas' internal dynamics but also influences its external behavior and interactions within the broader Middle Eastern context.

However, it is important to note that while Hamas is commonly associated with Sunni Islam due to its ideological roots and historical context, the organization itself does not officially categorize itself as Sunni. Rather, it embodies a Sunni identity, which is deeply rooted in the concept of the *umma*, or the global Muslim community (Lawson, 2010, p. 17). The Sunni tradition views the *umma* as a unified political entity transcending geographical and cultural boundaries, encompassing all Muslims regardless of their sectarian affiliations or internal differences. This Sunni identity is integral to Hamas' ideological framework and organizational ethos. It emphasizes the notion of solidarity among Muslims and the collective responsibility to defend fellow believers, particularly in the face of perceived injustices and oppression. Hamas' adherence to Sunni principles shapes its worldview and informs its approach to various political and social issues, including the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation.

Furthermore, while Hamas operates within the broader context of Sunni Islam, it also recognizes the diversity within the Muslim community and the existence of different interpretations and practices (Lawson, 2010, pp. 17–18). As such, Hamas' Sunni identity does not preclude cooperation or engagement with non-Sunni groups or individuals. Instead, it serves

as a unifying force that transcends sectarian divisions and promotes solidarity among Muslims in pursuit of common goals.

In summary, while Hamas does not explicitly label itself as a Sunni organization, its Sunni identity is deeply ingrained in its ideological foundation and organizational identity. Understanding this Sunni identity is crucial for comprehending Hamas' motivations, strategies, and interactions within the broader Islamic context.

It is important to note that the evolution of Hamas' foundational documents, particularly the transition from the 1988 Charter to the 2017 political declaration, highlights a potential departure from strict sectarian language towards a more moderated stance, whether with a rhetorical purpose or not. The 1988 Charter, serving as the movement's defining document, emphasized Hamas' ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and espoused a comprehensive ideological framework rooted in Sunni Islamist principles. However, the 2017 document represents a notable departure from this sectarian framework, focusing primarily on defining Hamas as a "liberation movement" and adopting a more pragmatic and inclusive language. This shift suggests a move away from explicit sectarian affiliations towards broader narratives of liberation and resistance, reflecting a growing recognition within Hamas of the need to adapt to changing political realities and engage in approaches that are more pragmatic to achieve its objectives.

Furthermore, the language used in the 2017 document reflects a departure from sectarian rhetoric towards a more inclusive approach, aligning with broader trends within Hamas. By emphasizing themes of liberation and resistance over sectarian affiliations, Hamas may seek to broaden its appeal and foster alliances beyond sectarian lines. While the movement's core principles remain rooted in Sunni Islamist ideology, the shift towards a more pragmatic and inclusive approach in the 2017 document suggests a potential decrease in Hamas' sectarian nature, facilitating broader engagement with other political actors and potentially contributing to a reduction in sectarian tensions within the region.

By delving into the movement's roots in the Muslim Brotherhood, its articulation of Sunni Islamist principles and its engagement with regional dynamics shaped by Sunni Islamism, its sectarian identity can be elucidated. Additionally, an analysis of Hamas' support base, operational tactics, and ideological evolution provides further insight into its Sunni Islamist orientation.

The subsequent section explains each of these facets, drawing on scholarly research, primary sources, and empirical evidence to construct a comprehensive portrait of Hamas as a Sunni Islamist organization. This examination aims to shed light on the sectarian dimension of Hamas' ideological framework, its historical evolution, and its strategic calculus within the volatile landscape of the Middle East.

3.3.1.1. Historical Context

Hamas originated in the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank, where the majority of the population adheres to Sunni Islam. The cultural, social, and religious fabric of these territories is predominantly Sunni, providing the context in which Hamas operates. Its rhetoric, symbols, and appeals to Islamic unity resonate primarily with Sunni Muslims. This contextualizes Hamas within the broader Sunni Muslim community.

The Palestinian national identity is deeply intertwined with Islam, and Sunni Islam is the predominant religious orientation among Palestinians. This context influences Hamas' rhetoric and appeals to Islamic unity and solidarity, resonating with the Sunni Muslim population. Hamas often employs Islamic symbolism and imagery in its messaging and activities, drawing on symbols and references that are familiar and meaningful to Sunni Muslims. For example, Hamas' flag prominently features the Shahada (Islamic declaration of faith), a symbol widely associated with Sunni Islam.

Hamas regularly utilizes mosques and religious gatherings, such as Friday sermons and religious festivals, to disseminate its message and mobilize support. These religious spaces serve as important platforms for engaging with Sunni Muslim communities and reinforcing Hamas' Islamic identity. In addition, the organization has established extensive support networks within Sunni Muslim communities, including social, charitable, and educational organizations. These networks often operate within the framework of Sunni Islamic principles, reflecting the religious orientation of the communities they serve.

3.3.1.2. Ideological Roots

The Muslim Brotherhood has significantly influenced Hamas since its formation. The founders of Hamas, such as Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, drew inspiration from the principles and teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood. Their ideologies and strategies reflect a deep connection to the Brotherhood's philosophy. They sought to apply these principles in the context of the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation. The Hamas Charter, Article 2, explicitly stated that "The Islamic Resistance Movement was the branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine." (Mousa, 2022, p. 5).

According to the eighth article of the covenant (Hamas, 1988), Hamas' goal is "Allah, its model is the Prophet, its constitution is the Quran. Its path is jihad, and its highest ideal is to die for the sake of Allah," reflecting a well-known Islamist-Muslim Brotherhood formulation in the Arab world.

The concept of nationalism, emphasized in the majority of Hamas' speeches and documents, is explicitly outlined in the covenant as an integral part of the religious creed (Article 12). This signifies that, according to the covenant, nationalism is intertwined with and considered a fundamental aspect of the broader religious beliefs espoused by Hamas.

Hamas' assertion that the question of Palestine's liberation is connected to three circles—the Palestinian, Arab, and Islamic—carries significance in understanding its identity (Article 14). By emphasizing the importance of the Arab circle, Hamas implicitly distinguishes itself within the broader Islamic circle, suggesting a differentiation from Shiite influence. This differentiation is crucial in highlighting Hamas as essentially a Sunni organization rather than a general Islamic one. The deliberate delineation between Sunni and Shiite influences, with an emphasis on the Arab circle, suggests that Hamas aligns itself more closely with Sunni Islam in its approach to the liberation of Palestine. The organization's historical ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist movement, further reinforce this Sunni identity. In essence, Hamas' framing of the liberation of Palestine within the Palestinian, Arab, and Islamic circles, with specific emphasis on the Arab circle, supports the argument that Hamas is fundamentally a Sunni organization, grounded in the Sunni interpretation of Islam, rather than being a more broadly Islamic organization.

The emphasis on following Islamic orientation in education, particularly the comprehensive study of the Quran and the Prophet's Sunna (his sayings and doings), within

Article 16 of the Hamas Covenant, provides a strong argument supporting the view that Hamas is fundamentally a Sunni organization. Sunni Islam prioritizes Sunna as a source of guidance alongside the Quran. The Sunna, which includes the teachings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, is a central component of Sunni jurisprudence and theology. By explicitly underlining the study of Sunna in the context of educating Islamic generations, Hamas aligns itself with Sunni principles and traditions. Therefore, the Sunna emphasis in Article 16 serves as compelling evidence reinforcing the Sunni character of Hamas as an organization deeply rooted in Sunni Islamic teachings and practices.

Article 27 of the Covenant explicitly opposes secularism and asserts that secular ideologies are in complete contradiction to religious beliefs. The rejection of secularism and the explicit preference for an Islamic nature in Palestine, as articulated in the covenant, strongly align with Sunni Islamist principles. The article states that the Islamic nature of Palestine is considered part of the religion, hinting at a specific religious identity. Moreover, the rejection of exchanging the idea of an Islamic Palestine for a secular one underscores the organization's commitment to an Islamist ideology. The reference to Islam in the context of rejecting secularism implies a Sunni interpretation, as the opposition to secularism is a characteristic feature of many Sunni Islamist groups. Therefore, the anti-secularist and Islamist character of Hamas, as articulated in Article 27, provides substantial evidence supporting the argument that Hamas is fundamentally a Sunni organization.

The emphasis on rejecting secularism in Article 27 of the Hamas Covenant is not only a declaration of the organization's ideological stance but also serves to express its position towards other Palestinian organizations such as Fatah, DFLP or PFLP. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, various Palestinian organizations have historically held different political and ideological positions. The emphasis on an Islamic nature in Palestine, as opposed to secularism, can be seen as a way for Hamas to distinguish itself from these other groups and assert its own ideological stance, rooted in Sunni Islamist principles. By rejecting secularism, Hamas is implicitly criticizing and distancing itself from other Palestinian groups that may have more secular or non-religious orientations.

The emphasis on Islam in Hamas' founding text should indeed be interpreted in close relation to its understanding of Islam. Given the strong sectarian emphasis of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas' interpretation of Islam aligns with a Sunni Islamist approach. The frequent emphasis on concepts such as sharia, jihad, and Sunnah in the organization's rhetoric

provides substantial evidence supporting the argument that Hamas is fundamentally a Sunni organization. These core Islamic principles are integral to Sunni Islam, and their consistent emphasis in Hamas' discourse reinforces its Sunni Islamist identity.

In a significant shift, Hamas distanced itself from the Muslim Brotherhood movement in 2017. Outlining new general principles of Hamas, the new charter signaled its departure from its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood (Adwan, 2019; Hamas, 2017). Despite this official disassociation in 2017, it is important to recognize that Hamas' ideological roots are deeply intertwined with those of the Muslim Brotherhood. This historical connection remains significant, particularly when examining the organization's trajectory leading up to 2017. While Hamas may have formally severed ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, the examination conducted in this study encompasses the period preceding this change, allowing for an exploration of the ideological, historical, and operational dynamics that characterized Hamas' relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood up to that point.

In addition, Hamas' charter explicitly draws from Islamist ideology, emphasizing the role of Islam in the Palestinian struggle. The charter cites Quranic verses and Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) to justify its objectives, which reflects a clear adherence to Sunni Islamist principles.

Hamas' vision for governance in Palestine aligns with Sunni Islamist ideals of Islamic governance. While Hamas has participated in Palestinian elections and engaged in political processes, it maintains a commitment to implementing Islamic law in areas under its control. This commitment to Islamic governance echoes the principles advocated by Sunni Islamist movements.

3.3.1.3. Support Base

Hamas garners significant support from Sunni communities, both within the Palestinian territories and abroad. Its popularity among Sunni Muslims stems from its perceived commitment to Islamic principles and its resistance against perceived injustices, particularly Israeli occupation. Hamas also collaborates with Sunni Islamist groups and organizations on regional initiatives and joint projects. For example, Hamas has worked closely with other Palestinian factions, such as Islamic Jihad, which also adhere to Sunni Islamist principles.

Additionally, Hamas has participated in broader coalitions and alliances with Sunni actors on issues of common concern, such as opposition to Israel or support for Palestinian rights.

Within the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank, Hamas enjoys significant support from the Sunni Islamist population. This support is evident in Hamas' electoral victories in the elections of 2006, where it won a majority of seats, as well as in its ongoing popularity among Islamist Palestinians despite challenges and criticisms. It has established a powerful network of welfare programs and social services that cater to the needs of Sunni communities in Gaza and the West Bank. These programs include healthcare, education, financial assistance, and infrastructure development, which have garnered support and loyalty from local Sunni populations.

Hamas frequently utilizes religious appeals and symbolism in its messaging and activities, resonating with Sunni Muslims' religious sensibilities. Its use of Islamic rhetoric, symbols, and religious imagery reinforces its identity as a Sunni Islamist organization and enhances its appeal among Sunni populations.

Despite international controversy and criticism, Hamas enjoys significant sympathy and support among Sunni Muslim populations worldwide. This support is evident in public demonstrations, social media campaigns, and grassroots movements that express solidarity with Hamas and its objectives.

3.3.1.4. Operational Strategies

Hamas' operational strategies, including its use of religious symbolism, appeals to Islamic unity, and propagation of Islamic governance, are consistent with Sunni Islamist methodologies. These tactics resonate with Sunni audiences and contribute to Hamas' identity as a Sunni Islamist organization. Hamas frequently employs Islamic rhetoric, symbols, and imagery in its communications and activities. For instance, its official flag prominently features the *Shahada* (Islamic declaration of faith), and its messaging often incorporates Quranic verses and references to Islamic principles. These practices resonate with Sunni Islamist traditions and reflect Hamas' commitment to Islamic symbolism.

Hamas emphasizes the importance of Islamic unity and solidarity in its discourse. It portrays the Palestinian struggle as part of a broader Islamic cause, appealing to shared religious

identity and values among Sunni Muslims. By framing its objectives within an Islamic framework, Hamas seeks to mobilize support from Sunni communities both domestically and internationally.

Hamas justifies its armed resistance against Israeli occupation and aggression using religious narratives and principles. It portrays armed struggle as a religious duty (*jihad*) and frames its resistance efforts within the context of Islamic teachings on self-defense and liberation. This religious justification for armed resistance resonates with Sunni Islamist interpretations of jihad and resistance.

In summary, the Sunni identity of Hamas is reflected in its political agenda, social programs, and rhetoric. The group emphasizes the importance of Islamic law (Sharia) and seeks to establish an Islamic state in historic Palestine. This commitment to Sunni Islam not only informs Hamas' ideological foundation but also helps to mobilize support among the predominantly Sunni Palestinian population. While its roots are in Islamic principles, its strategic adaptations over time, such as accepting interim solutions (Seurat, 2018, p. 107) and avoiding explicit sectarian rhetoric, indicate a more complex and nuanced self-perception that goes beyond a narrowly sectarian classification.

In light of above discussion, it becomes evident that Hamas, despite its Sunni identity, strategically avoided emphasizing sectarian differences due to its regional alliances and pragmatic considerations. Both Hezbollah and Iran recognized Hamas' crucial role in the Palestinian cause and provided substantial support, both financially and militarily, irrespective of sectarian differences (Mousa, 2022, p. 12). This support was rooted in shared political interests, particularly in countering common threats, such as Israel.

Mutual political interests rather than sectarian affinity drove the alliance between Hamas, Iran, and Hezbollah. Iran sought to bolster its influence by cultivating a relationship with Sunni Hamas, enhancing its anti-Israel narrative and challenging Western influence in the region. Similarly, Syria's alliance with Hamas allowed it to maintain relevance in Palestinian politics and reinforce its stance against Israel, counterbalancing its perceived sectarian image resulting from its alliances with Iran and Hezbollah.

Despite their ideological disparities, Hamas and its regional allies, including Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria, found common ground in their shared objectives and political circumstances (Mousa, 2022, p. 14). This strategic alignment enabled Hamas to compete effectively in Palestinian politics. It has also strengthened its capacity in its resistance against

Israel. Ultimately, the convergence of political interests superseded sectarian differences, highlighting the pragmatism underlying Hamas' regional alliances.

3.3.2. Sectarian Dimensions of Hezbollah's Identity

Hezbollah, an influential Shiite Muslim political party and militant organization, has entrenched itself as a formidable entity within Lebanon, earning the moniker of “a state within a state” (Kindt, 2009) due to its expansive security apparatus, political machinery, and a comprehensive social services network. Emerging amidst the tumultuous backdrop of the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War, Hezbollah's genesis is intricately tied to its Shiite roots and its firm alignment with Iran (Al-Aloosy, 2023). This connection has not only fueled its staunch opposition to Israel but has also motivated its resistance against Western influence.

Hezbollah's multifaceted identity is shaped by its dual role as both a political and military force, a characteristic that has garnered both support and condemnation on the global stage. While its roots are deeply embedded in Lebanon, its impact extends far beyond its borders, with a history marred by involvement in global developments (Farida, 2020, pp. 8–10). This has led to the designation of certain segments, and in some instances the entire organization, as a terrorist entity by the U.S. and numerous other countries (Robinson, 2023). The interplay between its regional ambitions and global actions underscores the complexity of Hezbollah's role in the geopolitical arena.

Hezbollah's engagement in Lebanese politics is a dynamic facet of its existence, where it operates within the framework of a fragile political system (Salloukh, 2017, pp. 62–63). The organization has successfully integrated itself into the political fabric of Lebanon, securing seats in the parliament and participating in government coalitions (A. Daher, 2019, p. 224). This dual existence as both a political actor and a military force presents unique challenges, as Hezbollah navigates the delicate balance between its commitment to resistance and its responsibilities within the Lebanese state.

The complexities surrounding Hezbollah are not limited to its domestic engagements but also extend to its role as a regional actor. Its alliances with Iran and Syria, while bolstering its military capabilities, have also positioned Hezbollah as a key player in the broader Middle Eastern geopolitics (Robinson, 2023). This has invited both support and condemnation, with

regional dynamics shaped by the intricate interplay of alliances and conflicts. As a result, Hezbollah's actions reverberate beyond Lebanon, contributing to the broader regional tapestry.

Hezbollah was founded in 1982, during the Lebanese civil war. However, it remained a secret organization in its early years and announced its establishment four years after its establishment (Dionigi, 2014, p. 92). Its establishment was primarily influenced by four major factors. First, the Shia revival spearheaded by Imam Musa Sadr in Lebanon during the 1970s played a crucial role. Second, Islamic revolution that turned Iran into an Islamic Republic had a profound impact. Third, the eruption of a sectarian civil war in Lebanon further exacerbated societal divisions. Finally, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon under Operation 'Peace for Galilee' was a significant contributing factor (Ożarowski, 2017, p. 40). It appealed to the same social base as AMAL (The Brigades of the Lebanese Resistance - *Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya*), the Shiites, so it was naturally a rival of AMAL (Yetim & Kalaycı, 2022, p. 222). In fact, among the most important reasons for the emergence of Hezbollah were the disturbances against AMAL movement.

Given Hezbollah's roots in AMAL, it is crucial to delve into the historical trajectory of AMAL and its prominent political figure, Imam Musa al-Sadr. He came to Lebanon in 1958, garnered a growing support and emerged as the leader of the Lebanese Shia community (Alagha, 2006, p. 26). In 1963, his Iranian citizenship was revoked due to his vocal criticisms of the Shah's suppression of the Iranian people's uprising. During the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of Imam Musa al-Sadr as an Iranian charismatic and visionary leader marked a turning point in the relationship between the Lebanese and Iranian populations, particularly as many Iranians sought refuge in Lebanon following their flight from the Shah's regime. Lebanon served as a base for Iranians to organize opposition groups against the Shah's regime (Alagha, 2006, p. 26).

Imam al-Sadr efficiently galvanized the Lebanese Shia community in their pursuit of a fairer political, social, and economic system. His initial objective, the establishment of robust and autonomous civil society organizations separate from state control, unfolded with the creation of the Higher Islamic Shia Council in 1969 (Ajami, 1986, p. 98). This council aimed to assert Shia demands within the state framework, advocating for their interests on par with other Lebanese sects (Dionigi, 2014, p. 88).

In his inauguration ceremony on May 23, 1969, he presented his political program, detailing seven main points (Alagha, 2006, p. 27):

1. Organizing the Shia Community: He aimed to streamline the affairs of the Shia community and enhance its socio-economic standing.
2. Implementing a Holistic Vision of Islam: His program emphasized the comprehensive application of Islamic principles in thought, practice, and jihad (struggle).
3. Striving for Muslim Unity: He advocated for the unification of Muslims without discrimination, fostering a sense of solidarity among all believers.
4. *Infitah* (Opening Up): He advocated for collaboration with all Lebanese sects and communities to protect national unity, promoting inclusivity and collaboration across religious lines.
5. Fulfilling Patriotic Duties: He pledged to uphold patriotic and national responsibilities, including safeguarding Lebanon's sovereignty and independence within territorial integrity.
6. Combatting Social Issues: His program prioritized addressing societal challenges such as ignorance, poverty, backwardness, social injustice, and moral decline, aiming for a more equitable and progressive society.
7. Supporting Palestinian Resistance: He pledged support for the Palestinian resistance and active participation in the liberation of Palestinian territories alongside other Arab nations, underscoring solidarity with oppressed populations and advocating for justice on a regional scale.

Musa al-Sadr joined forces with Grégoire Haddad, a Greek Catholic archbishop in 1974 to create *Harakat Al-Mahrumin* (the Movement of the Deprived). This initiative sought to address the hardships of marginalized individuals, irrespective of their sectarian or ethnic affiliations. It was envisioned as an inclusive initiative open to all oppressed individuals from various sects, not limited to Shia (Saouli, 2019, p. 58). Over time, *Harakat Al-Mahrumin* gradually evolved into a predominantly Shia movement under the leadership of al-Sadr.

AMAL, founded in the late 1970s by Imam Musa al-Sadr, aimed to advocate for the rights and empowerment of Lebanon's Shia population, who had long been marginalized and underrepresented in the country's political landscape.

In the summer of 1978, Musa al Sadr vanished in Libya while visiting Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi. He was last seen in a Tripoli hotel on August 31. Despite Libyan authorities claiming he had departed for Italy on an Alitalia flight the same day, statements by

the Italian authorities contradicted this assertion, which asserted that only his luggage arrived in Rome (Ajami, 1986, p. 21).

This incident bore a striking resemblance to a Shia myth, reflecting the doctrine of "*Ghaiba*." According to Shia belief, the twelfth Imam disappeared from the sight of ordinary people in 873-874, with the promise of returning at a future date to establish justice on earth (Farida, 2020, p. 14).

Al-Sadr's movement laid the groundwork for the awakening and organization of Shia political consciousness. However, three interconnected events significantly deepened this awakening and directly contributed to the emergence of Hezbollah in the early 1980s (Saouli, 2019, p. 59).

Firstly, the mysterious disappearance of al-Sadr during a trip to Libya marked a tragic and pivotal moment, the circumstances of which remain undisclosed. This event signaled a new phase in Shia political development, leaving a void that spurred further activism and solidarity among Lebanon's Shia community. The mysterious disappearance of Musa al-Sadr played a significant role in crystallizing the religious ideology of Hezbollah, through impacting its foundational principles (Alagha, 2006, p. 279). After Musa al-Sadr, AMAL took on the appearance of a secular movement rather than a religious one (Alagha, 2006, p. 31). Nabih Berri, who was the leader of AMAL as of 1982, was a lawyer. He also brought AMAL into a civil war on the side of the Christian Phalangists and Israel, which supported them, which caused reaction from the Shiite population, who argued that the Palestinians should not be opposed during the war (Baş, 2022, p. 130).

Secondly, the 1979 revolution in Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary rhetoric resonated deeply with Lebanon's Shia Islamists, emboldening their aspirations for political change and empowerment. The revolutionary discourse from Iran provided ideological inspiration and a sense of solidarity, strengthening the resolve of Lebanon's Shia population. The ongoing civil war since 1975, coupled with the political activism of figures like Fadlallah, Shamseddine, and the Lebanon branch of the Dawa Party, created an environment conducive to accommodating Islamist revolutionary ideals in Lebanon (Farida, 2020, p. 2). Amidst the chaos of conflict, Lebanon became a fertile ground for the cultivation of revolutionary fervor and the pursuit of political transformation.

Thirdly, the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982 accelerated the urgency for Islamists to establish an independent, armed resistance movement (Dionigi, 2014, p. 92). With the

withdrawal of armed Palestinian organizations from their areas, some Shia factions, including Shamseddine and elements within Amal, opted for a strategy of "total civil resistance" against the Israeli occupation. In contrast, revolutionary Islamists, led by figures like M. H. Fadlallah, advocated for armed resistance as a means of confronting Israeli aggression and defending Shia interests.

These three events, occurring within the broader context of regional and local upheaval, converged to catalyze the emergence of Hezbollah as a formidable force in Lebanon's political landscape, shaping the trajectory of Shia activism and resistance in the years to come.

In June 1982, Israel launched a military invasion of Lebanon with the primary objective of expelling the PLO from Lebanese territory. In response to this incursion, Iran swiftly extended its support, deploying 5,000 Revolutionary Guards to Syria for subsequent deployment in Lebanon. However, as the major hostilities subsided, the majority of Iranian forces returned home. With the approval of the Syrian government, a reduced contingent of Iranian personnel relocated to the northern Beqaa Valley. Here, they embarked on a mission to mobilize and recruit Shiite individuals, laying the groundwork for the formation of a new anti-Israeli resistance movement. This initiative served as the embryonic stage for what would eventually evolve into Hezbollah, marking a significant turning point in Lebanon's political landscape and the broader regional dynamics (Blanford, 2022).

Hezbollah emerged as a distinct entity through the efforts of figures like Hussein al-Musawi, Ibrahim al-Amine, and Hassan Nasrallah, disenchanted with the prevailing trajectory of AMAL and opting to separate from it. While AMAL pursued a path of incremental political reform and sought accommodation within the established system, Hezbollah diverged significantly by adopting a confrontational approach, particularly towards perceived external adversaries such as Israel. Beyond mere confrontation, Hezbollah's agenda expanded to encompass broader goals of Islamic resistance and the pursuit of social justice. This departure from AMAL's methodology marked a significant shift in Shia political activism, as Hezbollah sought to assert its identity through defiance and adherence to a more radical interpretation of Islamic principles.

Endorsed by three religious leaders representing Lebanon's predominant Shia regions—the South, the Beqaa Valley, and the outskirts of Beirut—the founding manifesto of Hezbollah articulated three foundational principles (Dionigi, 2014, p. 92). First, it underscored a steadfast commitment to the tenets of Islam, serving as the cornerstone of the ideological framework.

Secondly, it advocated for active resistance against Israeli occupation through the concept of jihad, reflecting a resolute stance in defending Shia interests and territorial integrity. Thirdly, the manifesto affirmed the authority of Wilayat al-Faqih as the singular legitimate governance structure, underscoring the adherence to a specific interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence and leadership.

The ensuing section scrutinizes the components that both inform and embody Hezbollah's Shia sectarian identity. These components encompass Shiite Islamist ideology, the tenets of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist), religious symbolism and rituals, the patronage from Iran, and the organization's steadfast dedication to Shia causes. Through an examination of these fundamental elements, the objective is to attain a comprehensive understanding of Hezbollah's sectarian identity and its consequential role within the broader dynamics of Lebanese and regional politics.

3.3.2.1. Shiite Islamist Ideology

In 1985, amidst the intensity of the Lebanon war, Hezbollah unveiled its political manifesto (Adnan Abu Amer, 2013c). Hezbollah's founding manifesto, "Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World (*Nass al-Risala al-Maftuha allati wajahaha Hizballah ila-l-Mustad'afin fi Lubnan wa-l-Alam*)" (Hezbollah, 1985) clearly reflects its Shiite Islamist ideology. The document emphasized the importance of Islamic governance based on Shia principles, resistance against Israeli occupation, and support for oppressed communities, particularly Shiites. This manifesto served as a guiding ideological framework for Hezbollah's activities and objectives.

Open Letter explicitly articulated its commitment to Islam as a comprehensive faith and system of governance (Hezbollah, 1985). The letter states that Hezbollah does not seek to impose Islam on anyone and resents having others impose their beliefs and systems on them. It also affirms that Hezbollah does not want Islam to be enforced in Lebanon by force. Despite this disclaimer, Hezbollah unequivocally affirms its conviction in Islam as a guiding principle for governance. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing Islam and resorting to its laws, highlighting their adherence to a Shiite Islamist worldview (Blanford, 2022).

Central to its objectives was the aspiration to liberate Lebanon from both Israeli and Western influence, along with the associated domestic alliances that perpetuated such control. Concurrently, Hezbollah aimed to dismantle what it perceived as the divisive and inequitable sectarian system within Lebanon. Moreover, the organization expressed a conditional willingness, subject to the approval of the Lebanese majority, to establish an Islamic state. In essence, Hezbollah declared its identity as part of a broader global Islamic movement under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. Rooted in this identity was a commitment to the liberation of Palestine and to the support of oppressed peoples worldwide, embodying a sense of solidarity with the oppressed individuals worldwide. These principles not only encapsulated Hezbollah's ideological stance but also underscored its aspirations for Lebanon's political and social transformation within the broader context of regional and global dynamics.

Hezbollah operates various religious, educational and cultural institutions that promote Shiite Islamic ideology. These play a multifaceted role, not only disseminating religious teachings but also fostering a sense of communal identity and solidarity among the Shia population. By controlling the narrative and shaping the educational curriculum, Hezbollah exerts significant influence over the ideological orientation of its constituents, thereby consolidating its authority within the Shia community (Farida, 2020, p. 37). This is evident in an interview given by Fadlallah in 1995. He asserts that they are currently working on establishing educational institutions that will provide advanced studies in jurisprudence, shari'a, and related disciplines (Fadlallah & Soueid, 1995, p. 69).

Conversely, the process of Islamization has proven instrumental in Hezbollah's efforts to consolidate its control over the Shia community in Lebanon. Through the promotion of Islamic values, Hezbollah strengthens its legitimacy and resonance among Shia constituents, positioning itself as the vanguard of their religious and socio-political aspirations (Farida, 2020, pp. 37–38). Moreover, by championing the Islamization agenda, Hezbollah reinforces its role as the primary guardian of Shia interests and identity in the face of external pressures and perceived threats. Thus, the symbiotic relationship between the Islamization process and Hezbollah's hegemony underscores the intricate dynamics at play within Lebanon's sectarian landscape.

Formed with the support and backing of Iran after Israel's 1982 invasion, Hezbollah represented a significant Shiite force in Islamist politics throughout the Arab world. Drawing inspiration from Khomeini's teachings, Hezbollah adheres to the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih.

This principle of Islamic governance grants political authority to a senior religious scholar, shaping Hezbollah's approach to governance and influence.

This principle is enshrined in Hezbollah's founding document, which outlines the its ideological principles and objectives (Hezbollah, 1985). In an article published in al-Ahed in 1986, Hezbollah provided an exposition of its allegiance to Wilayat al-Faqih, stating that they adhered to the Wilayat al-Faqih... as his leadership resembled that of the Prophet and the infallible Imam, stating that this was a religious obligation (Saouli, 2019, p. 65).

At the heart of Hezbollah's ideology lie three core objectives (Blanford, 2022). Firstly, the movement is staunchly committed to resisting Israel, viewing the occupation of Palestinian territories as a fundamental injustice. Secondly, Hezbollah envisions the establishment of an Islamic state within Lebanon, advocating for governance guided by Islamic principles. Thirdly, the movement pledges allegiance to Iran's supreme leader, affirming its obedience to Tehran's religious and political authority in the Open Letter (Dionigi, 2014, p. 178). These ideological tenets not only underscore Hezbollah's distinct identity but also shape its actions and strategies within Lebanon's complex political landscape and the wider regional context.

Hezbollah's hierarchical leadership structure is also consistent with the concept of Wilayat al-Faqih (Robinson, 2023). The organization is led by a Secretary-General who serves as the supreme authority and is responsible for guiding the organization's policies and decisions in accordance with Shia Islamic principles (Alagha, 2006, p. 98). The Secretary-General's authority is derived from his perceived religious and moral authority as a qualified Islamic jurist (Dionigi, 2014, p. 119).

Hezbollah's leadership and decision-making bodies comprise clerics and religious scholars, underscoring the significance of religious guidance and expertise in its governance model. These clerics play a pivotal role in interpreting Islamic law and providing religious legitimacy for Hezbollah's actions and policies, aligning with the principles of Wilayat al-Faqih. The composition of Hezbollah's leadership reflects the party's evolution and ideological trajectory. Despite their varied backgrounds, these individuals share an unwavering commitment to two foundational principles of Hezbollah's ideological identity: prioritizing the interests of the Resistance above all else, and adhering to the principle of Wilayat al-Faqih (A. Daher, 2019, pp. 330–331).

3.3.2.2. Religious Symbolism and Rituals

Hezbollah prominently incorporates Shiite religious symbolism and rituals into its activities and messaging. The group employs a variety of strategies, including the adaptation of symbols and the reinterpretation of traditional practices, to mobilize people, expand its support networks, recruit new members, and foster proactive engagement towards achieving organizational objectives.

This strategic utilization of symbols serves as a potent tool for social mobilization, enabling Hezbollah to imbue its activities with cultural significance and resonate deeply with its constituents. Symbolic religious rituals, including memorials, mourning ceremonies, funerals, public expressions of grief, and prayers, are also employed to perpetuate the objectives of nonviolent resistance (Jashni et al., 2019, p. 51). Moreover, the internet emerges as a pivotal platform for Hezbollah to disseminate its messages and influence public opinion. By leveraging existing Shiite symbols and crafting new ones, it effectively promotes Shiite interests and cultivate a sense of solidarity within its communities, thereby strengthening its ideological foothold and advancing its agendas.

Hezbollah employs these religious symbols and rituals strategically for sectarian purposes, leveraging events, holidays, and ceremonies to advance its ideological agenda (Azani, 2007, p. 16). The month of Ramadan serves as a platform for Hezbollah to foster a deeper connection to Islam among its supporters, while simultaneously galvanizing them in the struggle against Shiite discrimination. Through religious observances and communal gatherings during Ramadan, Hezbollah amplifies its message of resistance and solidarity within the Shiite community.

The Ashura procession, commemorating the martyrdom of the Shiite Imam Hussein, is utilized by Hezbollah to promote Shiite activism and resistance. By reenacting the tragic events of Hussein's death at the hands of Sunnis, Hezbollah instills a sense of historical grievance and mobilizes its followers towards a collective sense of defiance against perceived oppressors (Azani, 2007, p. 17).

World Jerusalem Day is celebrated annually on the last Friday of Ramadan in Iran, among Shiite communities globally, and in Sunni communities within Palestinian territories. Initiated by Khomeini in 1979, World Jerusalem Day serves as a rallying point for both Sunni and Shiite Muslims, aligning them in their shared goal of liberating Jerusalem. Hezbollah

leverages this ceremony to foster unity and solidarity among Muslims, while also reinforcing its own narrative of resistance against Israel (Azani, 2007, p. 20).

Hezbollah's leadership organizes conferences and conventions, often centered on revered figures such as Sheikh Ragheb Harb and Sheikh Abbas Musawi. These events serve to immortalize heroic narratives and current role models within the organization, inspiring new recruits and reinforcing loyalty among existing members. In addition, Hezbollah's propaganda materials often incorporate religious imagery and symbolism to evoke emotions and rally support among Shiite audiences. Images of religious leaders, shrines, and religious symbols are used to convey messages of faith, resilience, and defiance, appealing to the religious sentiments of Hezbollah's supporters.

To sum up, Hezbollah employs a variety of strategies to harness Shiite symbols and traditions, both old and new, as powerful tools for social mobilization and furthering organizational objectives. By imbuing these symbols with contemporary significance, it effectively broadens its support base, attract new activists, and inspire proactive engagement among its followers. Through the strategic utilization of existing Shiite symbols and the creation of new ones, Hezbollah effectively promote Shiite interests and solidify its ideological foothold.

3.3.2.3. Support from Iran

The relationship between Hezbollah and Iran has long been characterized as a patron-agent dynamic, marked by significant financial, ideological, and logistical support from Tehran. This strategic alliance, forged in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, has propelled Hezbollah's rise to prominence, transforming it from a nascent militia into a powerful non-state actor with significant regional influence. Iran's backing has been instrumental in shaping Hezbollah's ideology, operational capabilities, and political influence, while simultaneously serving Tehran's broader geopolitical ambitions.

The dynamics between Hezbollah and Iran exemplify a quintessential patron-agent relationship (Al-Aloosy, 2023, p. 4). In the wake of the Islamic Revolution, Iran deployed its Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon, fostering the development of a local Shia militia to oppose Israeli influence. This nascent group, which evolved into Hezbollah, received unwavering

financial support from Iran (Deeb, 2013, p. 36), in addition to its resources from *zakat* (Islamic alms), and donations from Lebanese diaspora abroad (Farida, 2020, p. 4).

Hezbollah also got ideological support from Tehran, which sought to promote its revolutionary model in neighboring states. This symbiotic relationship allowed Iran to project power beyond its borders while empowering Hezbollah to become a dominant force in Lebanese politics and regional security. Unwavering support from Iran has not only bolstered the organization's resilience but has also fueled its evolution into a formidable non-state actor.

Partnership with Iran, as well as with Syria, have not only shaped its ideology, but have also equipped the organization with military prowess, rendering it a potent force. The close relationship between Hezbollah and Iran is rooted in Iranian influence over the organization's formation and operations (Tinas & Tür, 2018, p. 131). The support has provided Hezbollah with crucial financial and military support, amplifying its capabilities beyond the confines of Lebanon (Collard, 2019). Syria's role in this alliance has added a layer of complexity to the geopolitical dynamics, further solidifying Hezbollah's influence in the region.

Iran's unwavering financial and ideological support has been pivotal in Hezbollah's transformation from a local militia to a powerful non-state actor. This patron-client relationship, further solidified by Syria's involvement, has enabled Hezbollah to exert considerable influence both domestically and regionally.

3.3.2.4. Commitment to Shia Causes

Hezbollah's activities and objectives often prioritize Shiite causes and the principles of the modern Shiite thought, which are formed in line with the teachings of Khomeini. Hezbollah has steadfastly maintained its religious identity, consistently upholding its intellectual and ideological adherence to the Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine (Farida, 2020, p. 4). Azani summarizes and explains the central components and principles of these causes under five headings (2007, p. 16):

Empowerment of Shiite Activism: Under Khomeini's leadership, Shiites transitioned from a passive and marginalized minority to an active sect committed to pursuing political objectives, often resorting to violence as a means of resistance against oppression. This shift marked a significant departure from the historical narrative of Shiite passivity and submission,

as Khomeini's teachings galvanized Shiite populations to challenge existing power structures and demand their rights (Arjomand, 1980, pp. 151–152). One notable example is the Iranian Revolution of 1979, where Khomeini's leadership mobilized Shiite masses to overthrow the repressive regime of the Shah and establish an Islamic Republic based on Shiite principles. Additionally, Khomeini's ideology resonated beyond Iran's borders, inspiring Shiite movements in other countries to rise up against oppressive governments and assert their political aspirations. However, while violence was sometimes deemed necessary in the struggle against tyranny, Khomeini also emphasized the importance of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience as legitimate forms of protest (Jashni et al., 2019, p. 44). This transformation underscores the dynamic nature of Shiite activism under Khomeini's leadership and its lasting impact on the political landscape of the Muslim world.

Delegitimization of Corrupt Islamic Regimes: Khomeini challenged the legitimacy of corrupt Islamic regimes, advocating for their overthrow by any means necessary, including the use of violence (Gholizadeh & Hook, 2012, p. 182). This stance stemmed from his belief that such regimes had deviated from the principles of Islam and failed to uphold justice and righteousness. One prominent example is Khomeini's leadership during the Iranian Revolution of 1979, where he mobilized popular discontent against the oppressive regime of the Shah and ultimately succeeded in establishing an Islamic Republic. Additionally, Khomeini's teachings inspired similar movements in other countries, where oppressed populations sought to overthrow authoritarian rulers perceived as corrupt and unjust.

Identification of Enemies: Khomeini defined the U.S. as the "Great Satan" and Israel as the "Little Satan," framing them as primary adversaries of the Islamic community (Alagha, 2006, p. 194; Azani, 2007, p. 30). Khomeinism positioned itself as a defensive ideological framework vis-à-vis the perceived international hegemony of the U.S. According to Khomeini's perspective, anti-American sentiment did not entail animosity towards the American populace nor did it entail a threat to the sovereignty or identity of a nation-state. Rather, it constituted opposition to perceived instances of interference and colonialist policies, particularly within the Middle Eastern context and specifically in Iran (Yazdi, 2016, pp. 11–12). Despite potential diplomatic overtures, the persistent hostility from the U.S. government towards Tehran reinforced the notion that the relationship between Iran and the U.S. remained characterized by animosity.

Hezbollah's primary motivation lies in its opposition to Israel, a sentiment that traces back to the organization's founding principles (A. Daher, 2019, pp. 61–62). This animosity has manifested in multiple conflicts, with Hezbollah playing a significant role in the Lebanese resistance against Israeli forces. The organization's military wing, known for its guerrilla tactics, has demonstrated its effectiveness, garnering respect and fear from its adversaries (Shaikh & Williams, 2018). As tensions persist in the region, the prospect of renewed hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel remains a looming concern, with experts highlighting the formidable challenge that Hezbollah could pose in such a scenario (Al-Aloosy, 2022, pp. 137–138).

Principle of Self-Sacrifice: Khomeini endorsed the concept of individual self-sacrifice, encouraging martyrdom in Jihad against Islam's enemies. This principle laid the groundwork for the emergence of suicide bombings as a strategic tactic in Hezbollah (Saouli, 2019, p. 114).

Rule of the Religious Clerics: A hallmark of radical Shiite thought, this principle emphasizes the authority of religious clerics in governance, particularly evident in Iran and Hezbollah's adherence to clerical rule (Yazdi, 2016, p. 132). The conduct of Hezbollah is primarily guided by the depth and loyalty of meticulously cultivated connections between individual Hezbollah leaders and the clerical establishment in Iran. These relationships serve as crucial conduits through which ideological principles, strategic directives, and material support flow from Iran to Hezbollah. Within this framework, the Iranian clergy wields considerable influence over Hezbollah's decision-making processes and operational strategies, shaping the organization's stance on regional and international affairs (Ranstorpe, 1994, p. 303). The symbiotic relationship between individual Hezbollah leaders and their counterparts in Iran underscores the interconnectedness of Shiite Islamist movements across borders and the enduring influence of Iranian revolutionary ideology on Hezbollah's actions and objectives.

These fundamental tenets rooted in the teachings of Khomeini have exerted a profound influence on the ideological framework of Hezbollah. These principles not only shape Hezbollah's worldview but also underscore its unwavering dedication to advancing Shiite causes. By adhering to these principles, Hezbollah reaffirms its commitment to championing the interests and aspirations of the Shiite community, both regionally and globally. Consequently, this commitment serves as a defining characteristic of Hezbollah's sectarian identity, emphasizing its role as a vanguard of Shiite activism and resistance against perceived adversaries.

3.4. The Syrian Civil War as a Sectarian Quagmire

The Arab uprisings commenced with what appeared to be non-religious calls expressed as "*al sha'b yurid isqat al nizam*," which translates to "The people want to overthrow the system" (Abdo, 2017, p. 1). This slogan reflected a widespread desire among the populace to challenge and replace the existing political order. The uprisings, marked by protests and demonstrations, were initially characterized by a seemingly secular nature, emphasizing the collective will of the people to bring about a change in the established system (Lynch, 2016).

The initially decentralized and locally rooted opposition that surfaced in March 2011 in Syria held national objectives as well, representing "the people" and "Syria" rather than any specific ethno-sectarian group, despite the majority being Sunni Arabs. In response, the regime also underscored its nationalist credentials, and both sides employed inclusive slogans and symbols, even incorporating competing Syrian flags.

Nevertheless, the conflict saw the involvement of actors driven by ethno-sectarian agendas. Syria's Kurds, marginalized for decades, organized along ethnic lines, initially protesting alongside the Arab opposition, but escalating violence empowered nationalist groups like the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Hezbollah and various Iraqi Shia militias justified their support for the regime by citing ethno-sectarian goals to appeal to their constituents. Opposition to the regime gave rise to radical Sunni sectarian groups like Jabhat al-Nusra.

The escalating prevalence of sectarian rhetoric within the Syrian conflict played a pivotal role in undermining the initial aspirations for 'dignity and equal citizenship' (Dibo, 2014a). These noble ideals, once central to the early stages of the conflict, gradually gave way to a focus on 'sectarian rights' and the 'protection of minorities.' However, rather than serving as genuine principles, these concepts became instrumentalized as tools of manipulation (J. Daher, 2018), wielded by both the regime and its opponents.

In Syrian politics, as seen in the recent civil war in Iraq, both sides to undermine each other have used the term "sectarian". This reflects a longstanding trend of using sectarian labels as a means of discrediting opponents. The Syrian regime accused its opponents of being Sunni Islamists intent on persecuting minority sects and secularists. In response, the opposition claimed that Shabiha, the paramilitary force of the regime, was deliberately stoking sectarian tensions. This, they argued, allowed Assad to position himself as a protector of pluralism (Phillips, 2015, p. 359).

These narratives of sectarian manipulation and instrumentalization are not isolated occurrences but rather reflect a broader regional trend. The Arab Spring has coincided with a growing divide between Sunni and Shia communities in the region. Protests and uprisings across various Arab countries have had a profound impact on the political landscape within those nations. It has played a transformative role in shaping and reshaping their domestic politics. Concurrently, there has been a noticeable escalation in the longstanding sectarian tension between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the region.

The developments during the Arab Spring and the Sunni-Shia divide have occurred in tandem, contributing to the complex dynamics and challenges faced by the Middle East (A. Saleh & Kraetzschmar, 2015, p. 545). Rather than a shared pursuit of social justice and a reimagined governance structure, newly emphasized features in Arab society have become religious distinctions and the ways in which Muslims define themselves (Abdo, 2017, p. 1). Abdo argued that political disputes stemming from sectarian divisions within states that lack functional political and economic systems could present a significant challenge to regional order in the foreseeable future (2013, p. 5).

Notable scholars who support the sectarian narrative include Hashemi and Postel (2017), who argue that the Syrian civil war is a "sectarianized conflict" in which religious identity has become a central factor in shaping the conflict's dynamics. Alvarez-Ossorio (2019) also emphasizes the role of sectarianism in fueling violence and polarization within Syria. Additionally, Hinnebusch (2012) analyzes the historical context of sectarianism in Syria and its impact on the current conflict.

3.4.1. Sectarian Dimensions

Sectarian identity has emerged as a significant driving force among regional powers, especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This divide also extends to their respective allies, influencing regional dynamics (International Crisis Group, 2014, pp. 15–16). The involvement of sectarian actors in the Syrian crisis—including ISIS, Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia, and Iran—has led analysts and politicians to view the Syrian crisis through a sectarian lens. Consequently, sectarian politics have become a central framework for understanding the ongoing crisis (D. K. Khatib, 2021, p. 1).

At the onset of the 2011 uprising, the protesters initially embraced a non-sectarian stance. However, as the conflict unfolded, sectarian rhetoric and perspectives began to dominate. Within a month of the initial wave of protests in mid-March 2011, sectarian identity evolved into a significant and, at times, predominant factor in interpreting and intensifying violence (Wimmen, 2017, p. 61).

Certain observers describe the Syrian civil war as a manifestation of the larger Sunni-Shia conflict, intensified by the ongoing regional rivalry between Iran and the Gulf countries. They argue that the war is deeply intertwined with this sectarian struggle. This view frames the conflict as part of a broader geopolitical and sectarian clash. Conversely, other experts argue that the more accurate perspective is the reverse. According to this viewpoint, internal sectarian dynamics of Syria have transformed regional alliances, aligning them based on sectarian affiliations. This realignment reflects the influence of sectarian divisions on geopolitical relationships (Lakitsch, 2017, p. 91).

From the outset, the conflict has been marked by sectarianism, which has been evident through acts of mass violence, sexual assault, ethnic purging, and inflammatory rhetoric. Sectarianism is also subtly present, as both the government and the opposition accuse one another of manipulating sectarian identity for their own gain, as noted by Phillips (2015, p. 370). Regardless of whether regional tensions ignited sectarian conflict within Syria or vice versa, the Syrian regime skillfully exploited the pervasive fear and mistrust associated with sectarianism. By deliberately framing the 2011 protests in sectarian terms, the regime aimed to deflect attention from legitimate grievances and consolidate its power by appealing to existing societal prejudices.

The negative implications associated with 'sectarianism' can provide regimes with a means to discredit otherwise legitimate political activism by linking it to this term. This dynamic was starkly evident in the response of the Syrian regime to the extensive protests of 2011. The regime accurately perceived that one of the most effective ways to neutralize the political threat posed by the protests, delegitimize the demonstrators, and bolster pro-regime sentiment was to equate the burgeoning protest movements with 'sectarianism.' Although this characterization merely hinted at the protesters' sectarian affiliations, it resonated within broader society, underscoring the reality that there exists a substantial body of opinion, whether viewed from a top-down or bottom-up perspective, ready to believe that members of the "Other"

sect are culpable of an unspecified (yet undoubtedly malevolent) form of 'sectarianism' (Haddad, 2017, p. 376).

This propensity to attribute 'sectarianism' to the "Other" was not merely a domestic phenomenon; it was amplified and exploited by the Syrian regime in the context of evolving regional dynamics. The rise of transnational sectarian identities, fueled by political instability and economic dysfunction, further exacerbated existing tensions. Regardless of its origins, both the regime and the diverse Islamist opposition have consistently employed sectarianism. Their aim has been to undermine their opponents, expand their support base, and rally their regional allies (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2019, p. 56).

Developments have heightened both internal and external dynamics, contributing to the emergence of a transnational sectarian identity. This evolving identity poses a significant threat to the current state system in the region, and has become a major force shaping regional politics and a key feature of the modern Middle East. The Syrian civil war exemplifies this trend, where sectarian divisions have transformed political conflicts, and in the context of politically and economically dysfunctional states, posed a substantial challenge to regional stability and settlements (Tinas, 2016, p. 3). Pinto argues that the production of sectarianism in Syria is a multi-faceted process involving actions by the state, societal dynamics, external influences from the region, and the cross-border impact of Syria's conflict on neighboring states (2017, p. 123).

A significant number of other scholars also argue that sectarianism played a substantial role in the war, citing a variety of contributing factors. They point to the pre-existing sectarian cleavages that have long characterized the region's social fabric, which were exacerbated by the war. Additionally, the use of sectarian symbolism and rhetoric by various actors served to deepen these divides. The involvement of foreign powers, often aligning themselves along sectarian lines, further intensified the conflict. The emergence and proliferation of sectarian militias, driven by these same sectarian allegiances, played a significant role in the violence. Moreover, the media's role in the sectarianization process cannot be overlooked, as it often perpetuated and amplified sectarian narratives. Lastly, the occurrence of sectarian attacks throughout the war underscored the centrality of sectarianism in the conflict's dynamics. The next section elucidates these factors, providing a comprehensive analysis of their impact on exacerbating sectarian tensions and shaping the trajectory of the Syrian conflict.

3.4.1.1. Pre-existing Sectarian Cleavages

Syria has a history of sectarian divisions, with the Alawite minority holding power over the Sunni majority since the 1960s. Although any discourse or discussion on sectarianism, regardless of its form or content, was entirely prohibited in national media and the public sphere (Dibo, 2014b), the sectarian dynamics that emerged during the Syrian civil war had long been enshrined and manipulated under the regimes of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. This exploitation was particularly evident during political conflicts, such as the clashes with the Muslim Brotherhood in 1979 and 1985 (Ahmed Khalil, 2018). The Assad regime's strategic use of sectarianism has been a key factor in the dynasty's enduring rule. Throughout the now seven-year-long civil war, sectarian fanaticism played a prominent role. Both the regime and the opposition exploited sectarian tensions to frame the conflict as a Sunni-Alawite struggle, a narrative further fueled by regional powers. This manipulation of sectarian divides has been instrumental in perpetuating the conflict and securing the Assad regime's survival.

The allocation of positions within both the ruling class and the armed forces followed an informal sectarian division (Dibo, 2014b). Although the prime minister was typically drawn from the Sunni elite, Alawites were granted significant influence, occupying four essential cabinet posts, notably the Ministry of Information, a pivotal position for controlling the narrative and disseminating propaganda. Similarly, Christians and Druze were allotted specific cabinet portfolios, reflecting a semblance of sectarian inclusivity within the government (J. Daher, 2018).

Moreover, the military hierarchy adhered to an unwritten but well-established protocol, known to Syrians, regarding the assignment of leadership roles in brigades and divisions. According to this convention, if the brigade or division leader were Sunni, the deputy would be appointed from the Alawite community, ensuring a degree of sectarian balance. Additionally, a third senior position was typically reserved for individuals from other minority groups such as Christians or Druze, further demonstrating an attempt at sectarian representation.

However, this pattern of sectarian balance was not universally applied. Notably, within the security forces, particularly the intelligence and paramilitary units, Alawites consistently dominated both in terms of numerical strength and leadership positions (Khan et al., 2020, p. 50). This underscored the regime's strategic prioritization of loyalists from its own sect to maintain control over critical apparatuses of power and coercion. Thus, while superficially

appearing as a system of sectarian inclusivity, the reality was a landscape where sectarian dynamics were intricately interwoven with power politics and regime survival strategies.

While publicly advocating for nationalism and secularism, the regime used these ideals as a facade to mask its authoritarian and sectarian practices, particularly within its security apparatus. Dibo characterizes this approach as "secular sectarianism," where the regime's purported secularism conceals its underlying sectarian agendas (2014b). This dual strategy allowed the regime to suppress overt sectarian discourse while covertly perpetuating sectarian divisions to fortify its control.

The regime leveraged tribal and kinship ties to secure loyalty in the security sector, creating a perception of Alawite supremacy. The true power, however, resided within a small circle of Assad family members. Consequently, the Alawite community maintained control over the security apparatus, exhibiting strong loyalty to the president and a firm opposition to the majority Sunnis (Khan et al., 2020, p. 50). The Assad regime empowered the Alawite community, and to a lesser extent, other minority groups, to assert dominance over the Sunni majority (Byman, 2014, p. 82; Wimmen, 2017, p. 65). This power imbalance created resentment and fueled sectarian tensions, which were exploited and exacerbated by the regime during the conflict (Hinnebusch, 2012, pp. 96–97).

On the other hand, regardless of their ideological positions, almost all insurgents came from the Sunni Arab community. The insurgency took root in the "poverty belt" surrounding Aleppo and Damascus, drawing mainly from agricultural areas and provincial towns that were economically harmed by Bashar el-Assad's reform policies. While major urban centers and middle-class neighborhoods largely stayed calm, the insurgency grew stronger due to years of migration from the declining rural areas (Lund, 2012, p. 10).

This socioeconomic and geographical marginalization laid the groundwork for the rise of Sunni-led insurgencies. These movements, though diverse in their specific ideologies, were united by a shared experience of disenfranchisement under the Assad regime. However, this was not the first time Sunni discontent had boiled over into open conflict.

The grip of political control over sectarianism tightened because of the uprisings against the regime in Hama between 1979 and 1982. Initially launched as civil protests against oppression and economic hardship, the uprisings quickly escalated into violent sectarian clashes. The ensuing violence, which reached its peak with the Hama massacre in 1982, established a legacy of sectarian animosity that still affects Syria today (Shams & Kaileh,

2014b). Despite occasional dealings with jihadi groups, the threat of a religiously driven revolt from the Sunni majority has continuously hovered over the Assad regime (Lund, 2012, p. 12). The Brotherhood presented themselves as the self-designated representatives of Sunnis both in Syria and beyond, branding the Assad regime as “the Alawite regime.” This labeling inadvertently provided the regime with a convenient justification for its actions (Dibo, 2014b). Subsequently, the regime suppressed any discourse on sectarianism using secular rhetoric and portrayed itself as the sole protector of minority rights, particularly those of the Alawite community.

The shift toward sectarianism is clearly illustrated by the account of Syrian poet Faraj Bayrakdar, who was a key member of the clandestine Communist Action Party and endured multiple imprisonments under the Assad regime: “In 1978, during my initial imprisonment, sectarian insults were absent. However, upon my subsequent arrest in 1987, sectarian slurs against detainees had become commonplace” (Dibo, 2014b).

Bayrakdar’s account illustrates the emergence of sectarianism as a tool of oppression. This transition reflects the deepening sectarian divide within Syrian society under the Assad regime’s rule, wherein sectarian identity was increasingly weaponized for political control and persecution. Such experiences underscore the profound impact of sectarianism on the lives of individuals, even within the confines of imprisonment, and highlight its alarming escalation as a means of suppression and intimidation by the regime.

Before the Syrian uprising, interactions between Syrian sects and communities were often characterized by *taqiyya* (dissimulation) or even hypocrisy. This dynamic mirrored the relationship between the political regime and the general population as well (Ahmed Khalil, 2018). The underlying mistrust and concealment of true intentions were prevalent not only among different religious and ethnic groups but also between the government and its citizens, reflecting a broader atmosphere of mutual suspicion and strategic deception.

One of the most potent “weapons” in the Syrian civil war has been the intercommunal doctrines and oral narratives propagated by members of each sect about other sects (Ahmed Khalil, 2018). These narratives, filled with mistrust and animosity, have fueled sectarian tensions and deepened divisions. The perpetuation of such ideologies has not only intensified the conflict but also eroded the social fabric, making reconciliation and unity increasingly difficult. The impact of these divisive stories and beliefs has been as destructive, perpetuating hatred and suspicion among the diverse communities in Syria.

In conclusion, the Syrian civil war was not a spontaneous eruption, but the culmination of decades-long grievances and power imbalances. The Assad regime's sectarian favoritism, coupled with economic disparities and historical traumas, created a fertile ground for unrest. The Sunni majority, feeling marginalized and oppressed, found an outlet for their frustrations in the wave of protests that swept across the Arab world in 2011. The regime's brutal crackdown on these protests only served to exacerbate existing tensions and push the country further towards the brink of war. The complex interplay of these factors ultimately led to the devastating conflict that continues to ravage Syria today, a conflict deeply rooted in the nation's troubled past and fraught political landscape.

3.4.1.2. Sectarian Symbolism and Rhetoric

Sectarianism has long been ingrained in the oral traditions of Syrian popular culture, predating the Assad regime by several decades. Historical rulers of Syria upheld primordial identities as foundational components of their political structures (J. Daher, 2018). However, it was under the Assad regime, aligning with regional political shifts, that sectarianism was not only fostered but also underwent a significant evolution, permeating various facets of Syrian society. Throughout the conflict, both the Syrian regime and various opposition groups have employed sectarian rhetoric to mobilize support, demonize their opponents, and justify violence (Pinto, 2017, p. 124; Wimmen, 2017, p. 61).

Even before the uprising became militarized, the sectarianization of Syrian politics initially emerged through rhetoric broadcast by the official Syrian media. Just two weeks into the protests, in late March 2011, Bashar al-Assad's first speech since the unrest began characterized the uprising as *fitna* (sedition or the breaking of ranks): a foreign plot aimed at disrupting Syria's unity. He claimed this *fitna* intended to divide Syrians along sectarian lines, fracturing the nation into separate sects (L. Khatib, 2019, p. 8).

Towards the end of December 2012, Time Magazine published claims asserting that the Assad government was purportedly offering compensation of up to \$500 monthly to individuals masquerading as members of the opposition. Their alleged task involved vandalizing buildings with graffiti or chanting slogans containing sectarian language. One such slogan included, "the Christians to Beirut and the Alawites to the Tarboot (Grave)." (Jasser, 2014, p. 62).

This strategy of “instrumentalisation of sectarianism” pursued three primary objectives:

1. Presenting itself as the sole safeguard against sectarian strife: By depicting itself as the only entity capable of preventing sectarian conflict, the regime sought to justify its authoritarian rule and portray opposition movements as threats to communal harmony.
2. Cementing alliances with minority communities: By projecting itself as the protector of minority rights, particularly those of the Alawite community, the regime aimed to solidify its support base among these groups and reinforce their dependence on its rule for security and protection.
3. Discrediting dissidents and opposition groups: By associating political dissent with sectarian agitation, the regime sought to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of opposition movements, labeling them as divisive forces that endangered national unity and stability.

This calculated manipulation of sectarian tensions served to consolidate the regime's power, marginalize dissent, and perpetuate its authoritarian control over Syrian society.

During the war, Syria has emerged as a worldwide attraction for militant Islamists drawn to the notion of "*jihad*." These individuals have exploited the grassroots movement for freedom embraced by the majority of Syrians. Similar to the regime, certain extremist factions employ sectarian rhetoric and symbols to propagate fear and sectarian division (Jasser, 2014, p. 64). Moreover, the growing role of Hezbollah has not only heightened tensions but also escalated the rhetoric and sectarian orientation among Sunni groups. As Hezbollah's presence and actions amplify, Sunni factions feel compelled to respond with increasingly radical rhetoric and emphasize sectarian identities (Byman, 2014, p. 93).

Regime loyalists often besieged mosques in predominantly Sunni areas, which were central to anti-Assad protests. These forces prominently displayed symbols like the Zulfiqar sword, a significant Alawite and Shiite icon linked to Ali bin Abi Talib, to assert their communal identity and reinforce the sectarian divide (Hinnebusch & Rifai, 2021).

Additionally, the growing prominence of Hezbollah has influenced external donors to reevaluate their support for various factions within the conflict. The rhetoric and actions of the foreign actors like Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and Iran have also played a role in shaping and solidifying ethno-sectarian divisions and tensions, often for their own political gains (Hadaya, 2020, p. 607). Saudi Arabia and Qatar leveraged their primary media platforms, such as Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera, to propagate their own narratives regarding the uprisings.

As early as March 25, 2011, the Egyptian Salafist Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi made a statement on his weekly television program aired on Al-Jazeera. He remarked that Assad treats the people as if he were Sunni, possessing education and youth, which could enable him to effect significant change. However, al-Qaradawi asserted that Assad's predicament lies in being confined by his inner circle and religious affiliation (J. Daher, 2017; Hadaya, 2020, p. 615).

The Syrian conflict has been significantly shaped and intensified by the pervasive use of sectarian symbolism and rhetoric. Both the regime and opposition forces have weaponized sectarian identities, fueling animosity and violence. This manipulation of sectarian sentiments has not only deepened existing divisions but also attracted foreign actors seeking to exploit the situation for their own geopolitical interests. The instrumentalization of sectarianism has thus become a self-perpetuating cycle, contributing to the protracted and devastating nature of the Syrian civil war, with far-reaching consequences for the region and beyond.

3.4.1.3. Foreign Intervention along Sectarian Lines

Prior to the Syria crisis, regional dynamics were marked by complex and sometimes unexpected alliances that did not strictly align with sectarian divisions. For instance, Iran cooperated with the Sunni organization Hamas, while Qatar and Türkiye fostered positive relations with both Syria and Iran. Additionally, Egypt's government under the Muslim Brotherhood was involved in diplomatic engagement with Tehran. However, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war had a transformative impact on these regional relationships. The conflict contributed to the realignment of geopolitical interests along sectarian lines, leading to the formation of new alliances that were shaped by the Sunni-Shia divide (Byman, 2014, p. 88).

During the Syrian civil war, regional powers considered fueling sectarian division as an opportunity for their own interests. The involvement of external actors, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, who supported different sides of the conflict based on their own sectarian affiliations, has further intensified sectarian tensions within Syria. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is characterized by a sectarian dimension, has indeed influenced the course of the war (Abdo, 2015, p. 18). The conflict evolved into a perceived proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as between Shi'is and Sunnis (Phillips, 2016).

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have actively intervened in the Syrian conflict, with their strained relations since the Islamic Revolution triumph in 1979. The bilateral relationship has been characterized by religious and ideological antagonism, as well as geostrategic rivalry, with both nations seeing themselves as natural leaders not only in the Middle East but also in the broader Muslim world (Sadjadpour & Ben Taleblu, 2015, p. 4). From the beginning of the war, it became evident that these two powers, engaged in a cold war for control of the Middle East, were particularly keen on establishing Syria as a buffer to prevent the Arab Spring from spreading to their own territories (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2019, p. 48).

Apprehensive Sunni leaders sought to consolidate power in response to the growing assertiveness of Shi'i and other groups that had long been marginalized in state affairs. In the Persian Gulf monarchies, a persistent standoff between Sunni and Shi'i unfolded in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, accompanied by widespread concerns about Iranian irredentism. The political landscape of the region was evidently undergoing significant changes, leaving both Western powers and regional states uncertain about how to respond (Potter, 2014, p. 1).

As sectarianism proved effective in mobilizing support, trans-state movements replicated its exploitation. The permeability of state borders allowed Sunni Salafist jihadists and a counter-coalition of Shia-led minorities to intervene (Hinnebusch, 2016, pp. 130–132). This stimulated a powerful cumulative tendency to bipolarize the region between Sunni and Shia sectarianism, compressing the moderate secular center. External actors have provided financial, military, and logistical support to their respective allies, fueling the conflict and contributing to its sectarianization.

Right from the beginning, Iran and Hezbollah were deeply engaged in providing the Assad regime with crucial political and military support to secure its continued existence. Hezbollah, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards of Iran, and Shiite fighters from Iraq have entered to support Assad, with additional support in terms of finances and politics coming from Iran and Russia (Jasser, 2014, p. 64). Senior Iranian cleric Mehdi Taeb emphasized Syria's critical role in Iran's strategy regarding the Syrian conflict. He stated that Syria is seen as a vital part of Iran's strategic interests. In the event of an attack, he asserted that Iran's primary focus would be to defend Syria rather than Khuzestan (Western Iran). He argued that preserving Syria would enable the recovery of Khuzestan, whereas losing Syria would jeopardize the security of Tehran (Hinnebusch & Rifai, 2021).

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Türkiye supported various proxies from the Sunni community. This included the Muslim Brotherhood, which received backing from Qatar and Türkiye, as well as Salafist groups funded by Saudi Arabia (Hinnebusch & Rifai, 2021). Saudi Arabia portrayed the conflict as a larger battle to protect Sunni interests from the Shiite influence in the region. Financial support of Türkiye for Sunni opposition groups in northern Syria, and the deployment of Syrians to fight in Azerbaijan and Libya under an Islamic banner, all contributed to the propagation of a specific version of Sunni identity.

The opposing coalitions were defined by their sectarian affiliations. The Shia coalition included the Syrian Alawite regime, Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shia militias, with additional support from Russia. In contrast, the Sunni coalition comprised the Syrian Sunni population, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, along with backing from EU countries and the USA. Religious minorities like Druze and Christians were associated with the Shia coalition, along with the significant ethnic minority of Kurds in Syria (Lakitsch, 2017, p. 91).

Pierret argues that the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict is frequently misinterpreted as being driven by regional state actors exploiting sectarian divisions to further their own agendas (Pierret, 2013, p. 1). According to him, while regional actors have played a role in the sectarianization of the crisis, the inherently sectarian character of the conflict has shaped regional alignments and behaviors. Thus, he argues, the roots of sectarian radicalization in Syria lie within the conflict itself, rather than in the strategies of external actors. Daher also contends that sectarianism has never been the ultimate political goal but has consistently served as a crucial tool for maintaining dominance (2018). The external dimension of the sectarian character of the conflict is further elaborated in more detail in the section titled “External drivers of the sectarianization.”

3.4.1.4. Rise of Sectarian Militias

The proliferation of sectarian militias, such as the pro-regime National Defense Forces (NDF) (Lister, 2015, p. 83) and the opposition's Ahrar al-Sham (Lister, 2015, pp. 87–88), has further entrenched sectarian identities. These militias have often been accused of committing atrocities against civilians based on their religious affiliation.

Despite explicit denials, implicit ethno-sectarian agendas were present within both the regime and moderate opposition (Phillips, 2015, p. 359). Various Iraqi Shia militias have articulated ethno-sectarian objectives to rationalize their backing of the regime to their domestic audiences. In opposition to the regime, radical Sunni sectarian groups like Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) emerged. This pattern mirrors a longstanding trend in Syrian politics, where each side used the term "sectarian" to delegitimize the other (J. Daher, 2018).

In a few months, Syria became a focal point for militant Islamists in pursuit of the excitement of *jihad*. These individuals have exploited the widespread desire for freedom among the majority of Syrians who seek a national awakening. Similar to the regime, certain extremist groups employed sectarian language and symbols to propagate fear and sectarianism (Jasser, 2014, p. 64).

The security dilemma compelled all factions to seek protection within their own communal groups (Hinnebusch & Rifai, 2021). Perceiving one another as threats, each group took pre-emptive actions to bolster its own security. These measures, however, had the paradoxical effect of making everyone less secure. This dynamic led to heightened group solidarity, the demonization of opposing factions, the formation of sectarian militias, and the sectarian cleansing of neighborhoods. Each group's attempt to secure itself exacerbated mutual distrust and conflict, perpetuating a cycle of insecurity and violence.

Security measures in Syria have largely involved deploying loyal forces, predominantly Alawite, to suppress protests. Additionally, pro-Assad militias, known as Shabiha, composed mainly of Alawites, have been tasked with targeting anti-Assad activists, primarily Sunnis. These forces have been implicated in stoking sectarian tensions, particularly in areas like the Coastal Mountain Range and the religiously diverse regions between Hama and Homs. Initially deployed in cities like Latakia and Banyas, the Shabiha later extended their operations to Homs and the outskirts of Damascus, causing unrest in Sunni communities and mixed rural areas (L. Khatib, 2019, p. 8).

In conclusion, the rise of sectarian militias, the use of sectarian rhetoric to justify violence, and the manipulation of communal fears have all contributed to the deepening of sectarian divides in Syria. This escalating cycle of mistrust and violence has created a security dilemma, where each group's actions to protect themselves have paradoxically made everyone less secure. The resultant polarization has not only fueled the conflict but also made any prospect of reconciliation and lasting peace increasingly elusive. The Syrian conflict, therefore,

serves as a stark reminder of the destructive potential of sectarianism when it is exploited and weaponized for political gain.

3.4.1.5. Sectarianization through the Media

The media landscape in Syria and the region has been heavily sectarianized, with various outlets promoting biased narratives that emphasize sectarian divisions and fuel animosity between different groups (Lynch, 2016). The regime strategically manipulated existential fears of minorities regarding the Sunni majority, fostering a climate of apprehension and division. The spreading of rumors played a crucial role in cultivating a politics of fear, presenting the regime as the sole protector of ethno-sectarian minorities in Syria (Hadaya, 2020, p. 613). It successfully instilled fear among the public, portraying authoritarian stability as preferable to potential freedom. This fear-driven narrative was a key element in safeguarding the regime's contested power (L. Khatib, 2019, pp. 8–9). This has further polarized society and made reconciliation more difficult (Byman, 2014, p. 79).

Syrian state media played a crucial role in controlling the information flow, shaping the narrative, and mobilizing support for the regime. State-controlled media outlets in Syria, such as Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), often portrayed the protests and opposition as Sunni extremists or foreign-backed terrorists (J. Daher, 2017). This narrative demonized Sunni Muslims and perpetuated sectarian divisions by framing the conflict as a struggle between the government and Sunni extremists. These outlets have consistently portrayed the uprising as a foreign-backed conspiracy, driven by "terrorist" groups and seeking to undermine the secular nature of the Syrian state. Official Syrian media channels employed terms like 'cleansing,' 'purging,' and 'liquidation' to describe their actions against 'terrorists' (Zisser, 2020, p. 64). Such narratives have sought to mobilize support among the regime's Alawite base and other minority groups, who fear the rise of Sunni extremism.

The Gulf monarchies and their media also framed the Syrian uprising through a sectarian lens, aiming to transform it into a Shia-Sunni conflict. They offered platforms for various Salafist leaders, who used Gulf-based media to spread their sectarian views. For instance, Faisal al-Qassim, a presenter on Al Jazeera, broadcasted a segment debating whether the Alawite community in Syria deserve genocide. At the same time, Al Arabiya showcased

Syrian Salafist cleric Adnan al-Arour, who had previously made threats to mutilate Alawites and “feed them to dogs.” (J. Daher, 2017).

Social media have been instrumental in the dissemination of sectarian hate speech, disinformation, and propaganda during the Syrian conflict. Extremist groups like ISIS have exploited social media to disseminate their ideology, recruit fighters, and incite violence against perceived enemies. Additionally, ordinary citizens have used social media to share sectarian rumors and conspiracy theories, thereby contributing to a climate of fear, mistrust, and animosity.

Certain opposition media outlets occasionally propagated a sectarian narrative as well. For instance, Orient TV distorted the facts about the May 2015 massacre, falsely portraying the killing of more than 40 civilians, including children, by IS fighters in the diverse town of Majaoubé, which is home to Sunnis, Isma'ilis, and Alawites, as an assault on regime forces. This portrayal by a media owned by an exiled Syrian businessman Ghassan Abboud sparked significant controversy, as it was seen as justifying a sectarian atrocity (J. Daher, 2017).

3.4.1.6. Sectarian Attacks during the War

The systematic targeting of Sunni-majority areas by the Assad regime, predominantly Alawite, and the retaliatory attacks on Alawite and Christian communities by Sunni extremist groups, illustrate the sectarian dynamics at play. From March 2011 to August 2012, the Center for Documenting Violations in Syria (VDC) recorded 1,832 deaths in the Deraa Governorate, which has a population of around 850,000, mostly Sunni Arabs with a small Christian minority. In contrast, during the same timeframe, the VDC reported only 17 deaths in the adjacent Sweida Governorate. This region is predominantly inhabited by Druze Arabs and has a population of approximately 300,000 (Lund, 2012, p. 8).

Accusations of ethnically motivated killings were directed at the regime as early as April 27, 2011, when the Shabiha were reportedly involved in the deaths of between five and 40 Sunnis in Telkalakh. The regime was accused of several massacres with varying numbers of victims, including:

- 100 fatalities in Kfar Oweid (December 2011)
- 50 fatalities in Bab Driad and Karm al Zhoutan, Homs (March 2012)

- 100 fatalities in Taftanaz (April 2012)
- 108 fatalities in Houla (May 2012)
- 78 fatalities in al-Qubayr (June 2012)
- 200 fatalities in Darayya, Damascus (August 2012)

In almost all instances, Sunni Arabs were reportedly the victims, while the regime claimed that the massacres were either exaggerated or committed by opposition forces. Observers argued that the Assad regime had directed its actions toward predominantly Sunni Muslim communities, with certain exemptions granted to those who demonstrated ongoing loyalty to the government (Jasser, 2014, p. 60).

Amnesty International (AI) has documented that several armed opposition factions, including some linked to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), were involved in further war crimes and severe human rights violations. These groups were responsible for sectarian intimidation and assaults on minority communities they viewed as supportive of the government. At some anti-government protests, demonstrators have chanted sectarian slogans, including the hostile phrase, “Christians to Beirut and Alawites to the grave,” from the early days of the uprising. This aggressive rhetoric extended beyond chants, as the slogan was also found scrawled on walls in Aleppo in areas seized by armed opposition forces in July 2012 (Amnesty International, 2013). These incidents highlight the sectarian undertones that have permeated the conflict, further inflaming tensions and contributing to the overall volatility of the situation.

In its February 2013 report, the UN independent international Commission of Inquiry on Syria determined that the conflict has grown increasingly sectarian, since 15 July 2012, with the actions of the parties becoming markedly more radicalized and militarized. The Commission highlighted a disturbing trend towards heightened sectarianism within the conflict, characterized by escalating radicalism and militarization among the involved parties. This observation underscores the deepening divisions and intensifying dynamics that have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Syria (UN Human Rights Council, 2013). The report also underscored that in Aleppo, Dara’a, Damascus, and Hama, wounded and sick individuals were denied medical treatment based on sectarian or political considerations (UN Human Rights Council, 2013, p. 21).

Reports also surfaced of massacres targeting non-Sunnis, including:

- 15 individuals killed in Karmallouz, Homs (April 2012)
- Up to 300 fatalities in Aqrab (December 2012)

- 16 fatalities in Maksar al-Hesan (September 2013)
- 45 fatalities in Sadad (October 2013)

The majority of the victims were Alawites or Christians. As before, opposition groups claimed that these events were either fabricated by the regime or undertaken by extremist jihadists (Phillips, 2015, pp. 359–360).

3.4.2. Non-sectarian Dimensions

Some scholars challenge the sectarian narrative, contending that it oversimplifies the complex causes and dynamics of the Syrian civil war. For example, Hafez (2023) argues that the conflict is primarily a political one with sectarian dimensions, rather than a sectarian conflict *per se*. According to him, political instability and rifts among different factions, coupled with economic crisis and social inequalities, fueled the conflict. Moral and religious disagreements, along with the meddling of external powers, also exacerbated the situation. Heydemann (2013) emphasizes the importance of non-sectarian factors, such as state repression and economic grievances, in explaining the conflict. Zeno (2022) argues that although sectarianism has influenced the conflict, its escalation has been driven by tactics of delineating boundaries and politicizing sects in reaction to regime brutality and regional narratives.

Kila also offers a critical perspective on the sectarian characterization of the Syrian regime, asserting that the conflict cannot be simplistically framed as a struggle between a Sunni majority and an Alawite minority. Instead, according to him, the essence of the conflict lies in a broader confrontation between diverse segments of the population and an oppressive, morally bankrupt regime (Kila, 2014).

L. Khatib argues that the actions of the Syrian regime were not driven by sectarian hostilities. Instead, they were influenced by considerations related to the consolidation of power, which inadvertently exacerbated sectarian divisions (2019, p. 15). He underlines that Saudi Arabia, recognizing the potential repercussions of funding Sunni Islamists, cautiously approached its involvement. Even when compelled to act in Syria to counter Iranian influence and confront radical elements, Saudi Arabia, at least until 2013, chose to support a coalition of groups perceived as secular. Importantly, it refrained from supporting Syria's prominent Sunni movement, the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar, on the other hand, aimed to strengthen its regional

standing by strategically employing Islamist proxies. Sectarian rhetoric is utilized to rationalize state policies and to vilify and divide the opposition (L. Khatib, 2019, p. 18).

While Khatib's analysis provides valuable insights into the regional power dynamics and the strategic deployment of sectarian rhetoric, a comprehensive understanding of the Syrian conflict necessitates a closer examination of Assad's own narrative and motivations. Analyzing Assad's 2013 interview allows for a deeper exploration of his interpretation of the conflict's origins, his assessment of the role of sectarianism, and his strategic calculations in response to the escalating crisis. In an interview in 2013, President Bashar al-Assad provided insights into his perspective on the reasons and dynamics of the Syrian civil war and addressed the question of whether he sees it as a sectarian conflict (SANA, 2013).

Assad acknowledges attempts to draw Syria into sectarian tension, emphasizing that various methods, including direct and indirect occupation, threats, and intimidation, have been employed. He argues that the Arab Spring was seen as a chance to weaken the Axis of Resistance by the Western powers. He rejects the attempt to label the resistance as sectarian, emphasizing that the Syrian people are not easily misled. Addressing allegations that the government instigated sectarian conflict, Assad admits that such claims are made not only by *takfirist* extremists but also by those who identify as secularists. He attributes the promotion of sectarianism to ignorance, both among those claiming to be secular and those claiming to understand religion without grasping its true essence. Assad identifies ignorance as a common element between those who claim to be secular and those who claim to understand religion, suggesting that poor knowledge of religions leads to sectarianism. He distinguishes between religious doctrine based on intellectual thought, which historically did not promote sectarianism, and the misinterpretation of religion that fosters sectarian divisions.

Those advocating this non-sectarian emphasize several key arguments. Firstly, they point to grievances beyond sectarian lines, suggesting that the conflict in Syria is rooted in broader societal issues rather than solely sectarian divisions. Additionally, they highlight the diverse motivations driving various actors involved in the conflict, indicating that sectarian identity is just one aspect of their involvement. Moreover, proponents of this view argue that sectarianism has been manipulated as a tool by both the regime and external actors to further their political agendas, rather than being the primary driver of the conflict. They also highlight instances of cross-sectarian alliances and coexistence, suggesting that sectarian divisions are not absolute and can be transcended. Finally, they criticize what they see as an overemphasis

on identity politics, arguing that focusing solely on sectarian dynamics overlooks other significant factors contributing to the conflict.

3.4.2.1. Non-Sectarian Grievances

The initial protests in 2011 were primarily driven by non-sectarian grievances, such as political repression, economic inequality, corruption, and lack of basic freedoms (Heydemann, 2013, p. 11). These grievances resonated with Syrians across religious lines, uniting them in their demand for change.

A closer examination of the initial protests reveals that demonstrators emphasized that their political demands were not rooted in sectarian affiliations. The early protestors employed inclusive slogans like '*al-shab al-suri wahid*' (the Syrian people are one) and '*Suriya turid isqat al-nizam*' (Syria wants to topple the regime). Protesters celebrated figures and symbols from Christian, Kurdish, and Alawi communities, bringing both crosses and crescents to their demonstrations. Their chants emphasized a secular and inclusive message. In Damascus' Hamidiyya market in March 2011, for example, they chanted, "We are Alawites, Sunnis, people of all sects, and we demand the downfall of the regime." (L. Khatib, 2019, p. 7).

3.4.2.2. Civilian Protests and Demands

The eruption of civilian protests marked a pivotal moment in the Syrian conflict, with demonstrators articulating demands that transcended sectarian lines. Calls for democracy and political reforms were central to the protests, indicating a collective yearning for governance that would address the broader political grievances shared by Syrians across diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. Ruiz de Elvira and Belhadj contend that in the early stages of the war, opposition to the regime was united, regardless of religious, ethnic, provincial, and class divides (2018, p. 329).

Civil society emerged as a crucial force in shaping the non-sectarian narrative of the conflict in the beginning. Activism and advocacy efforts, irrespective of religious or ethnic affiliations, played a vital role in channeling the aspirations of the populace towards a shared vision of a more inclusive and democratic Syria. According to Lund, activists framed their

engagement in terms of a struggle for freedom against tyranny, often overlooking or deliberately downplaying the sectarian dimension. This was a conscious choice to preserve moral integrity and prevent causing concern among Western supporters (2012, p. 7).

In conclusion, the early stages of the conflict saw a diverse cross-section of Syrian society united in their demands for political change, demonstrating a collective aspiration for a more inclusive and representative government. This initial non-sectarian character, however, was gradually overshadowed by the escalating violence, the rise of extremist groups, and the cynical manipulation of sectarian identities by various actors.

3.4.2.3. Non-Sectarian Factions within the Opposition

The Syrian civil war witnessed the presence of non-sectarian factions actively participating in the conflict. These groups demonstrated a commitment to goals that extended beyond sectarian lines, emphasizing shared values such as the establishment of a more democratic and inclusive political order. Khatib's perspective on the pre-revolution Syrian political landscape serves as a foundation for understanding the emergence of non-sectarian factions within the opposition. He posits that prior to the revolution; the domestic political structure was characterized by a lack of salience in sectarianism and confessional politics. Instead, it revolved around crosscutting identities and issues, suggesting a political culture that transcended confessional lines and primordial affiliations. This organizational framework inherently laid the groundwork for the formation of non-sectarian factions within the opposition. The absence of entrenched sectarian divisions in the pre-revolution political landscape allowed for the cultivation of groups with shared goals and values that extended beyond religious affiliations, contributing to the nuanced and multifaceted nature of the opposition in the Syrian conflict (L. Khatib, 2019, p. 5). Furthermore, Khatib argues, several pro-Assad loyalist militias, including the Quds Brigade, the Ba'ath Brigades, and the NDF, predominantly consist of Sunni loyalists and fighters who receive financial support from Sunni entrepreneurs such as the Hamshos and the Ghrewatis. Additionally, a significant number of Shabiha militias in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, and the Eastern governorates are, in general, composed of Sunnis. In essence, not all Sunnis align themselves with the opposition, highlighting yet another non-sectarian dimension of the Syrian civil war (L. Khatib, 2019, p. 5).

Wimmen's analysis focusing on the considerable number of Syrian Sunnis endorsing the regime and thousands of internally displaced individuals from Sunni regions seeking shelter in government-controlled areas underscores that the conflict is not a straightforward contest between clearly defined and unified groups striving for dominance, control over territory and institutions, or the exclusion or elimination of other sects (2017, p. 61).

3.4.2.4. Cross-Sectarian Alliances and Coexistence

Despite the sectarian tensions and violence, there have been numerous instances of cross-sectarian alliances and coexistence throughout the conflict. Many Syrians have rejected sectarian narratives and continued to interact with people from different religious backgrounds, highlighting the resilience of social cohesion and the potential for reconciliation.

Beyond sectarian lines, the Syrian civil war also unfolds along socio-economic and urban-rural divides, representing a classic countryside uprising against a perceived exploitative central government. This internal struggle is further complicated by the country's religious divisions, which intersect with various identity and loyalty patterns. Moreover, the conflict possesses a political dimension where loyalists of Bashar el-Assad contend to maintain the existing power structure in the face of calls for democratization and economic redistribution. Lastly, the conflict has evolved into a proxy war involving multiple regional and international powers vying for influence, introducing an additional layer of complexity to the situation.

There exist arguments concerning the support of some Sunnis for the Syrian regime, which proponents claim demonstrates the non-sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict.

Shams posits that this support primarily stems from class interests (Shams & Kaileh, 2014b). According to him, each strand of Islam holds distinct beliefs, with the doctrines of the Muslim Brotherhood differing vastly from those of the regime, and those of groups like ISIS or al-Nusra Front being dissimilar to Sufism. While Hamas previously maintained close ties with the Syrian regime, it distanced itself following the revolution, especially after being urged to suppress protests. The Qubaisiyat movement, backed by the regime and operating numerous schools and educational facilities, shares common interests with the regime. Despite officially promoting secularism, the regime requires various religious affiliations to showcase its

purported non-sectarianism, with the Qubaisiyat willing to fulfill this role alongside other official religious institutions like the Mufti and religious schools.

The Sunni bourgeoisie of Damascus forms a predominantly wealthy class that benefits significantly from its alliance with the regime, blending wealth and influence. Although a minority, this affluent group plays a substantial role in diverting the nation's wealth into private hands. Notably, many have already shifted their assets abroad, even prior to the revolution, due to pressures to collaborate with the security apparatus.

However, the class interests of the bourgeoisie do not negate the sectarian tendencies of the regime. Sectarianism, in itself, represents another facet of class-based authoritarianism. The "Damascene and Aleppo bourgeoisie" exhibit little concern over the nature of this authoritarianism, as long as it contributes to their wealth accumulation.

3.4.3. Sectarian Entrepreneurs and Non-entrepreneurs

While some scholars argue that the Syrian civil war was not sectarian in essence, these approaches often neglect the crucial roles played by both sectarian entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs. This oversight results in an incomplete understanding of the conflict's complex dynamics.

The concepts of "sectarian entrepreneurs" and "sectarian non-entrepreneurs" offer a valuable framework for understanding the Syrian civil war as fundamentally a sectarian conflict, despite its multiple dimensions. The sectarian entrepreneur framework highlights how influential figures exploit sectarian identities to consolidate power and achieve political goals. Studies on "sectarian entrepreneurs" have highlighted the instrumental use of sectarianism by influential actors, often from the elite class, to achieve political ends (Matthiesen, 2015; Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2008). These individuals exploit sectarian identities to forge alliances, manipulate power dynamics through a strategy of divide and rule, or bolster their own legitimacy at the expense of others.

Matthiesen's concept of the "sectarian identity entrepreneur" encapsulates this phenomenon. He defines these figures as powerful individuals who strategically leverage collective identities as a political tool (Matthiesen, 2015, p. 214). They capitalize on pre-existing sectarian fault lines or actively construct new ones to consolidate their power base and

advance their agendas. This exploitation of sectarianism can manifest in various ways, such as mobilizing sectarian groups for political support, instigating conflict to maintain control, or justifying discriminatory policies against perceived rivals.

In essence, sectarian entrepreneurs are not merely passive beneficiaries of sectarian divisions, but active agents who manipulate and exacerbate these divisions for their own gain. Their actions have profound consequences for social cohesion and political stability, often leading to increased polarization, conflict, and violence. These individuals actively manipulate sectarian divisions to mobilize support, justify violence, and maintain control, thereby deepening societal rifts. Ignoring the actions of sectarian entrepreneurs obscures a key driver of the conflict's escalation and persistent violence.

Moreover, neglecting the role of sectarian non-entrepreneurs (Fibiger, 2018, p. 305), who may not actively exploit sectarianism but passively benefit from or contribute to its perpetuation, further limits one's understanding of the conflict's multifaceted nature. While sectarian non-entrepreneurs might not be the primary instigators of violence, their behaviors and mindsets play a significant role in perpetuating sectarian divisions. These individuals, although not directly engaging in violent acts, contribute to the ongoing cycle of sectarianism through their everyday actions, language, and social interactions. By maintaining and reinforcing prejudiced attitudes, discriminatory practices, and exclusive group identities, they create an environment where sectarianism continues to thrive. This ongoing reinforcement ensures that sectarian boundaries remain rigid and that the social and cultural fabric remains divided, ultimately sustaining the conditions that can lead to conflict and violence.

Hinnebusch (2016, p. 123) introduces the concept of "everyday" or "banal" sectarianism, a form of sectarian expression characterized by the display of sectarian symbols and affiliations without conscious recognition of their significance. This is one of three types of sectarianism identified by Hinnebusch, alongside assertive and passive forms.

In short, the literature on "sectarian entrepreneurs" or non-entrepreneurs have highlighted the instrumental use of sectarianism by influential actors, often from the elite class, to achieve political ends. These individuals exploit sectarian identities to forge alliances, manipulate power dynamics through a strategy of divide and rule, or bolster their own legitimacy at the expense of others.

The perspective of sectarian entrepreneurs significantly bolsters the argument that the Syrian civil war was fundamentally sectarian, overshadowing other potential causes. These

actors, driven by sectarian motivations and seeking to exploit sectarian divisions for personal gain, actively fueled and escalated the conflict along sectarian lines. The initial phases of sectarianization saw the manipulation, solidification, provocation, and strengthening of ethno-sectarian identities by sectarian entrepreneurs such as clerics, elites, and influential individuals who personally gain from the prevalence and dominance of sectarianism (Hadaya, 2020, p. 624). Their actions, including mobilizing sectarian militias, promoting sectarian narratives, and targeting civilians based on sectarian identity, provide compelling evidence of the conflict's sectarian nature.

Furthermore, the success of sectarian entrepreneurs in mobilizing support and resources highlights the deep-seated sectarian grievances and divisions within Syrian society. Their ability to exploit these pre-existing fault lines and channel them into violence demonstrates the potency of sectarianism as a driving force in the conflict.

While other factors, such as socio-economic grievances and political repression, undoubtedly contributed to the outbreak of the war, the actions of sectarian entrepreneurs reveal the centrality of sectarianism in shaping the conflict's trajectory and intensity. Moreover, the rise of sectarian entrepreneurs and their influence on the conflict trajectory challenge the notion that the war was primarily a struggle for democracy or social justice. Their prominence underscores the limitations of framing the conflict solely in terms of political or economic grievances, as it overlooks the critical role of sectarianism in fueling violence and shaping the conflict's dynamics.

In conclusion, the perspective of sectarian entrepreneurs provides a compelling argument for the sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war. In addition, sectarian perspectives on the Syrian conflict offer a more convincing analysis due to several compelling reasons. Firstly, these perspectives acknowledge the deep-rooted historical and religious divisions within Syrian society that have been exacerbated by the conflict. Sectarian identities have long played a significant role in shaping political allegiances and social dynamics in the region, making it difficult to dismiss their relevance in the current conflict. Additionally, sectarian narratives provide a clear framework for understanding the motivations and actions of various actors involved in the conflict. By recognizing the sectarian dimension, one can better comprehend the alliances, strategies, and tactics employed by different groups, including the regime, opposition factions, and external actors.

Furthermore, sectarian perspectives shed light on the underlying power struggles and competition for dominance between different sects, particularly the Alawite-dominated regime and Sunni-majority opposition forces. Finally, they offer insights into the complexities of post-conflict reconciliation and the challenges of fostering inter-sectarian coexistence in a deeply divided society like Syria. Overall, by acknowledging the significance of sectarian dynamics, one can gain a more nuanced understanding of the Syrian conflict and its complexities.

3.5. Conclusion

This section has explored the multifaceted dimensions and manifestations of sectarianism, shedding light on the roles of Hamas, Hezbollah, and the intricate dynamics of the Syrian civil war. Sectarianism, as analyzed in this text, is not merely a byproduct of religious differences but a complex interplay of political, social, and strategic factors.

Hamas and Hezbollah, while rooted in specific religious and ideological contexts, operate as sectarian actors whose actions transcend simple religious allegiances. Hamas, primarily known for its resistance against Israeli occupation, also navigates sectarian divides, leveraging religious identity to bolster its political legitimacy and operational capacity. Similarly, Hezbollah, with its deep ties to Shia Islam and Iranian support, uses sectarian identity as a tool to maintain its influence in Lebanon and assert its position within the broader regional power dynamics.

The Syrian civil war epitomizes a sectarian quagmire, where the conflict's escalation and persistence are deeply intertwined with sectarian allegiances and rivalries. The Assad regime's strategies, aimed at consolidating power, have exacerbated sectarian divisions, turning what began as a political uprising into a sectarian battlefield. The involvement of regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, each with their sectarian agendas, has further deepened the conflict, transforming Syria into a theater of proxy wars fought along sectarian lines.

In conclusion, while Hamas and Hezbollah are undeniably rooted in sectarian contexts and operate within sectarian frameworks, their foreign policies during the Syrian civil war demonstrate a significant departure from purely sectarian motivations. Understanding and analyzing these non-sectarian aspects of their engagements not only enriches our comprehension of their roles in regional conflicts but also contributes to broader discussions on

the complexities of sectarianism and geopolitics in the Middle East. The upcoming chapters will critically examine both the sectarian and material dimensions inherent in the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah. Through this analysis, it will become evident that while sectarian considerations play a significant role, the prominence of material interests is far more pronounced in shaping their strategic decisions and regional engagements.



CHAPTER 4: HAMAS AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

4.1. Introduction

Hamas was born out of the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation and has since evolved into a multifaceted political and militant entity. Founded upon the principles of resistance and liberation, Hamas operates as both a political party and a militant group, with its armed wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, engaging in armed resistance against Israeli forces. Hamas' social welfare programs and grassroots support base have also contributed to its resilience and popularity among Palestinians, particularly in the Gaza Strip, where it exercises *de facto* governance (Jensen, 2009, p. 6).

In 2006, Hamas emerged victorious in the Palestinian legislative election, securing a majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council. Subsequently, in 2007, it gained control of the Gaza Strip from the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah), leading to the establishment of separate governance in the region independent of the Palestinian National Authority. Following this shift in power, the Gaza Strip became subjected to a blockade imposed by Israel with support from Egypt. Over the years, this blockade has severely affected the lives of Palestinians in Gaza, restricting their access to essential goods and services.

Furthermore, tensions between Hamas and Israel escalated into multiple conflicts, including significant military confrontations in 2008–2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021. The most recent conflict in 2023, instigated by Hamas through its "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood," resulted in a notable military setback for Israel, the most significant since the 1973 Arab–Israeli War. In response, Israel declared war on Hamas, intensifying the blockade of Gaza and launching airstrikes along with a ground invasion. This cycle of violence underscores the enduring conflict between Hamas and Israel, with significant implications for regional stability and the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip (M. M. Saleh, 2023).

Hamas' involvement in the Syrian civil war represents a crucial case in understanding the interplay between regional conflicts and sectarian dynamics. Initially, Hamas maintained a close relationship with the Assad regime and its key ally, Iran. However, as the conflict

intensified and sectarian lines became more pronounced, Hamas faced pressure to realign its stance. This chapter undertakes a comprehensive analysis of Hamas' foreign policy during the Syrian civil war, delving into the critical decisions and actions taken by Hamas, and examines the broader implications of its involvement in this complex and sectarian-driven conflict.

The foreign policy of Hamas underwent a transformation during the Syrian civil war. Initially, Hamas declared its commitment to the principles of respecting the will and aspirations of Arab countries (March 2011-February 2012). Subsequently, Hamas began to openly voice its opposition against the Syrian regime, represented by the organization's political leader, Khaled Meshaal, who left Damascus (February 2012-July 2013). However, the period following July 2013 witnessed another shift in Hamas' stance towards Syria, as the organization made efforts to mend connections with its old allies.

In the beginning, Hamas stated that the protests in Syria is an internal issue and declared its commitment to the principles of "respecting the will and aspirations of Arab countries". In an official statement published on Hamas' official website on April 2, 2011, Hamas declared support for steps that would preserve Syria's stability and internal unity (Berti, 2012, p. 27), stating, "We are closely following the developments taking place in this country with great interest and attention. What is happening in Syria is an internal affair. We respect the will of Arab and Islamic people. We hope that the current situation will be resolved by the people's quests and hopes being realized, thus preserving the stability of Syria" (Napolitano, 2013, p. 83; SAMAA, 2011). The statement concluded by affirming Hamas' support for both the Syrian government and the Syrian populace. This was also clarified by Ghazi Hamad, deputy foreign minister of the organization, who explained that their support for the Syrian regime persisted as long as it was engaged in the struggle against Israel (Cafiero & Certo, 2014).

As the violence in Syria escalated and developed into a civil conflict, Hamas altered its stance to become openly critical of the Syrian government and aligned itself with the Syrian opposition forces. In February 2012, Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas Prime Minister in Gaza, delivered an impassioned speech at al-Azhar Mosque during a Friday prayer, praising "the courageous people of Syria who were striving for freedom, democracy, and reform." As worshippers chanted, "No Hezbollah, No Iran," it became evident that Hamas was distancing itself from these particular actors (Cafiero & Certo, 2014). He conveyed his greetings to "the people of the Arab Spring or Islamic winter," along with extending his regards to the Syrian people striving for freedom, democracy, and reform (Akram, 2012).

This shift positioned Hamas in support of the Sunni Muslim majority in both Syria and the wider region. Hamas aligned its own resistance against Israeli oppression with the broader struggles of the Arab populations, effectively positioning itself in solidarity with the Arab masses (Baconi, 2018, p. 175; Milton-Edwards, 2013, p. 61). Under pressure from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Hamas leader Meshaal left Damascus in 2012 and settled in Qatar, which was a prominent advocate for the Syrian opposition and post-Mubarak Egypt administration.

The violent incidents and civil war in Syria brought Hezbollah and Hamas, who were collaborating on various issues, particularly in their struggle against Israel in the Middle East, face to face. Hezbollah accused Hamas, whom they claimed was involved in anti-Assad resistance in Syria, of training FSA militants and demanded that they leave Lebanon as soon as possible. Hamas, on the other hand, denied the allegations of providing military training to Syrian opposition militants.

However, as the Syrian civil war continued and external actors became increasingly involved, Hamas began to shift its stance once more. The removal of the Brotherhood from power in Egypt dealt a significant blow to Hamas, resulting in substantial damage due to the loss of a close supporter in terms of both ideology and proximity. Consequently, Hamas found itself compelled to explore alternatives to navigate its ongoing crisis. Hamas leadership felt pressure from external actors such as Iran, who were supporting the Syrian government, and from within the organization, where there were divisions over the group's stance on the Syrian conflict. As a result, Hamas started to reevaluate its position and sought to rebuild its relationships with Iran and the Syrian government.

Hamas' relations with regional allies like Qatar and Türkiye also played a role in shaping its stance towards the Syrian conflict. Both Qatar and Türkiye were supportive of the Syrian opposition forces, and their support for Hamas was seen as a way to counterbalance Iran's influence in the region. However, as relations between Qatar and other Gulf states deteriorated, and Türkiye's involvement in Syria became more complex, Hamas sought to reevaluate its alliances and pursue a more neutral stance on the conflict.

In mid-June 2013, several senior Hamas delegations traveled to Beirut, including political leaders led by Moussa Abu Marzouk, the deputy chair of the political bureau. They engaged in discussions with key members of Hezbollah. The most significant meeting involved leaders from both Hamas and Hezbollah, particularly Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah. This marked the first high-level meeting since March 2012. Notably, these

meetings were sponsored by Iran, and an iftar banquet was held on July 31, 2013, at the Iranian Ambassador's residence, attended by Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary-General, Naim Qassem, and Hamas' representative in Lebanon, Ali Baraka. During this meeting, the Iranian ambassador also expressed gratitude to Hamas for preventing the involvement of Palestinian refugee camps in any Sunni-Shiite sectarian conflict in Lebanon (Adnan Abu Amer, 2013c). This signaled a potential return to the relationship's previous state before the Syrian crisis.

In 2017, the election of Haniyeh marked a significant shift in Hamas' foreign policy, as the group began to move away from its initial stance critical of the Syrian government and towards a more pragmatic approach that prioritized regional alliances and avoiding further divisions within the organization. New Hamas charter in 2017 also contributed to this process (Adwan, 2019). In February 2019, Haniyeh visited Tehran and met with Iranian officials, underscoring the importance of the relationship between Hamas and Iran.

Overall, the foreign policy of Hamas underwent a significant transformation during the Syrian civil war. The group initially aligned itself with the Syrian opposition forces but eventually shifted towards a more pragmatic approach that prioritized regional alliances and avoided further divisions within the organization. The group's relations with Iran, military intervention in Egypt and the dynamic course of the war in Syria played a key role in this transformation, as did its relations with Qatar and Türkiye.

4.2. Foreign Policy of Hamas during the Syrian Civil War

The analysis of Hamas' foreign policy trajectory reveals distinct phases punctuated by significant events that have reshaped the organization's regional alliances and strategic principles. This chronological classification serves as a structured framework for examining Hamas' shifts in foreign policy during the Syrian civil war. Each period is marked by pivotal events that have had profound and enduring consequences, thereby providing a methodical approach to unraveling the complexities of Hamas' diplomatic evolution amidst the turbulent regional landscape. This classification is justified by the critical nature of these phases, which offer valuable insights into Hamas' strategic decision-making and adaptation to geopolitical challenges over time.

4.2.1. The Early Commitment (March 2011 – February 2012)

At the onset of the Syrian conflict in March 2011, Hamas initially positioned itself in alignment with broader Arab principles, emphasizing unity and the aspirations of the Arab populace. This period marked a crucial phase in Hamas' engagement with regional dynamics, reflecting its commitment to Arab solidarity. Hamas operated an office in Damascus to facilitate communication with the "Alliance of Ten Palestinian Factions," which had opposed the Oslo Accords since 1993. After Hamas leaders were expelled from Amman in 1999, Damascus emerged as the new base for the movement's external branch (Napolitano, 2013, p. 73).

The foreign policy of Hamas has evolved significantly since the early 1990s, particularly in its strategic use of ideology to further the movement's interests. This period saw Hamas dynamically adjusting its ideological stance in response to changing regional and international conditions, aligning its ideology pragmatically with its core objectives (Seurat, 2018, p. 106). However, the emergence of the Arab Spring introduced a period of unprecedented uncertainty, characterized by a complex interplay of factors that obscured clear-cut interests. As the political and social fabric of the region transformed during the Arab Spring, Hamas found itself navigating a challenging landscape where its interests became less distinct and straightforward.

The outcomes of the Arab uprisings were largely advantageous for Hamas, particularly with the rise of Islamist movements in Egypt and Tunisia, which provided new opportunities for regional alliances. However, the turmoil in Syria posed a significant dilemma for Hamas. The movement faced a critical decision: to support President Bashar al-Assad and risk alienating other Arab nations, or to side with the Syrian populace and jeopardize its relationship with Iran, a primary financial backer.

In an effort to navigate the Syrian conflict cautiously, Hamas adopted a neutral stance until early 2012, when it withdrew its exiled political leadership from Damascus (Ayyoub, 2013). This neutrality was partly influenced by the Syrian regime's pressure on Hamas to align with its interests, aiming to counter accusations from Sunni factions that the regime's brutal crackdown was sectarian in nature. By securing Hamas' support, the regime sought to demonstrate that its actions were not sectarian, thereby attempting to discredit these accusations and mitigate perceptions of sectarian discrimination (Mousa, 2022, p. 19).

Before the protests began, Meshaal had advised Assad to introduce reforms in order to prevent the kind of unrest that had destabilized Tunisia and Egypt (Napolitano, 2013, p. 75). Nevertheless, Hamas largely maintained a wait-and-see approach during the early stages of the revolution. Its initial statements regarding the Syrian uprising were deliberately vague, attempting to please both the regime and the opposition. Hamas recognized Syria's role as a host for resistance groups while also validating the legitimacy of the demands of the public (Napolitano, 2013, p. 75).

When Yusuf al-Qaradawi, “the most influential Sunni theologian of today” (Belhaj, 2022, p. 8) associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and the founding chairman of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) between 2004 and 2018, publicly condemned the Assad regime's atrocities, it placed Hamas in a highly precarious position. The Syrian government immediately pressured Meshaal to repudiate al-Qaradawi's statements and affirm support for the regime. Meshaal, however, declined to meet this demand. Instead, he suggested organizing a meeting between al-Qaradawi and the Syrian ambassador in Qatar to discuss the regime's perspective and the situation in Syria. This refusal to denounce al-Qaradawi was interpreted by the Syrian authorities as a clear sign that Hamas prioritized its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood over its allegiance to the Assad regime (Mousa, 2022, p. 20).

On April 2, 2011, just fifteen days after the revolution began, Hamas released its initial statement regarding the events in Syria, affirming its stance of neutrality, emphasizing that the situation was an internal matter for Syria and expressing hope for a resolution that would fulfill the people's aspirations while preserving Syria's stability. This statement, titled “On the Current Events in Sister Syria,” underscored Hamas' commitment to closely monitoring developments in Syria (Mousa, 2022, p. 21; SAMAA, 2011).

After the January 24, 2011 revolution, Hamas, especially its leadership in Gaza, began to see the newly formed Morsi government in Egypt as a potential alternative to its existing alliances with Damascus and Tehran. The robust organizational and ideological ties that Hamas had cultivated with the Brotherhood over the years drove this shift. Morsi government suggested to Hamas a promising avenue for maintaining its political influence and securing support in the region. However, Hamas refrained from openly criticizing the Syrian government, despite its growing alignment with the Morsi government and the ideology of the Brotherhood (Mousa, 2022, pp. 29–30).

Further statements from Hamas reiterated its neutrality. On September 12, 2011, Hamas denied rumors that the Syrian regime had requested its leadership to leave Damascus (Mousa, 2022, p. 21). In December 2011, following a series of explosions in Midan district of Damascus, close to the Yarmouk camp, Hamas issued another statement to clarify its position. The statement expressed support for the Syrian people and advocated for a political resolution to the crisis (Napolitano, 2013, p. 78). This statement signaled a subtle yet crucial shift in Hamas' policy towards the Assad regime.

In January 2012, Meshaal attempted to broker a dialogue between the Syrian regime and the Arab League. This effort faced significant backlash from the Brotherhood (Napolitano, 2013, p. 77). This diplomatic approach was driven by a desire to avoid taking sides in the Syrian conflict, thereby preserving Hamas' relationships with both the Syrian government and other Arab states, and maintaining flexibility in a complex and volatile situation.

Haniyeh's Iran visit in February 2012, although disapproved by the Qatari emir, also underscored Hamas' efforts to maintain diverse regional alliances. This visit was part of a broader strategy to navigate the regional complexities and balance relationships with key supporters such as Iran, despite potential strains with other allies like Qatar (Eldar, 2015).

As the Syrian conflict intensified, Hamas found itself under increasing pressure to revise its relations with the Assad regime. According to a Wall Street Journal report from December 7, 2011, a senior Hamas official who had relocated from Damascus to Gaza disclosed that Türkiye and Qatar had urged Hamas to leave Syria immediately, with statements such as "Aren't you ashamed? Enough. Leave immediately" (Taştekin, 2022).

Shabbiha frequently circulated false claims in regions adjacent to Palestinian refugee camps, alleging that Hamas supporters were actively involved in quelling anti-regime protests. In 2011, Syrian security personnel in the Hajar al-Aswad suburb, close to the Yarmouk refugee camp, were observed wearing scarves emblazoned with Hamas' emblem while suppressing demonstrations. This strategy was designed to incite hostility between Syrians and the Palestinians of Yarmouk, while also attempting to associate Hamas with the regime's tactics to fragment and undermine the opposition (Napolitano, 2013, p. 76).

Escalation of the civil war into widespread violence compelled Hamas to reassess its position regarding the Assad regime. Initially attempting to maintain a stance of neutrality (Mousa, 2022, p. 17), Hamas gradually shifted to openly supporting the Syrian opposition forces. This transformation aligned Hamas with the Sunni Muslim majority in Syria and the

broader region and marked a significant reorientation in its foreign policy and regional alliances.

Ultimately, in January 2012, Hamas severed its ties with Syria. Meshaal, having relocated to Doha, acknowledged the severance during a visit to Türkiye a few months later, expressing support for the Syrian people's revolution and their quest for freedom, stating, “We salute the revolution of the Syrian people who bleed for democracy.” This shift reflected a move away from the non-sectarian Axis of Resistance and towards a “Sunni Axis” influenced by the Arab Spring (Napolitano, 2013, p. 77).

4.2.2. Departure from Damascus and Shift in Alignment (February 2012 – July 2013)

As the Syrian uprising gained momentum, with widespread protests erupting in Damascus and other cities, Hamas found itself at a critical juncture. The Palestinian Islamist group, which had maintained its base in Damascus for nearly 11 years, was compelled to make a pivotal decision: to either support the Syrian people's demands for freedom and reform or continue backing the Assad regime, which had been a longstanding ally (Hamadi, 2023).

Although Hamas' leadership was reluctant to embrace the political upheaval in Damascus, fearing the potential instability and loss of strategic support, the sentiment among its grassroots supporters in the Palestinian camps was markedly different. The rank-and-file members, as well as many ordinary Palestinians, were in favor of the revolutionary fervor sweeping Syria. They viewed the protests as an opportunity for greater freedom and justice, aligning with the broader aspirations of the Arab Spring (Mousa, 2022, p. 17). The escalating violence and the pressures mounting from regional allies intensified this dilemma. Ultimately, this period marked the beginning of a significant shift in Hamas' alignment.

The Muslim Brotherhood was acutely aware of Hamas' precarious situation in Syria and initially understood its decision to maintain a neutral stance amid the escalating conflict. However, this understanding turned into severe criticism when Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal assumed the role of a mediator between the Arab League and the Syrian regime following the Arab League foreign ministers meeting in Cairo in January 2012. The Arab League had tasked Meshaal with delivering a message to the Syrian authorities to enhance the efficacy of the Arab observers' mission. This intermediary role was perceived as a betrayal by the Brotherhood,

which had hoped for a more definitive stance against the Assad regime (Napolitano, 2013, p. 77). The Brotherhood's critique highlighted the complexities and internal pressures faced by Hamas as it was trying to navigate its position.

Hamas started to perceive that it was not only jeopardizing its support among Palestinians but also risking its credibility within the broader Arab and Muslim communities, particularly among Sunni populations (Mousa, 2022, p. 26). This realization stemmed from the perception that maintaining ties with the Assad regime, which was increasingly viewed as oppressive and sectarian, could undermine Hamas' standing as a champion of Sunni interests and values. Hamas was aware that its continued association with Assad could erode its political legitimacy and moral authority, both regionally and domestically. Therefore, the organization faced a dilemma: maintaining its traditional alliances and risking its broader credibility or aligning with popular sentiment and potentially losing support from key allies.

Under mounting pressure from within and abroad, Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal left Damascus in early 2012 and relocated to Qatar, a prominent supporter of the Syrian rebels and post-Mubarak Egypt. This move symbolized a definitive rupture with the Assad regime, which Hamas had previously supported in its conflict with Israel (Adam Khalil, 2022). In a video titled "The events between us and the Syrian regime after the revolution", Khaled Meshaal elaborated on the reasons behind Hamas' relocation to Doha. He emphasized that the decision was primarily driven by security concerns and Hamas' refusal to be complicit in the regime's actions. Hamas, Meshaal asserted, could not afford to be perceived as endorsing or providing cover for the Syrian regime's oppressive measures (Mousa, 2022, p. 23). Therefore, the move to Doha was a strategic response to safeguard the movement's integrity and autonomy in the face of mounting pressure from the Assad regime.

Ghazi Hamad, Hamas deputy foreign minister, clarified that their support for the Syrian regime was conditional and based on its opposition to Israel (Cafiero & Certo, 2014). With the regime turning against its own people, Hamas decided to disassociate itself, even though this decision represented a significant loss for the organization. Hamas opted to depart from Damascus only after thoroughly exploring all potential avenues to remain neutral in the conflict (Mousa, 2022, p. 25).

The departure from Damascus was part of a broader strategy of realignment within the region. Hamas' decision to distance itself from its longstanding alliance with Alawite backers marked a significant shift in the geopolitical fault lines within the Middle East, exacerbating

the divide between Sunni and Shiite factions (Danin, 2012). With this move, the landscape of Syria's Middle East supporters has narrowed, primarily comprising Shiite Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Iran. This consolidation of Shiite-backed forces underscores the deepening sectarian tensions within the region, as Sunni and Shiite powers increasingly find themselves at odds over the Syrian conflict.

Khaled Meshaal's visit to Amman in January 2012, the first after many years of broken relations, underscored Hamas' efforts to establish alternative bases in the region (Napolitano, 2013, p. 76). Additionally, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt provided Hamas with new opportunities and support, allowing Mousa Abu Marzouk, the deputy head of Hamas' political bureau, to establish office in Egypt.

In February 2012, the real break with the Syrian regime occurred when Ismail Haniyeh, the prime minister of the Hamas-led government in Gaza, delivered a speech at Cairo's al-Azhar mosque (Napolitano, 2013, p. 78). The symbolism and location of this speech was noteworthy (Danin, 2012). Haniyeh expressed solidarity with the Syrian people's struggle for freedom and democracy, explicitly denouncing the Assad regime. "I extend my greetings to all the nations of the Arab Spring, and I express my admiration for the heroic people of Syria who are striving for freedom, democracy, and reform," Haniyeh proclaimed, to which the audience responded with chants rejecting Hezbollah and Iran (Cafiero & Certo, 2014). This marked a significant departure from Hamas' previous alliances and aligned it with the broader aspirations of the Arab Spring.

Hamas publicly declared its support for the Syrian opposition, and strained relations with its primary supporter, Iran. Reuters described this period as one of indecision for Hamas, as it initially wavered in its stance before decisively opposing Assad: "Hamas went public after nearly a year of equivocating as Assad's army, largely led by fellow members of the president's Alawite sect, has crushed mainly Sunni protesters and rebels" (Fahmy & Al-Mughrabi, 2012). This public disassociation from Assad raised questions about Hamas' future relations with Iran, which remained supportive of Assad, and introduced uncertainties regarding its ties with Iran's Shiite allies, such as Hezbollah.

As the Sunni-Shiite divide in the Middle East intensified, Hamas appeared to align itself with the Muslim Brotherhood. The ascendancy of Islamist groups to power in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco broadened Hamas' maneuvering space. This geopolitical

realignment prompted a shift in Hamas' approach towards Syria, reflecting the changing dynamics and alliances in the region.

While ideological considerations played a significant role in Hamas' decision to leave Syria, pragmatic factors were equally influential. No Arab country, including those undergoing the Arab Spring, agreed to host Hamas officially due to concerns about U.S. relations and the potential rise of Islamist Palestinian leaders within their borders (Adnan Abu Amer, 2013a).

Following the evacuation of the Damascus politburo, Hamas leaders dispersed to various locations. Musa Abu Marzouk, leveraging his extensive knowledge and familial connections in Egypt, settled in Cairo. Khaled Meshaal, acting as a mobile leader, primarily resided in Doha but also gained access to Amman, Cairo, and Gaza through the facilitation of Qatari Crown Prince Tamim. Muhammad Nazzal established his base in Jordan, with Hamas' return facilitated by a meeting between Meshaal and King Abdullah II, mediated by Prince Tamim. Khalid Al-'Alami returned to Gaza, while Mahmoud Al-Zahhar openly advocated for the return of all Hamas leaders to Gaza (Sadiki, 2012).

Internal debates within Hamas were also crucial in shaping its decision. Intense and protracted discussions occurred, with some members arguing that Hamas could not ethically remain allied with a regime committing atrocities, while others emphasized their status as guests benefiting from the government's protection and support (Baroud, 2021). Externally, figures such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a prominent Islamic scholar close to the Muslim Brotherhood, publicly condemned the Assad regime's crimes, adding pressure on Hamas to sever ties with Assad (Mousa, 2022, p. 20). This heated debate, which spanned many months, ultimately influenced the decision to leave Damascus.

Hamas' departure from Damascus and open opposition to the Assad regime between February 2012 and July 2013 marked a pivotal moment in its regional strategy. This period was characterized by a significant realignment of alliances and a redefinition of its ideological and strategic priorities in response to the evolving dynamics of the Syrian conflict and broader regional upheavals.

Following its departure from its long-standing base in Damascus, the movement sought new allies and sources of support. Meshaal's visit to Amman was seen as a move to reestablish ties, even if the meeting was largely symbolic (Napolitano, 2013, p. 76). Qatar, already a close ally, was the only actor who accepted hosting Hamas (Danin, 2012), while Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood government provided Hamas leaders in Gaza with greater freedom of movement.

Türkiye envisioned Hamas as a strategic ally to bolster its influence in the region, and pledged significant covert support, including financial aid, signaling Türkiye's commitment to Hamas' cause (Al-Husseini, 2014). Similarly, Qatar sought to leverage its support for Hamas to enhance its regional influence and consolidate its position as a key player in Middle Eastern politics. Qatar's substantial financial contributions, estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars, became instrumental in sustaining Hamas' operations and mitigating the loss of support from previous allies (Ghaith, 2013).

The notion that Hamas left its Syrian base in February 2012 purely for ideological reasons is challenged by Alsoos, who argues that the decision was also deeply influenced by pragmatic considerations. According to Alsoos (2021), Hamas leaders had communicated their intention to relocate the political bureau from Damascus to Cairo well before the official move. This decision was not solely based on ideological differences with the Assad regime but was significantly constrained by the political dynamics in the region, particularly Egypt's stance on Assad's removal. Thus, the departure from Syria was driven by a blend of ideological and strategic factors.

Furthermore, Jeenah provides additional context, suggesting that the decision to leave Syria was not impulsive but rather the result of extensive internal deliberation (Baroud, 2021). According to her, there was a prolonged and intense debate within Hamas, regarding their position on the Syrian conflict. Many members argued that it was ethically untenable to remain in Syria while the Assad regime committed atrocities against its people. Conversely, others felt a strong sense of loyalty to the Syrian government, which had provided protection and support to Hamas over the years. This debate, more intense than often portrayed, spanned several months before a consensus was reached. Therefore, the move was not merely a strategic calculation but was also significantly influenced by internal ethical and ideological pressures.

The transition to Doha was succeeded by a series of additional declarations in December 2012, condemning the targeting of Palestinian camps by the Syrian regime and advocating for the recognition of these camps as neutral entities, removed from the sphere of conflict (Mousa, 2022, p. 22). As the protests in Syria escalated, the regime exerted mounting pressure on Hamas to adopt a definitive stance on the unfolding events. Consequently, Hamas found itself compelled to abandon its previously neutral position, unable to maintain its impartiality in the face of mounting pressure.

4.2.2.1. The Battle of Yarmouk Camp

Yarmouk Camp is crucial in understanding the foreign policy of Hamas during the Syrian civil war for several key reasons. The camp, being the largest Palestinian refugee community in Syria, represented a significant humanitarian and political concern for Hamas. Dire situation of the camp highlighted the plight of Palestinian refugees, a core issue for Hamas' identity and mission. Hamas' handling of the Yarmouk crisis also affected its standing among Palestinians in the diaspora and within the occupied territories. Its supporters and detractors alike scrutinized the group's response to the suffering of Palestinians in Syria.

Yarmouk Camp, located near Damascus, Syria, was established in 1957 to accommodate Palestinian refugees who fled or were expelled from their homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Over the years, Yarmouk evolved from a refugee camp into a vibrant urban neighborhood, home to both Palestinians and Syrians. By 2011, its population had grown to an estimated 150,000-220,000 people, making it the largest Palestinian refugee community in Syria (Al-Khateeb, 2022; UNRWA, n.d.).

The camp became strategically significant during the civil war, due to its location near Damascus. In December 2012, intense fighting broke out in Yarmouk as various factions, including the FSA and Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, clashed with Syrian government forces and their allies. The battle resulted in widespread destruction and the displacement of thousands of residents (Erakat, 2014, pp. 601–602).

Hamas' involvement in the Battle of Yarmouk was more indirect. While there were reports of individual Hamas members joining opposition forces, the organization as a whole did not commit significant resources or manpower to the fight in Yarmouk. A Syrian source claimed to Al-Monitor that Hamas had been involved in the Syrian conflict from the outset. This involvement included providing military expertise to the FSA and having fighters participate in the battle at Yarmouk Camp near Damascus (Mouzahem, 2013).

The movement never officially acknowledged its role in the conflict, but the active involvement of its supporters on the ground allowed Hamas to enhance its reputation relative to other Palestinian factions that were criticized for their lack of engagement. This involvement helped Hamas distinguish itself from those accused of remaining passive (Napolitano, 2013, p. 82). In 2011, as the Syrian civil war began, Hamas militants in the Yarmouk Camp formed the Aknaf Bait Al Maqdis Brigades. This group, reportedly composed of individuals within Hamas,

facilitated the entry of militants into the camp and participated in conflicts in other areas such as Eastern Ghouta (Al-Tamimi, 2018). Although Hamas leadership denied direct connections to this group, it was formed under the protection of Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal and was actively involved in armed engagements (Moore, 2015).

4.2.3. Reconciliation Attempts (July 2013 – August 2017)

Between 2013 and 2017, Hamas engaged in numerous efforts to reconcile with Iran and Syria, driven by strategic necessities and the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. These reconciliation efforts were driven by several factors. First, the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt complicated Hamas' position. The organization had anticipated that the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood in countries like Egypt would provide a supportive regional environment (Saouli, 2013). However, the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi in 2013 and the subsequent hostile stance of the new Egyptian regime under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi dealt a severe blow to Hamas' strategic outlook (Karmon, 2013, p. 111).

Hamas lost a crucial ally as the new Egyptian regime took a hard stance against the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, including Hamas. The closure of the Rafah border crossing by Egypt significantly hindered Hamas' ability to govern and support the population in Gaza. Although Qatar continued to provide financial aid and political support, it could not replace the military and logistical backing that Iran had previously offered.

A few weeks following the ousting of Morsi, Hamas official Ahmad Youssef disclosed to the press that the organization had engaged in discussions with Iranian and Hezbollah representatives in Beirut. Youssef emphasized that both parties acknowledged their shared adversary in Israel, while also recognizing and respecting each other's differing perspectives on certain issues, particularly regarding the situation in Syria (Danin, 2012).

Another turning point came with Israel's military offensive in Gaza in the summer of 2014. While media attention initially focused on Hamas' alleged involvement in the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teenagers, the broader narrative revealed Hamas' vulnerability. Departing from its traditional alignment with the Axis of Resistance, Hamas found itself marginalized by the so-called "moderate" Arab states, further weakening its position on the regional stage. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seized the opportunity presented by

Hamas' isolation, unleashing a campaign of unprecedented brutality aimed at politically dismantling the organization before targeting its military infrastructure. The assault intended to break Hamas' resolve and render it incapable of posing a significant threat in the future.

In this context, the Gaza war served as a catalyst for a recalibration of alliances, pushing Hamas towards Iran as a reliable source of support amidst escalating hostilities and dwindling regional backing (Baroud, 2015). The shared animosity towards Israel, coupled with Iran's willingness to extend a helping hand to a beleaguered Hamas, fostered a renewed bond between the two entities, despite the complexities and potential repercussions of such a realignment on the broader geopolitical landscape.

In addition, the Syrian regime's military successes and the containment of the opposition forced Hamas to reconsider its antagonistic stance towards Damascus. Additionally, the financial and military support that Iran and Hezbollah had provided in the past made it strategically imperative for Hamas to restore these alliances (Mousa, 2022, p. 30). Khalil al-Hayya, a prominent leader of Hamas in Gaza, stated that with the decline of support from Iran, financial resources of Hamas have been severely impacted (Adnan Abu Amer, 2013b).

In the context of these developments, Hamas faced increasing regional isolation and sought to repair its fractured alliances. One of the critical steps in this direction was a series of high-level meetings aimed at mending ties with Iran and Hezbollah. In mid-July 2013, a significant delegation from Hamas, led by Musa Abu-Marzuq, Deputy Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, met with Iranian and Hezbollah officials in Beirut. Among the key meetings was one with Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, during which they acknowledged a recent strain in their relationship attributed to the Syrian crisis. They reached a consensus to unite their efforts against Israel and to reconcile any disparities in their perspectives on ongoing Arab affairs (Adnan Abu Amer, 2013d). Remarkably, this pivotal gathering, the first of its kind since March 2012, was facilitated by Iranian sponsorship, with an iftar dinner organized by the Iranian Ambassador in July 2013. This meeting was a pivotal attempt to reconcile after Hamas' departure from the Axis of Resistance and its alignment with the Sunni coalition against Assad (Karmon, 2013, p. 111).

There were significant internal disagreements within Hamas regarding the restoration of ties with the Syrian regime. Some factions within Hamas, particularly those based in Gaza, argued for the necessity of mending relations with Damascus to strengthen their strategic position against Israel. Mahmoud al-Zahhar, a prominent Hamas leader, articulated this

viewpoint by emphasizing the importance of maintaining good relations with all entities hostile to Israel, including Syria and Iran (Al-Watan, 2021).

Other factions within Hamas, especially those influenced by the Sunni Islamist ideology, were vehemently opposed to reestablishing ties with Assad's regime. These factions viewed any rapprochement with Assad as a betrayal of the Syrian revolution and the broader Sunni opposition to Shia-dominated regimes (Safadi, 2019). Nayef Rajoub, a notable Hamas leader in the West Bank, strongly opposed renewing ties with the Syrian regime, arguing that it had become a "losing bet" and had lost its legitimacy (Mousa, 2022, p. 32).

In March 2014, Hamas embarked on a diplomatic outreach effort, engaging in a series of consequential political exchanges across various fronts. One pivotal encounter occurred on March 11th in Qatar, where Khaled Meshaal, the leader of Hamas' political bureau, convened with Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani. During this meeting, both parties deliberated extensively on pressing matters such as the Palestinian quandary and the enduring blockade on Gaza.

Bassem Naim, the deputy head of Hamas' political bureau, emphasized the significance of this rendezvous, stating to Al-Monitor that Iran reaffirmed its unwavering backing for the resistance cause. This reaffirmation served to rekindle warmth in the historically complex relationship between Hamas and Iran, which had experienced a cooling period due to the shifting dynamics in the region (Adnan Abu Amer, 2015).

However, a prominent journalist, privy to decision-making circles in Doha, offered a contrasting perspective to Al-Monitor under the cloak of anonymity. According to this insider, the Meshaal-Larijani meeting appeared more symbolic than substantive, lacking potential for tangible outcomes in the Hamas-Iran relationship. The skepticism stemmed from Iran's purported unchanged stipulations for re-establishing ties, which notably included Hamas altering its stance concerning the Syrian crisis (Adnan Abu Amer, 2015).

By late 2014, signs of restored cooperation emerged. Abu Ubaida, a spokesperson for Hamas' military wing, publicly thanked Iran for its support during the conflict with Israel (Operation Protective Edge), highlighting the role of Iranian-supplied missiles in Hamas' military efforts (MEMRI, 2014). This gratitude signified a thaw in relations, although the relationship remained complex and contingent on broader regional dynamics.

Reports indicated increased financial and military support from Iran by 2015, which significantly bolstered Hamas' capabilities. This support was crucial for Hamas' survival and operational effectiveness, especially given the hostile environment in Gaza and the lack of substantial support from other Sunni-majority countries (Mousa, 2022, p. 32).

By August 2017, Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, confirmed that relations with Iran had been restored (Akram & Federman, 2017). The visit of a high-ranking Hamas delegation to Tehran in October 2017, led by Saleh al-Aroui (Majidiyar, 2017a), symbolized the formal reconciliation with Iran.

The process of reconciliation was further facilitated by the broader geopolitical dynamics in the region. The persistent threat posed by Israel and the need to counterbalance Western influence created a convergence of interests among the members of the Axis of Resistance. This pragmatic alignment allowed Hamas to navigate the complex web of regional politics and gradually restore its alliances with Iran and Syria.

4.2.4. Rapprochement with Iran (2017 onwards)

The political landscape in the Middle East experienced significant shifts post-2017, leading to a notable rapprochement between Hamas and Iran. This realignment was primarily driven by changes in regional power dynamics and internal leadership transitions within Hamas. Under the new leadership of Yahya Sinwar, who was elected in 2017, Hamas actively sought to mend and strengthen its ties with Iran, Hezbollah, and the broader Axis of Resistance.

Sinwar, a co-founder of the al-Qassam Brigades, assumed leadership of Hamas in Gaza in February 2017. Known for his hardline stance and opposition to a two-state solution with Israel, he brought a pragmatic approach to Hamas' foreign policy. His leadership was pivotal in reestablishing connections with Iran, given his close ties with the military wing and his support within the organization (Hamadi, 2023). The election of Ismail Haniyeh as the head of Hamas' political bureau in May 2017, replacing the moderate Khaled Meshaal, further facilitated this shift. Haniyeh's relocation of the political bureau from Qatar to Gaza underscored a strategic pivot towards greater independence and a realignment with Iran.

The reconciliation efforts were further facilitated by Hamas' 2017 charter, which officially distanced the organization from the Muslim Brotherhood. This move was a clear

departure from its original 1987 charter and was aimed at rebranding Hamas' identity in the regional political landscape (Adwan, 2019; Hamas, 2017; Mousa, 2022).

Hamas' rapprochement with Iran was motivated by both immediate and long-term strategic considerations. Following the 2011 Syrian civil war, Hamas' relationship with Iran had cooled due to divergent positions on the Assad regime. However, by 2017, it became clear that a regime change in Syria was unlikely, prompting Hamas to seek renewed support from Iran as it found itself increasingly isolated. Heiko Wimmen, a project director at the International Crisis Group, highlighted that Iran became the main source of funding, training, equipment, and salaries for Hamas members once it was apparent that the rest of the Arab world, barring Qatar, had abandoned them. Wimmen recalled a senior Hamas member saying, "Since all the Arabs have abandoned us, what other options do we have?" (Hamadi, 2023).

The broader regional context also played a role in Hamas' rapprochement with Iran. The Qatar crisis, which erupted on June 5, 2017, significantly influenced Hamas' foreign policy trajectory and facilitated its rapprochement with Iran. Following the leadership changes within Hamas, the blockade and diplomatic isolation of Qatar by several GCC members, led by Saudi Arabia, compounded the organization's strategic challenges. Accusations against Qatar for supporting terrorism and its alleged connections with Iran led to a severe reduction in Qatari financial aid to Hamas, although support did not cease entirely.

This financial setback prompted Hamas to reconsider its alliances. Advocates within Hamas who had consistently favored maintaining ties with Iran found their position bolstered by the crisis. By August 2017, Sinwar announced the restoration of the relationship between Hamas' military wing and Iran (Lieber, 2017). This strategic shift was further solidified on October 20, 2017, when a high-ranking Hamas delegation, led by Saleh al-Arouri, visited Tehran, marking a formal reconciliation with Iran (Majidiyar, 2017a).

The reconciliation process between Hamas and Iran involved other multiple high-level delegations visiting Tehran in 2017 and 2018, signaling a thaw in relations (Mousa, 2022, p. 33). Tehran mediated between the Syrian regime and Hamas, and several meetings were held to facilitate this rapprochement (Ahmad Abu Amer, 2019). Rapprochement also contributed to mending ties with Hezbollah. On October 31, 2017, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah welcomed Saleh al-Arouri, the deputy head of Hamas' political bureau, in Beirut. This meeting underscored the renewed collaboration between the two groups and highlighted

their shared strategic interests. The discussions between Nasrallah and al-Arouri focused on enhancing coordination and support, especially in their collective resistance against Israel.

In 2019, a crucial event in the Hamas-Iran relationship occurred when a Hamas delegation met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Tehran. This visit, led by Saleh al-Arouri, the deputy head of Hamas' diplomatic wing, marked a significant step in the reconciliation efforts between the two entities, which had been strained during the tenure of former Hamas chief Khaled Meshaal. Khamenei reaffirmed Iran's commitment to providing military and economic aid to Hamas, emphasizing the advancement of Hamas' military capabilities as a result of Iranian support (Eldar, 2019). Al-Arouri reciprocated by pledging Hamas' loyalty to Iran, stating that Hamas would serve as Iran's first line of defense against Western aggression, thus reinforcing the strategic alliance.

The visit underscored the importance of Hamas' renewed relationship with Iran, especially in the context of regional geopolitical dynamics. Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas' political bureau chief, also expressed support for Tehran in a letter delivered by Al-Arouri, despite being unable to attend due to restrictions imposed by Egypt (Eldar, 2019). This alignment with Iran provided Hamas with vital support but also necessitated careful navigation of relationships with other regional actors like Egypt. Ultimately, the visit highlighted a strengthened commitment between Hamas and Iran, driven by mutual strategic interests and ideological alignment, significantly influencing Hamas' foreign policy and regional alliances.

To sum up, the period after 2017 marked a significant phase in Hamas' foreign policy, characterized by a strategic rapprochement with Iran. This realignment was driven by leadership changes within Hamas, regional geopolitical shifts, and the pressing need for financial and military support amidst increasing isolation. The restoration of ties with Iran had significant implications for Hamas. Financial and military support from Iran allowed Hamas to partially break out of its political isolation and gain more advantage in regional politics, thereby reintegrating Hamas into the Axis of Resistance against Israel.

4.2.5. Reconciliation with Syria (2018 onwards)

Hamas' revised charter in 2017 marked a pivotal shift in its political and ideological stance, significantly influencing its relationship with the Syrian regime. The new charter

distanced Hamas from the Muslim Brotherhood, a move that was strategically designed to reshape its identity and improve its diplomatic relations in the Middle East (Hamas, 2017).

The original 1988 charter of Hamas explicitly declared its ideological alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood, which had become a liability due to the Brotherhood's controversial standing in many Arab countries, including Syria (Hamas, 1988). This association had contributed to the breakdown of relations with the Syrian regime, especially after the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, when Hamas sided with the opposition forces.

The 2017 charter, however, aimed to reframe Hamas as a purely Palestinian nationalist movement rather than an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood (Adwan, 2019, p. 19). By doing so, Hamas sought to alleviate some of the geopolitical tensions and align itself more closely with the broader spectrum of resistance movements in the region. This repositioning was crucial for mending ties with the Syrian government, which had felt betrayed by Hamas' earlier stance during the civil war.

This ideological shift allowed Hamas to express a more conciliatory tone towards Syria. Key Hamas leaders, such as Ismail Haniyeh, Mahmoud Zahar, and Khalil al-Hayya, began issuing statements that acknowledged Syria's past support and expressed a desire to restore and strengthen ties with the Syrian regime. For example, Haniyeh stated in 2018 that they did not sever the relationship with Syria, but many objective circumstances led to the current form of the relationship. He underlined that they consider Syria a sister country whose people and regime have always stood by the Palestinian right, stating that all they wanted was to distance themselves from the internal problems that were taking place in Syria (Zaman al-Wasl, 2018).

This sentiment was echoed by other senior Hamas officials, such as Mahmoud Zahar, who denied that ties with the Syrian regime had ever been completely severed, and expressed hope for the regime's strength and stability (Ahmad Abu Amer, 2019). Khalil al-Hayya, another member of Hamas' leadership, reinforced this process by emphasizing Syria's critical role in the destiny of the Palestinian people and the necessity of maintaining a relationship with the Syrian state. Al-Hayya asserted that within the echelons of Hamas leadership and its broader support base, unanimity prevailed regarding the decision to reestablish diplomatic relations with Syria. This consensus was not only reflective of an internal alignment within Hamas but also echoed the sentiments of the group's international backers (Voice of America, 2019).

4.2.6. Ongoing Challenges and Balancing Act (2021 onwards)

The year 2021 marked a significant juncture in Hamas' foreign relations, particularly evidenced during the "Saif al-Quds operation. Tensions rose following repeated Israeli intrusions into the al-Aqsa mosque during the holy month of Ramadan. In response, Abu Ubaydah, the spokesperson for the al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, issued an ultimatum to Israeli occupation forces, demanding their withdrawal from the Al-Aqsa Mosque and an end to a far-right settler march by 6 PM. When the deadline passed without compliance, Gaza launched a barrage of rockets targeting Israeli settlements surrounding Jerusalem. Subsequently, Israel officially declared war on Gaza.

This operation saw coordinated efforts between Hamas and Hezbollah, reflecting a closer alignment between the two groups in addition to Ansarallah, groups from Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and the Palestinian armed factions. During battle, two groups collaborated in a joint operation center (Hamadi, 2023). The joint response to Israeli provocations in Jerusalem underscored Hamas' determination to defend Palestinian interests and resist external pressures. The collaboration with Hezbollah highlights Hamas' strategic calculus in leveraging regional alliances to confront common adversaries and safeguard Palestinian rights.

An analysis of the relationships between these organizations and Iran following the October 7 attacks (Operation Al-Aqsa Flood) reveals a notable shift towards a positive trajectory. This suggests a significant improvement in ties that had previously been strained, particularly due to the complexities of the Syrian conflict. The reparation of these relationships signifies more than just a diplomatic realignment; it symbolizes a resurgence of the collective will within the Axis of Resistance. This resurgence implies a renewed commitment to shared goals and a reinvigoration of collaborative efforts among its members.

4.3. A Multi-Level Analysis of Hamas' Syria Policy

This section aims to explore the intricate layers of decision-making processes, ideological considerations—specifically the sectarian dimensions—and regional factors that molded Hamas' foreign policy during the Syrian civil war. A multi-level approach has been

implemented for a nuanced interpretation of how various elements influenced Hamas' actions and decisions in a complex conflict environment.

Analyzing the role of key decision-makers within Hamas provides insights into the internal dynamics and leadership strategies that guided the organization's foreign policy. By examining the perspectives and actions of influential figures such as Khaled Meshaal, it becomes clear how leadership priorities and personal ideologies shaped policy directions. This level of analysis helps in understanding the immediate motivations and responses of Hamas' leadership to the evolving situation in Syria.

The identity dimension focuses on the ideological and sectarian factors that influenced Hamas' foreign policy. Hamas, being a Sunni Islamist movement, was naturally affected by the Sunni-Shia divide that characterized much of the Syrian conflict. Understanding how Hamas' Sunni identity and its ideological commitments to the broader Sunni community influenced its stance towards the Alawite-led Assad regime is crucial. This perspective helps explain why Hamas might distance itself from the Assad government despite previously strong ties, aligning more with Sunni opposition groups and their regional backers.

Systemic factors encompass the broader regional and international context in which Hamas operates. This includes the influence of regional powers such as Iran, Türkiye, and Qatar, and the strategic necessities imposed by these relationships. Systemic analysis also considers the impact of geopolitical shifts and the overarching strategic environment of the Middle East during the Syrian civil war. By understanding these external pressures and opportunities, one can better grasp the strategic calculations behind Hamas' foreign policy.

By integrating these three levels of analysis, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving Hamas' foreign policy during the Syrian civil war. The decision-makers level provides a detailed view of leadership dynamics and immediate motivations. The identity level sheds light on the sectarian and ideological influences, revealing how deeply rooted beliefs and affiliations impact foreign policy decisions. Finally, the systemic level places Hamas' actions within the broader geopolitical context, illustrating how external pressures and alliances shape strategic choices. This multi-faceted approach ensures that the study does not oversimplify Hamas' foreign policy as purely ideological or purely strategic. Instead, it highlights the interplay between ideological commitments and pragmatic needs, offering a holistic view of how Hamas navigated the complexities of the Syrian civil war.

4.3.1. Decision Makers

Hamas uses a consultative decision-making processes that operate at various levels, including local, municipal, and national (Dunning, 2015, p. 2). This means that decisions are made through a system of collective deliberation and input from different levels of the organization, ensuring that a range of perspectives are considered before finalizing policies and actions. Hamas' foreign policy structure is dispersed across various entities: within the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Israeli prisons where some members are incarcerated, and international locations. Hamas' decision-making authority is centered in the Political Bureau, which includes internal leaders based in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as external leaders in Damascus and Cairo. Policies regarding Israel and other Arab nations have frequently emerged from the interplay and conflicts between internal and external leaderships (Seurat, 2019, p. 31). This decision-making framework led to rivalry between the leadership in Gaza and the diaspora. It also resulted in some of Hamas' most contentious foreign policy decisions, including its alliance choices after the 2011 Arab uprisings (Mohns & Bank, 2012).

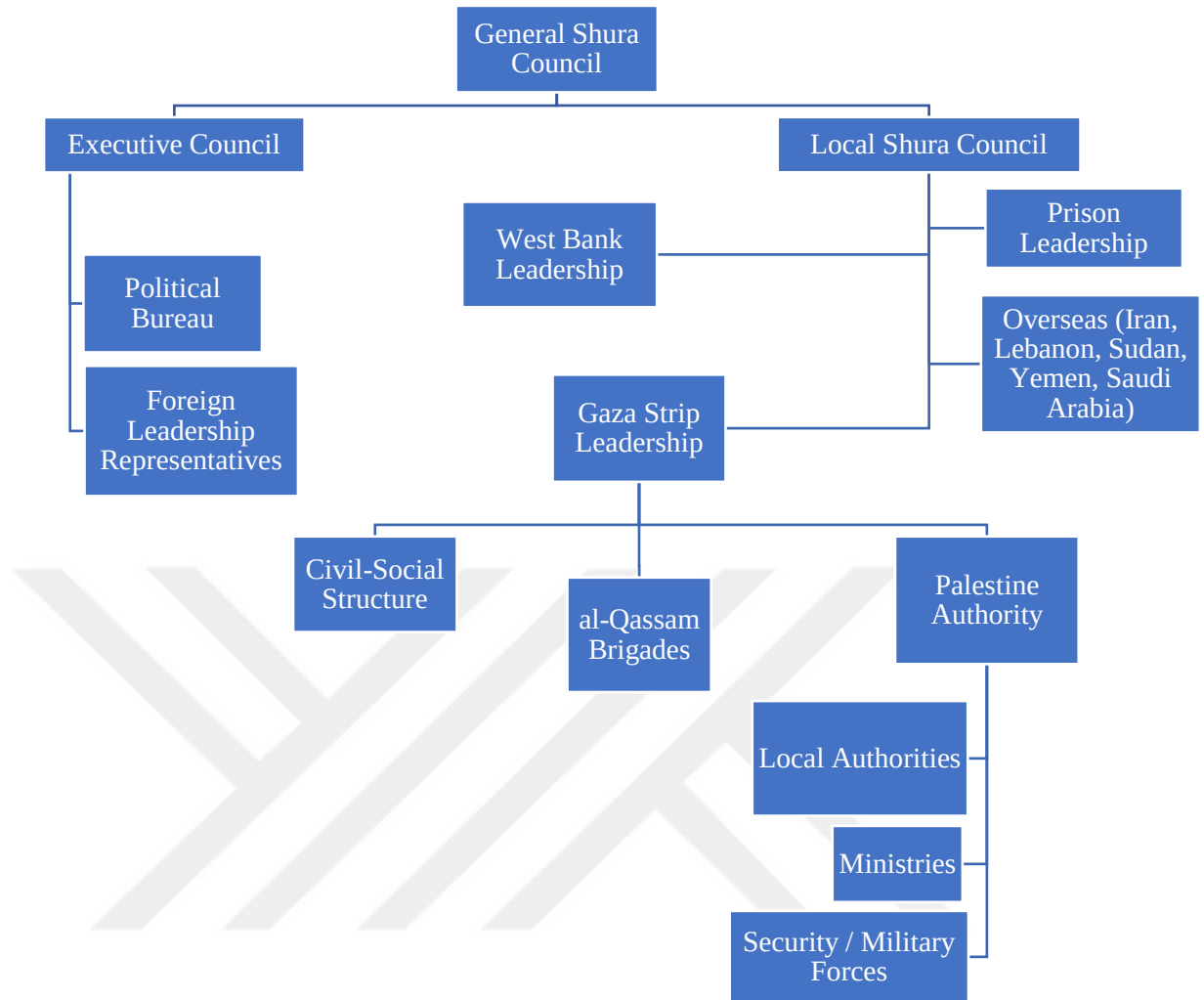


Figure 2. Organizational Structure of Hamas (Yetim et al., 2020).

Hamas was divided into two camps during the Syrian civil war as well: The political leadership, led by Meshaal, who sought refuge in Qatar, and the military leadership, commanded by Muhammad Deif, based in Gaza. The political leadership embraced a stance closer to Qatar's and pursued a project of regime change in Syria. During the war, Meshaal and Haniyeh were photographed waving the flag of the FSA (@resistance_sa, 2019), which demonstrated their explicit support to the opposition groups in Syria. Haniyeh's passionate speech at al-Azhar mosque in February 2012 (Al-Khateeb, 2022) highlighted that Hamas was shifting its allegiances after years of membership to the Axis of Resistance.

On the other hand, the military leadership advocated for the continuation of ties with Iran and Hezbollah. While the hostile attitude of the political leadership persisted, Abu Ubaida,

spokesperson for the al-Qassam Brigades expressed gratitude to Iran for its support during Israel's 51-day attack on Gaza resistance in December 2014: "We thank the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has not withdrawn its financial and military support to us and has supported our resistance by providing us with missiles and anti-tank rockets." (Al-Mughrabi, 2014).

4.3.1.1. Leaving Damascus

The Hamas leadership's statements regarding their departure from Syria suggests potential internal disagreements. Khaled Meshaal attributed the move to their refusal to be associated with the Assad regime's actions, emphasizing the movement's support for the Syrian people's struggle for freedom. Meshaal indicated that Hamas was willing to bear the significant costs of leaving Syria to maintain its principles. On the other hand, Sami Abu Zuhri, Hamas' official spokesperson, asserted that their exit from Syria was limited to its top leadership and was solely due to security reasons. He affirmed that Hamas maintained operational offices in Damascus and denied any shift in the movement's stance towards the Syrian regime. These contrasting explanations may reflect internal divisions within Hamas regarding its relationship with Syria and its strategic direction (Mousa, 2022, p. 23).

Resilience of the Syrian regime and the decline of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt were other dynamics at play, which culminated internal debate within the group. One faction within Hamas believed it was essential to capitalize on the positive developments from the Arab Spring, particularly the rise in influence of Islamist movements. Conversely, another faction argued that the political upheaval across the Arab world did not necessarily signal a complete overturn of the established order. An official within this faction warned, "We must wait to see the outcomes of these revolutions before responding, lest we find ourselves like a fish caught in turbulent waters." This represents the disagreements among the decision makers over whether to immediately embrace the changes brought by the Arab Spring or to adopt a more measured approach, assessing the long-term implications before committing to a course of action (Mousa, 2022, p. 36).

4.3.1.2. Reconciliation

Between July 2013 and August 2017, which was shaped by reconciliation attempts of Hamas with its old allies, the issue that decision makers could not agree on was whether rapprochement policy should be followed or not. Significant internal disagreements within Hamas persisted regarding the restoration of ties with the Syrian regime and Iran. One faction, primarily based in Gaza, argued for the necessity of mending relations with Damascus to bolster their strategic position against Israel. Mahmoud al-Zahhar, a prominent leader within Hamas, articulated this viewpoint by stressing the importance of maintaining good relations with all entities hostile to Israel, including Syria and Iran (Al-Watan, 2021).

Conversely, other factions within Hamas, especially those influenced by Sunni Islamist ideology, were strongly opposed to reestablishing ties with Assad's regime. These factions perceived any rapprochement with Assad as a betrayal of the Syrian revolution and the broader Sunni opposition to Shia-dominated regimes (Safadi, 2019). Nayef Rajoub, a notable Hamas leader in the West Bank, epitomized this opposition by vehemently arguing against renewing ties with the Syrian regime, which he described as a "losing bet" that had lost its legitimacy (Mousa, 2022, p. 32).

Party members were also divided, with many expressing dissatisfaction with the official direction the group had taken (Al-Khateeb, 2022). The leadership faced internal discord, as the military wing within Hamas, which has closer ties to Iran, was gaining influence. This internal power struggle and the rising influence of pro-Iranian factions have driven the recent push towards normalization with Iran. This move aims to strengthen Hamas' relationship with Iran, leveraging its support to bolster the movement's strategic position.

During these discussions, Haniyeh and Muhammad Deif conveyed his condolences to Nasrallah, following the killing of Jihad Mughniyah, Hezbollah's high-level commander in the Syrian Golan Heights in January 2015, (Akhter, 2022, p. 69; Reuters, 2015). These were strong signals of the rapprochement between the parties.

These internal rifts within Hamas reflected deeper ideological and strategic dilemmas. The faction advocating for reconciliation underscored the pragmatic need to secure support and resources essential for sustaining their resistance against Israel. They saw the alliance with Syria and Iran as pivotal in countering Israeli military actions and strengthening their geopolitical stance. On the other hand, the faction opposing the rapprochement was driven by a commitment

to the principles of the Sunni Islamist movement and solidarity with the Syrian opposition. They viewed any alliance with Assad's regime as a betrayal of the Sunni community and the revolutionary forces fighting against what they perceived as an oppressive and sectarian regime.

4.3.1.3. Leadership Change in 2017

In 2017, significant changes took place in the Hamas administration. Haniyeh, who sought to rebuild ties with Iran and other regional actors, replaced Meshaal as the new leader. Yahya Sinwar, a prominent figure within Hamas, became the new political leader in Gaza. Saleh al-Arouri, who has strong ties to Iran and Hezbollah, assumed the position of deputy head of the political bureau. This move signaled a notable change in Hamas' international strategy. The group started distancing itself from its previous stance of criticizing the Syrian government and started adopting a more practical approach focused on forming alliances in the region and preventing internal divisions within the organization.

Although Haniyeh also waved the flag of the FSA in the first days of the uprisings, Meshaal was seen as the main motive behind Hamas moving closer to Qatar while distancing itself from Iran and Hezbollah. After Meshaal was removed from his position, a Hamas delegation attended the inauguration ceremony of President Hassan Rouhani's second term, and in August 2017, high-level meetings were held with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iran.

In October 2017, Saleh al-Arouri, a pivotal figure in the founding of Hamas' military wing, was appointed as the deputy head of the political bureau. Al-Arouri's election to this influential position marked a significant shift in the organization's leadership dynamics, reflecting a strategic emphasis on bolstering military capabilities and resistance activities. His extensive experience and deep connections within Hamas' military operations underscored the group's commitment to reinforcing its militant agenda and navigating the complex geopolitical landscape of the region. This appointment also highlighted a renewed focus on strengthening ties with allies such as Iran and Hezbollah, aiming to enhance Hamas' strategic position against Israel and its regional adversaries.

The change in leadership was quickly reflected in Hamas' foreign policy. Iran and Hamas rapidly initiated a reconciliation process. Sinwar and other members of the military wing

were aware of Hamas' urgent need for military support from Iran, particularly given the escalating tensions between Hamas and Israel following sporadic rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory. The public statements highlighting Iranian military support for Hamas suggest that the current leadership of Hamas is willing to openly acknowledge and rely on this assistance, even if it strains relations with Egypt, which are crucial for Hamas, and disrupts the internal Palestinian reconciliation process ("Iran-Hamas Rapprochement: The Current Situation," 2018).

In December 2017, Qasem Soleimani, the Commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC-QF), met with Sinwar and expressed Iran's commitment to providing all possible assistance for the defense of Al Quds. In early 2018, al-Arouri attended the funeral of Soleimani's father. Following this event, the relationship between Hamas and Iran started to strengthen further.

In the middle of 2018, Sinwar stated, "Our relations with Hezbollah and the Revolutionary Guards are at their best level ever, and we are in contact with their leaders almost daily." (MEMRI, 2018). He also expressed that the relationship between his organization and Hezbollah was "excellent," with frequent coordination occurring between them. He described Hamas' ties with Iran, the IRGC, and Qasem Soleimani as "strong and warm."

During Al Quds Day in 2019, Sinwar highlighted the evolution of Palestinian resistance capabilities, stating that in 2008, they had limited weaponry but managed to hit Beersheba with Grad missiles provided by Iran. Sinwar credited Iran for their increased capacity, noting that without Iranian support, they would not have achieved it: "Most of the missiles were of our own production, but they were produced with Iran's financial and technical support." He also expressed disappointment with the lack of support from the Arabs: "The Arab nation left us alone in a difficult situation, but Iran supported us with weapons, equipment, and technical expertise." (Staff, 2019).

In February 2019, Haniyeh visited Tehran and met with Iranian officials, underscoring the importance of the relationship between Hamas and Iran. Speaking at Soleimani's funeral in Tehran in January 2020, Haniyeh acknowledged Soleimani's significant role in supporting Palestinian groups. Haniyeh credited him for strengthening Palestine and stated that he had played a crucial role in enhancing their power and resilience (Abu Sneineh, 2020).

Given these developments, it is evident that factors on the leadership level have played a role in shaping Hamas' position regarding the Syrian civil war. Haniyeh's leadership

represented a shift in Hamas' foreign policy and regional alliances. Under Meshaal, Hamas had moved away from its historical base in Syria and closer to Qatar and Türkiye. Haniyeh's leadership signaled a desire to mend ties with some Arab states, particularly Egypt. Haniyeh's leadership has been characterized by a pragmatic approach to foreign policy. Hamas, under his leadership, has sought to adapt to changing regional dynamics and to engage with various actors to improve the situation in Gaza and advance Palestinian interests.

4.3.2. Sectarian Identity

The Syrian civil war has caused a dissidence within Hamas regarding whether to align with the Shiite members of the Axis of Resistance or to side with Sunni protesters in Syria. Initially ambiguous stance of Hamas became clear in February 2012 when Meshaal and Haniyeh stood alongside members of the Brotherhood in Cairo and voiced support for the protesters. Within weeks, Haniyeh officially declared Hamas' support for Sunni opposition groups (Ghaddar, 2013).

Although Meshaal put forward a sharper attitude, officials in Gaza continued to present themselves as occupying a neutral position, asserting that their policy favored the Syrian people rather than being explicitly against Assad. They highlighted the significant presence of half a million Palestinian refugees in Syria as a key factor influencing their cautious approach. These officials expressed concerns about potential repercussions and drew parallels to the experience of Yasser Arafat, the late Palestinian leader, who faced the expulsion of nearly 450,000 Palestinians from Kuwait in 1991 after aligning with Iraq during its invasion of Kuwait (Brulliard, 2012). Some members of the military wing argued that aid from Iran should not be risked solely to publicly support the Sunni rebels fighting against Assad in Syria ("Syrian war Causes Division in Hamas," 2013).

In mid-June 2013, Meshaal and Haniyeh visited Ankara to meet with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Prior to the visit, Meshaal had called on Hezbollah to withdraw its forces from Syria and focus on resisting Israel, accusing it of contributing to sectarian tensions in the region. On the other hand, leaders of Hamas' armed wing cautioned Meshaal against growing closer to Qatar, as it was negatively affecting aid from Iran. They reminded him that it was Tehran's military support, not Gulf assistance that enabled Hamas to withstand the Israeli assault on Gaza in November 2012 (Al-Arabiya, 2013b).

The visit of al-Qaradawi to Gaza in May 2013 further exacerbated the divide within Hamas, as he subsequently called on Sunni Muslims to join the rebels fighting against Hezbollah. At this point, it is important to underline that the IUMS, which was founded by al-Qaradawi in 2004, has a sectarian position concerning the developments in the region. Although the IUMS addresses the significant issues of the *umma* in general, it frequently supports causes where Sunni Islamist movements stand against regimes, such as in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. The IUMS backed Sunni factions in the Yemen conflict and took definitive stance against Iran, urging Sunni countries to resist Iran's military expansion in the Middle East (Belhaj, 2022, p. 7). Thus, al-Qaradawi's call aimed to exert sectarian pressure on Hamas during the Syrian civil war, by advocating for Sunni participation against a predominantly Shia group. His actions and statements thus aimed to push Hamas towards a more explicitly sectarian alignment in the context of the Syrian conflict. On June 14, 2013, Hamas prime minister denied reports that the al-Qassam Brigades were assisting rebels in Syria, stating that while they supported the Syrian people, Hamas fighters were not present in Syria (Al-Arabiya, 2013b).

To gain insight into Hamas' reluctance towards sectarianism, one of the most informative sources is a document penned by Meshaal in 2013. In addressing Hamas' position on sectarianism, he highlighted four crucial points. First, he emphasized the diversity of religions in the Middle East and argued against disregarding this diversity in terms of its knowledge, influence, impact, and demands. Second, he unequivocally rejected sectarianism and any attempts to fuel division between Sunni and Shia Muslims, deeming such endeavors as harmful. Third, he attributed the sectarian disputes to the manipulations of American and "Zionist" agendas that employed the "divide and rule" tactic for control. He regarded sectarian conflicts as traps that weakened the cohesion of the region. Fourth, Meshaal asserted Hamas' overarching perspective that sectarian disputes only contribute to the further deterioration of regional unity. He called for the region to overcome its weakness by not engaging in defensive responses based on Arabism, religious divisions, or various sects, as such approaches reflected the thinking of the weak and severely ill (Meshaal, 2013, pp. 12–14).

4.3.2.1. Departure from Syria

When examining Hamas' departure from Syria during this period, it is crucial to grasp that the motivation was not solely due to "push" factors like increased pressure from Damascus

and the opposition. Equally significant were the “pull” factors and new prospects that emerged due to the transformative events of the Arab uprising. These events presented Hamas with alternative opportunities to establish alliances that better aligned with its Sunni identity. Therefore, employing a strategy of strategic outreach, Haniyeh embarked on a tour of newly elected governments supported by the Brotherhood. These governments had risen to power in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Sudan. This marked Haniyeh’s first trip outside the Gaza Strip in nearly five years. Notably, the Turkish authorities committed to providing Hamas with approximately \$300 million in aid (Bar’el, 2012).

The transition of Hamas from its long-standing base in Damascus to other locations, particularly Cairo, marked a significant shift in its foreign policy and operational strategy. While the move has often been interpreted as driven solely by ideological differences with the Assad regime, scholars like Alsoos (2021) argue that pragmatic considerations played a crucial role. According to Alsoos, Hamas leaders had already been contemplating the relocation of their political bureau from Damascus to Cairo before the official decision was made. Thus, the move may not solely be motivated by ideological disagreements but was also influenced by broader geopolitical dynamics, particularly Egypt's stance on the Assad regime.

Although Hamas’ departure from the alliance can be considered as a choice favoring its Sunni identity over its existing Shia alliances, it became evident over time that Hamas’ decision was driven by its support for the democratic aspirations of the Arab Spring, its commitment to non-interference in the affairs of other states or groups, and its determination to maintain its independence (Musgrave, 2016, p. 706). In this context, one could argue that sectarian factors played a less significant role in Hamas’ strategic decision-making than is commonly perceived. Moreover, it was Hamas’ aversion to sectarianism that ultimately sustained the movement and safeguarded it against regional isolation (Baroud, 2015).

Hamas’ leadership was reluctant to embrace the political upheaval in Damascus, fearing the potential instability and loss of strategic support. However, the sentiment among its grassroots supporters in the Palestinian camps was markedly different. The rank-and-file members, as well as many ordinary Palestinians, were in favor of the revolutionary fervor sweeping Syria. They viewed the protests as an opportunity for greater freedom and justice, aligning with the broader aspirations of the Arab Spring. This divergence created a profound internal conflict within Hamas, as the leadership had to balance its strategic interests and long-standing alliances with the genuine desires and demands of its base. The grassroots supporters

saw the Syrian uprising as a path to liberation from authoritarian rule, reflecting their own struggles and aspirations for self-determination. This internal pressure contributed significantly to the eventual decision of Hamas to distance itself from the Assad regime and align more closely with the opposition.

4.3.2.2. Reconciliation

Significant internal disagreements within Hamas persisted regarding the restoration of ties with the Syrian regime. One faction, primarily based in Gaza, argued for the necessity of mending relations with Damascus to bolster their strategic position against Israel. Mahmoud al-Zahhar, a prominent leader within Hamas, articulated this viewpoint by stressing the importance of maintaining good relations with all entities hostile to Israel, including Syria and Iran (Al-Watan, 2021).

Conversely, other factions within Hamas, especially those influenced by Sunni Islamist ideology, were strongly opposed to reestablishing ties with Assad. These factions perceived any rapprochement as a betrayal of the Syrian revolution and the broader Sunni opposition to Shia-dominated regimes (Safadi, 2019). Nayef Rajoub, a notable Hamas leader in the West Bank, epitomized this opposition by arguing against renewing ties with the Syrian regime, which he described as a "losing bet" that had lost its legitimacy (Mousa, 2022, p. 32). The Sunni-oriented IUMS issued a warning to Hamas regarding normalization, stating, "The decision contradicts principles, values, and Islamic law, and needs to be reviewed by considering the points raised by Muslim scholars." The statement concluded with a call to action: "The scholars are waiting for [Hamas] to fulfill the legitimate duty that is appropriate to the situation and in the interest of the Palestinian cause, which is the cause of all Muslims" (Al-Khateeb, 2022). This reflects the IUMS's firm stance that Hamas should adhere to Sunni Islamic principles.

The reconciliation attempts of Hamas during this period, despite pressure from Sunni circles, highlight the organization's pragmatic approach to foreign policy. While ideological and ethical considerations played a role in internal debates, the overarching strategic imperatives often dictated the final decisions. The deteriorating situation in Gaza, compounded by economic blockades and military confrontations with Israel, necessitated the restoration of support from powerful regional actors like Iran and Syria.

4.3.3. Systemic factors

Until the Arab Spring, Iran was Hamas' most important supporter in the region (Hroub, 2006, p. 93). The main reason for their close relationship was not solely Hamas' Islamist identity but also the significance Iran attributed to the Palestinian struggle (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 171). However, as Hamas adopted an anti-Assad position during the war, Iran reduced its support to Hamas and shifted its assistance primarily towards its military wing, rather than providing comprehensive support to the organization (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 167).

Another close ally of Hamas was Syria before the war (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 173). The Baath administration supported Hamas for years as a means to gain an edge in the regional power struggle and to exert influence over the Palestinian cause (Kear, 2019, p. 252). Furthermore, Hamas' armed resistance against Israel signaled a potential weakening of one of Syria's key regional adversaries. This prompted Syria to cultivate close relations with Hamas and provide support to the organization through various means (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 173).

Having endured political, economic, and military embargoes from multiple parties and operating within the constraints of the Axis of Resistance, Hamas viewed the Arab Spring as the start of a new era that could potentially broaden its foreign policy options and influence in the region (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 174). While initially hesitant and cautious, Hamas eventually welcomed the Arab Spring uprisings, seeing them as potentially conducive to its resistance-based ideology (Saouli, 2013, p. 39). The victories of the Islamist opposition movements in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco bolstered the expectation that new governments sympathetic to Hamas would replace the previous regimes that had been troublesome for the organization (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 175). During this period, Hamas sought to develop bilateral relations with many regional states (Baconi, 2018, pp. 172–186).

The deteriorating internal situation in Syria during that period also presented Hamas with a critical juncture. As the Assad regime's grip on power weakened and the conflict escalated, Hamas found itself compelled to reassess its position. With signs pointing towards the regime's potential collapse within a short timeframe, Hamas perceived a shifting balance of power. The prevailing sentiment within Hamas' was one of skepticism regarding the Assad regime's ability to weather the storm. Amidst widespread unrest and escalating violence, many anticipated that Assad would face imminent downfall, perhaps within a span of two to three

months. This perception was fueled by the regime's escalating crackdown on peaceful protests, which, rather than quelling dissent, only seemed to galvanize opposition forces further.

In this context, Hamas confronted a strategic dilemma: whether to maintain its allegiance to a regime on the brink of collapse or to recalibrate its stance in anticipation of a new political order in Syria. Faced with mounting uncertainties and the prospect of aligning with a faltering regime, Hamas opted for a cautious reevaluation of its position. Essentially, Hamas chose not to invest its political capital in what it perceived as a declining regime (Mousa, 2022, p. 25). Instead of doubling down on support for Assad, whose grip on power appeared increasingly tenuous, Hamas sought to distance itself from a potential losing bet. This was a pragmatic calculation of the movement's long-term interests. By avoiding entanglement with a regime facing imminent downfall, Hamas aimed to preserve its credibility and flexibility in a rapidly evolving regional landscape. The movement recognized that maintaining ties with a regime in decline could undermine its standing and hinder its ability to navigate emerging power dynamics effectively.

Furthermore, Hamas acknowledged that it had alternative options and potential allies to consider. As regional dynamics shifted and new power centers emerged, Hamas sought to position itself strategically to capitalize on evolving geopolitical realities. This strategic calculus guided Hamas' decision to distance itself from the Assad regime, reflecting a pragmatic approach to safeguarding its interests amid regional turmoil.

The legislative elections in Tunisia in October 2011 and in Egypt from November 2011 to January 2012 underscored the rising political influence of Islamist groups in the region. The Muslim Brotherhood's electoral success in Egypt significantly impacted Hamas' strategy (Napolitano, 2013, p. 78). Thus, Hamas shifted its alignment toward Egypt and Qatar due to the increasing prominence of the Brotherhood in the changing regional landscape (Salah, 2017, p. 570). The most crucial turning point was the shift of policies towards Syria. In contrast to Hezbollah, Hamas decided to distance itself from Assad regime, despite pressures from both Syria and Iran. It declared its commitment to supporting resistance movements regardless of geographical location, marking a significant departure from its previous stance (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 176). In the early days of the Syrian conflict, Hamas leadership remained silent but later declared its support for the "independent and democratic aspirations of the Syrian people" during a speech in Cairo (Milton-Edwards, 2013, p. 65).

Hamas' decision to oppose the Syrian regime was also influenced by pressure from Palestinians in Syria. In the Gaza Strip, the population was deeply disappointed by Hamas' initial ban on demonstrations supporting the Syrian revolution. In Syria, Palestinian refugees strongly criticized Hamas for its ambiguous stance and failure to protect Palestinians from the regime. This criticism, combined with rising violence, led Hamas to shift its position from ambiguity to siding with the revolutionaries (Napolitano, 2013, pp. 77–78).

Turning away from the Axis of Resistance, Hamas sought support from other regional players, notably Türkiye and Qatar. Qatar and Türkiye were vocal supporters of the opposition forces. Qatar offered financial and political assistance to Hamas. Türkiye also provided support to Hamas and hosted its political leadership in exile. Both countries also shared a mutual interest in supporting Sunni opposition groups in the region. This shift in alliances marked a significant turning point for Hamas, leading to rapid developments in its relationships with these countries during the period from 2012 to 2013 (Mousa, 2022, pp. 27–28).

Türkiye emerged as a key supporter of Hamas during this time, and pledged substantial covert assistance, committing to provide Hamas with a staggering sum of 250 million dollars (Al-Husseini, 2014). For Türkiye, backing Hamas presented an opportunity to position itself as a prominent advocate for the Palestinian cause and potentially replace Iran as the primary supporter of the Palestinian Islamic movement. Beyond mere financial support, Türkiye saw Hamas as a strategic asset in advancing Türkiye's influence in the region, aligning with his broader objective of challenging existing power dynamics.

Meanwhile, Qatar emerged as another crucial benefactor for Hamas, offering substantial financial assistance and logistical support. Qatar's strategic interest in Hamas was underscored by its efforts to relocate the movement's headquarters from Damascus to Doha. Khaled Meshaal, Hamas' political leader, made the transition to Qatar, where he was met with generous financial backing estimated at around 400 million dollars in 2012 alone (Ghaith, 2013). Qatar's contributions became indispensable for Hamas, serving as a vital lifeline that replaced the support previously provided by Iran. Qatar's investment in Hamas signaled its desire to play a more influential role in regional affairs and solidify its position as a key player in Middle Eastern politics. However, Qatar's relationship with Hamas remained political in nature, without any military involvement.

Hamas was able to easily abandon its long-standing partner, Syria, partly due to its hope of receiving support from the newly established government of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt

(Løvlie & Knudsen, 2013, p. 57). Hamas believed that the Morsi government would be influential in ending the isolation of Gaza and overcoming the existing economic crisis. However the expected strong support never materialized (Yetim et al., 2020, pp. 177–178). The relations between Hamas and the Brotherhood saw a significant decline after the coup. As evidenced by its 2017 statement, Hamas began to take measures to create a gap between itself and the Brotherhood (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 181).

Hamas ultimately emerged as one of the major losers of the process. The Syrian regime's near-triumph in the civil war and the downfall of the Brotherhood-led government in Egypt, which Hamas had pinned high hopes on, led to adverse consequences for the organization (Baconi, 2018, p. 199). Hamas experienced a loss of support from its allies, Iran and Hezbollah, because of its policy shift in Syria. Additionally, it had to contend with a more hostile Egypt on its doorstep, further complicating its position (Salah, 2017, p. 570). These developments deepened the isolation of Hamas in the region.

By 2014, Hamas had faced a number of challenges, including the ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip by Israel and Egypt, financial difficulties, and political isolation. These prompted Hamas to seek support from various regional actors, including Iran. Meshaal visited Iran in 2014 to improve relations. Although marked a significant step and allowed Hamas to partially gain Iran's support, the expected rapprochement was not achieved rapidly (Kear, 2019, p. 255).

A similar approach was taken with Egypt as well. Before 2014, Egypt had been involved in maintaining a blockade on the Gaza Strip, along with Israel, to isolate and weaken Hamas. This blockade had a severe impact on the humanitarian situation in Gaza. After the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas, there were efforts to repair and improve the relations between Hamas and Egypt. Several regional actors attempted to mediate between Hamas and Egypt to achieve a ceasefire and to ease the blockade. These efforts were partly successful in ending the immediate hostilities. Efforts were made to lift the blockade on Gaza by initiating a visit to Egypt in 2016 (Salah, 2017, p. 572). High-level diplomatic channels were established between Egypt and Hamas to address various issues, including ceasefire negotiations with Israel.

Hamas' shift in policy was primarily driven by political pragmatism. The group faced a harsh reality where most Arab regimes were moving towards normalizing relations with Israel and the Assad regime. As Ahmad Quneita noted, Hamas' decision was influenced by the need to confront Israel and the perceived abandonment by other Arab states. Strengthening ties with

Iran and Syria thus became a strategic necessity to ensure the continuity of support for the Palestinian cause (Al-Khateeb, 2022).

In 2018, reconciliation gained momentum after years of strain resulting from Hamas' concerns regarding the Syrian regime. This reconciliation was manifested in an increasing number of visits by Hamas delegations to Iran and in public statements of senior Hamas officials, underscoring the importance of Iran's military support to Hamas. One could argue that two systemic-level factors played a pivotal role in fostering reconciliation between Hamas and Iran. First, Iran's perceived victory over the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq prompted a shift in its strategic focus toward the Palestinian arena. Iran recognized an opportunity to bolster Hamas' military capabilities and provide support for its actions against Israel.

The second significant factor contributing to the reconciliation between Hamas and Iran was the declaration made by Donald Trump on December 6, 2017, in which he recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. This move presented Iran with an additional opportunity to demonstrate its support for the Palestinian cause. Both Iran and Hamas encouraged a new uprising against Israel in the Judea and Samaria regions following Trump's announcement. Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, engaged in discussions with senior members of Hamas' military wings during this period, expressing Iran's readiness to provide extensive support in various ways (Majidyar, 2017b).

During this period, the Arab-Israeli normalization process has significantly diminished the number of allies available to Hamas. Previously, the group had other sources of support in countries like Türkiye, Qatar, and Egypt. However, recent regional initiatives, especially by Gulf nations, to pursue normalization with Israel, while simultaneously attempting to normalize relations with Syria, have compelled Hamas to contemplate strengthening ties with Assad. This shift is not only viewed as aligning with the broader direction of Arab states but also as a return to the only remaining anti-Israeli axis in the region.

To conclude, despite the pressures from Iran and Syria, Hamas clearly demonstrated its will to pursue an independent policy in its relations with external actors, implementing its own envisioned strategy in the early years of the Syrian civil war (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 182). As a Sunni Islamist organization, Hamas initially aligned itself with these states and expressed solidarity with the Syrian opposition. This decision was influenced by factors such as the hope that the Muslim Brotherhood, which came to power in Egypt, can end the blockade on Gaza, the expectation that it can establish better relations with the Brotherhood by supporting Sunni

movements in Syria, and the understanding that it can compensate for the support it would lose from Iran with Türkiye and Qatar.

However, as the conflict progressed, the Syrian civil war became increasingly sectarian, with Sunni-Shia tensions escalating. Hamas, being a Sunni organization, faced a dilemma as it sought to balance its ideological affinity with Sunni allies and maintain its historical alliances with Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah, who supported the Syrian regime. Additionally, the rise of the IS and the threat it posed to Hamas and Iran further complicated the situation.

Over time, Hamas began to reassess its position, realizing the potential risks and consequences of alienating Iran and its allies. In the beginning, it could not foresee the developments like the fall of Morsi, a development that worsened the strategic situation of Hamas (Løvlie & Knudsen, 2013, p. 58). The factors such as the removal of Morsi through a coup in Egypt, the expected support from Türkiye and Qatar not materializing, and Iran's rapprochement with Fatah in Palestine have pushed Hamas back towards the Axis of Resistance. The group recognized that maintaining its relationship with Iran was crucial for financial and military support, particularly in the face of reduced backing from Arab states. Hamas also observed Iran's successful military intervention in Syria, leading to the downfall of IS and the strengthening of the Assad regime. These influenced Hamas' decision to modify its strategy and seek a rapprochement with Iran.

4.4. A Preliminary Conclusion on Hamas

The chapter on Hamas presents a complex interplay of ideational and material interests, illustrating the group's strategic maneuvers amidst shifting regional dynamics. Initially, Hamas' departure from Syria to Damascus marked a significant shift driven by the rise of the Brotherhood to power in Egypt, expectations of failure of Syrian regime in a short time, and pressure from Palestinians in Syria to openly confront Syrian regime. However, the Brotherhood's fall in 2013 and the near-victory of the Assad regime left Hamas increasingly isolated.

By 2014, Hamas faced a multitude of challenges, including the ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip by Israel and Egypt, severe financial difficulties, and political isolation. The limited support from Qatar and Türkiye proved insufficient, compelling Hamas to consider

rapprochement with former allies such as Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah. This strategic realignment was not without internal discord, as the group navigated between nationalist hawks focused on the Palestinian struggle and factions influenced by Sunni Islamist ideology, strongly opposed to renewing ties with Assad.

Leadership changes in 2017, coupled with the release of a new policy document distancing Hamas from the Muslim Brotherhood, underscored the organization's evolving strategy. Sinwar assumed leadership of Hamas in Gaza in February 2017. Known for his hardline stance and opposition to a two-state solution with Israel, Sinwar brought a pragmatic approach to Hamas' foreign policy. His leadership was pivotal in reestablishing connections with Iran, leveraging his close ties with the military wing and his support within the organization (Hamadi, 2023). The election of Ismail Haniyeh as the head of Hamas' political bureau in May 2017, replacing the moderate Khaled Meshaal, further facilitated this shift.

This period highlighted the dual pressures of ideational commitments and pragmatic necessities, as Hamas confronted the strategic dilemma of whether to maintain allegiance to a faltering regime or recalibrate in anticipation of a new political order in Syria.

Political changes in Egypt, a key player in the Middle East, further added to the intricate calculus that Hamas had to consider. The evolving political landscape in Egypt meant that Hamas had to reassess its relationships and adapt to the changing realities of its regional environment. This factor, combined with the broader regional dynamics, compelled Hamas to reevaluate its stance and make strategic decisions in response to the unfolding developments.

The perceived advantages of realigning with Iran emerged as a noteworthy consideration in the organizational decision-making process. This alignment brought strategic benefits, from financial support to military assistance, but also came with its set of challenges, particularly in the context of regional power dynamics and the broader geopolitical implications.

These multifaceted factors collectively played a pivotal role in shaping Hamas' strategic choices amid the Syrian conflict. It was a delicate balancing act, where the organization had to weigh its historical alliances against the evolving realities of the regional landscape. The interplay of these external elements highlights the complexity of Hamas' decision-making during this critical period, illustrating how the organization's foreign policy was a product of its adaptability to the ever-changing dynamics of the Middle East.

The reconciliation attempts of Hamas with Iran and Syria between 2013 and 2017 were marked by significant internal and external challenges. The internal divisions within Hamas regarding its stance on the Syrian regime and the broader geopolitical shifts in the Middle East influenced the organization's approach to restoring its alliances. Despite these challenges, Hamas' pragmatic strategy, driven by the need for financial and military support, ultimately led to the gradual reestablishment of its relationships with Iran and Syria. This period underscores the intricate balance between ideology and pragmatism in Hamas' foreign policy and its ability to adapt to the evolving regional landscape.

According to Quneita, the normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel has left Hamas with few allies. He asserts that Hamas decided to collaborate with Iran to confront Israel and to sustain animosity towards it. (Al-Khateeb, 2022). While Hamas previously relied on Türkiye, Qatar, and Egypt, the recent normalization efforts by Arab, particularly Gulf countries, with Israel and Assad, have pushed Hamas to reestablish ties with Assad, aligning with the remaining anti-Israel axis.

Quneita emphasizes the pragmatic nature of this decision, stating, "The political decisions of Palestinian factions are interest-driven. Hamas and other factions believe that renewing their relationship with the Syrian regime currently serves the Palestinian cause." This pragmatic approach is consistent with numerous surveys and interviews within Gaza and the occupied territories, which show that while most Palestinians sympathize with the Syrian people and oppose the Assad regime, they acknowledge the strategic necessity of Hamas' actions (Al-Khateeb, 2022).

In the broader analysis, it is evident that Hamas' foreign policy decisions during the Syrian conflict were intricately woven into the fabric of the external context. The sectarian nature of the war served as a crucial backdrop, introducing complexities that demanded careful navigation. The shifting dynamics in regional alliances presented Hamas with a dynamic and fluid geopolitical landscape, where traditional partnerships were tested, and new alignments emerged.

Although took a sectarian stance in the beginning of the war, as a result of the pressure within the leadership as well as the Palestinians in Syria and Sunni partners like Qatar, Hamas has demonstrated a reluctance to engage in sectarianism, driven by a combination of pragmatic considerations and ideological principles. This inclination is linked to Hamas' perception of its position within the broader "Islamist family," its solidarity with similar groups, which it regards

as "national liberation movements," and its aspiration to preserve both operational and ideological autonomy.

From a material standpoint, Hamas recognized the potential drawbacks of sectarianism in terms of alienating potential allies and complicating diplomatic relations. By maintaining a non-sectarian approach especially as of July 2013, Hamas aimed to foster alliances beyond religious divides, thus broadening its support base and enhancing its diplomatic maneuverability.

Ideologically, although it was closer to the Muslim Brotherhood until the fall of Morsi regime in Egypt, Hamas began to identify itself as part of a broader Islamist movement that transcends sectarian boundaries, especially as of 2017. It began to view its struggle for Palestinian liberation as part of a larger struggle against oppression and injustice, alongside other movements fighting for self-determination and sovereignty. By refraining from sectarianism, Hamas aimed to underscore the universality of its cause and emphasize solidarity with oppressed peoples worldwide, regardless of religious affiliation.

Moreover, Hamas became aware of becoming entangled in the sectarian conflicts that have plagued the region, recognizing the potential for such involvement to undermine its legitimacy and detract from its primary goal of achieving Palestinian liberation. By assuming a non-sectarian stance, Hamas endeavored to uphold its image as a principled resistance movement dedicated to the emancipation of the Palestinian people. To conclude, Hamas' disinclination towards sectarianism reflects a strategic and pragmatic approach to its engagement with regional and ideological dynamics.

CHAPTER 5: HEZBOLLAH AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

5.1. Introduction

Hezbollah emerged in Lebanon amidst the turmoil of the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Initially conceived as a resistance movement against Israeli occupation, Hezbollah has since evolved into a powerful political and military force, wielding considerable influence within Lebanon's political landscape (Alagha, 2006, p. 11). Led by its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah operates a sophisticated network of social services, media outlets, and military wings, including the Islamic Resistance, which has engaged in armed confrontations with Israel and supported Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime during the Syrian civil war.

Its involvement in the Syrian civil war marks a pivotal evolution in its strategic objectives and operational scope. This chapter examines Hezbollah's engagement in the Syrian conflict, exploring its ideational and material dimensions, and the broader implications of its actions. By examining Hezbollah's involvement to the conflict, this chapter provides critical insights into the group's foreign policy motivations, its alliance with Iran, and the impact on the balance of power in the region. Understanding Hezbollah's role in Syria not only sheds light on the dynamics of its foreign policy, but also reveals the broader trends in geopolitical contestations of the Middle East.

Hezbollah did not initially oppose the Arab uprisings that erupted in 2011 in Tunisia. When the protests spread to Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain, Hezbollah celebrated them as liberation revolutions. This was mostly because the emerging regimes opposed Hezbollah's adversaries in the region. The future appeared promising as the populace, seemingly aligned with Hezbollah's anti-Western aspirations, began to shape new political systems in the region.

The group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, addressed the Egyptian demonstrators protesting against former President Hosni Mubarak, stating, “You are waging the war of Arab dignity. Today, with your voices, blood, and steadfastness, you are retrieving the dignity of the Arab people; the dignity which was humiliated by some rulers of the Arab world for decades.”

(International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 4). This stance underscored Hezbollah's support for popular movements aimed at overthrowing autocratic regimes, aligning with the broader sentiment of the Arab Spring.

However, Hezbollah's support for these revolutions shifted dramatically when the unrest spread to Syria. Supporting regional uprisings was one thing, but the potential collapse of the Assad regime was quite another (Al-Aloosy, 2020, p. 141). To avert this perceived catastrophe, Hezbollah engaged in extensive political efforts, and when these proved insufficient, it intervened militarily.

Initially, the group played a covert role, influenced by a strategic assessment of the risks. In the initial stages of the Syrian uprising, Hezbollah provided guidance to the Syrian regime and military officials. In collaboration with Iranian advisors, Hezbollah played a key role in training the regime's paramilitary forces and carrying out intelligence operations. These efforts were aimed at helping the regime penetrate opposition groups and allowed Hezbollah to conduct its own evaluations of the conflict's evolving dynamics. Iran also extensively depended on Hezbollah operatives to oversee and track military developments in Syria, underscoring the profound military and intelligence cooperation between the two allies (Slim, 2014, p. 63).

Hezbollah's cautious approach to direct involvement was influenced by two main factors according to Pollak (2016, p. 3). First, in 2011, President Assad did not appear to be in immediate danger. The Syrian military was still strong enough to contain the growth of certain rebel factions, reducing the urgency for Hezbollah to intervene directly. Second, Hezbollah was wary of being perceived as opposing a popular movement. Supporting a regime against a backdrop of widespread calls for democratic reforms across the Arab world could have undermined Hezbollah's image and support between its own base and the broader Arab population.

Despite their initial restraint, both Iran and Hezbollah gradually increased their involvement as the conflict in Syria deepened. Their intervention was driven by the fear of losing a crucial ally in the region should the Assad regime fall. Although they initially refrained from publicly acknowledging their role and support for the Assad regime, this support was well known and later openly admitted. This eventual acknowledgment of their involvement did not come as a surprise to many observers, as their actions on the ground had already indicated significant support for Assad (Javed, 2019, p. 20).

In the first two years of the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah's contributions were primarily limited providing advisory roles, training, and securing sensitive military installations and religious sites. This approach allowed Hezbollah to support the Assad regime without drawing too much attention to its involvement, thus maintaining a level of deniability while actively contributing to the regime's efforts to suppress the uprising (Pollak, 2016, p. 3).

As the conflict progressed, Hezbollah's role in Syria became more pronounced and visible. The group's fighters took on more direct combat roles, engaging in key battles to support Assad's forces. This escalation highlighted the strategic importance of Syria to Hezbollah and Iran, as well as their commitment to preserving the Assad regime. The increased visibility of Hezbollah's involvement also underscored the complexities of the Syrian conflict, where local uprisings intersected with regional power dynamics and the strategic interests of external actors.

This alignment with Syria was consistent with Hezbollah's ideological commitment to "Resistance". As the Syrian civil war prolonged, Hezbollah's involvement deepened, with the group deploying its fighters to actively assist the Syrian government. Before 2013, Hezbollah primarily aided the Assad regime in technical and training roles. However, after its operation in al-Qusayr in May 2013, Hezbollah shifted toward direct intervention in the Syrian Civil War. This marked a significant change in the foreign policy of Hezbollah.

Hezbollah has emerged as a pivotal force on the ground in Syria, where its fighters and commanders have played leading roles in crucial battles. They have been instrumental in training numerous Shiite militia fighters and in defending the regime's strategic installations. Hezbollah's involvement in Syria represents the largest and most extensive military campaign in its history (Pollak, 2016, p. 1). While the group has secured significant victories and bolstered the Assad regime, it has also incurred substantial losses. This involvement highlighted the high stakes and profound sacrifices associated with their commitment to the Syrian conflict.

Hezbollah encountered disapproval within Lebanon due to its engagement, notably from Sunni Muslims who were against the Syrian government. Furthermore, its participation in the Syrian civil war exacerbated sectarian tensions, significantly affecting Hezbollah's domestic political standing in Lebanon. Despite the 14 March coalition's anti-Assad stance in Lebanon, the government adopted policies in line with Hezbollah during the Syrian conflict. In addition, Hezbollah's active political and military support in Syria has had further repercussions for Lebanon's foreign policy (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 109).

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Hezbollah maintained its dedication to backing the Syrian government and actively took part in the conflict. Moreover, the group aimed to uphold its ties with influential regional players such as Iran and Russia, who were providing assistance to the Syrian government. Hezbollah strived to strike a balance between its engagement in Syria and its political standing within Lebanon, aiming to prevent additional destabilization of the country. Over time, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria became more complex, as the conflict became increasingly internationalized and involved a range of external actors. Hezbollah faced a growing threat from jihadist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, which posed a direct threat to the group's interests in the region. In response, Hezbollah became more closely aligned with Russia and Iran, who were facing threats from jihadist groups in the region.

In July 2019, Hezbollah began gradually reducing its troops in Syria, as its sense of threat towards the Syrian civil war has diminished. The discourse has returned to its traditional form, revealing a weakening perception of the threat originating from Syria, which was considered vital and posed a threat to the regional resistance front (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 125).

In summary, while Hezbollah remained committed to supporting the Syrian government from the beginning, it also sought to maintain its relations with key regional actors and balance its involvement in Syria with its domestic political position in Lebanon. Its involvement became more complex over time, as the conflict became increasingly internationalized and involved a range of external actors.

5.2. Foreign Policy of Hezbollah during the Syrian Civil War

From initial denials to active military engagement and coordination with international allies, Hezbollah's role offers a compelling case study in the intricate dynamics of a conflict that has reverberated far beyond Syria's borders. To comprehend the full extent of Hezbollah's influence, the layers of its involvement needs to be understood, together with the organization's strategic calculus in the context of the Syrian civil war. The group's involvement has evolved over the years, and its role has had significant implications for the conflict. Next section provides a summary analysis of the stages of Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war:

5.2.1. Initial Denial (March 2011 – April 2013)

When the Arab uprisings erupted in 2011, Hezbollah embraced the protests, hailing them as liberation demands. Nasrallah praised the efforts of the Egyptian demonstrators, stating that they were retrieving the dignity of the Arab people, which was humiliated by rulers for decades (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 4). Emphasizing that the regimes being overthrown were marked by corruption, weakness, and moral and psychological frailty, Nasrallah suggested that the widespread discontent and the eventual toppling of these regimes were reflective of broader historical and social forces at work (Slim, 2014, p. 66).

Primarily, the regimes being overthrown were adversaries of Hezbollah and its allies. The fall of these regimes appeared to weaken the influence of Western powers and their regional allies, creating an opportunity for a geopolitical shift that favored Hezbollah's anti-Western stance. For example, the ousting of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a staunch ally of the U.S. and Israel, was seen as a significant blow to Western influence in the region. Similarly, the overthrow of regimes in Libya and Tunisia, which had maintained various degrees of alignment with Western interests, presented an opportunity for a realignment of power in favor of movements sympathetic to Hezbollah's goals.

Furthermore, the Arab uprisings seemed to promise a future where the newly emerging political systems could potentially align more closely with Hezbollah's ideological and strategic objectives. The prospect of governments rising from popular movements, many of which had strong anti-Western sentiments, aligned well with Hezbollah's long-standing opposition to Western hegemony in the Middle East. The group's support for these uprisings was thus not merely ideological but also a calculated move to foster a regional environment more conducive to its interests and those of its allies, particularly Iran.

However, when it came to Syria, Hezbollah's strategic interests in preserving the Assad regime took precedence over its rhetorical support for popular movements (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 4). While Hezbollah publicly denied any direct involvement in the Syrian conflict at the onset of the uprising in March 2011, it adopted a much more cautious and calculated policy. Initially, Hezbollah reached out to Syrian opposition figures, both within Syria and abroad, in an attempt to mediate and find a middle ground between the Assad regime and the opposition (Slim, 2014, p. 66).

Hezbollah exercised caution before fully engaging in the Syrian conflict for two primary reasons (Pollak, 2016, p. 3). Firstly, as of 2011, Assad regime did not appear to be facing imminent collapse. The Syrian military possessed sufficient strength to suppress certain rebel factions, mitigating the immediate threat to Assad's grip on power. Secondly, against the backdrop of the Arab Spring, Hezbollah was mindful of public perception and the risk of being seen as opposing a widespread popular movement. Given the broader context of uprisings against authoritarian regimes across the Arab world, Hezbollah sought to avoid being perceived as antagonistic to the aspirations of the people.

As accounts surfaced in May 2011 alleging that Iran's Quds Force was aiding the Syrian government in quelling protests against its authority, Hezbollah refuted any involvement in military activities within Arab nations (Warrick, 2011). However, amid the escalating political turmoil in Syria during the spring of 2011, Nasrallah publicly voiced his inclination towards the maintenance of the existing regime (Los Angeles Times, 2011). While he emphasized the importance of preserving the Assad regime while concurrently advocating for a constructive dialogue between the regime and the opposition (A. Daher, 2018, p. 136). This underscored Hezbollah's strategic interest in ensuring the continuity of the Assad government, which served as a crucial ally in the region. Furthermore, Nasrallah's call for dialogue aimed to present Hezbollah as a proponent of peaceful conflict resolution, aligning with the organization's efforts to maintain a favorable public image and its influence in the region.

Hezbollah advocated for dialogue between the regime and the opposition, to maintain stability in Syria while also avoiding alienation of Hezbollah's support base. Calls for dialogue were aimed at presenting Hezbollah as a reasonable actor seeking peaceful resolution, despite its underlying commitment to Assad's survival. The group's leadership recognized the importance of the Assad regime as a critical ally in the region, essential for maintaining Hezbollah's supply lines and strategic depth. At the same time, publicly supporting a regime crackdown on popular protests could risk damaging Hezbollah's image as a champion of resistance against oppression, a narrative it had carefully cultivated over the years. Its public stance advocating dialogue and its initial denial of direct involvement were designed to maintain its regional credibility and support base. Simultaneously, its covert support for the Assad regime underscored its commitment to preserving a crucial ally, reflecting the complex interplay between ideological commitments and strategic imperatives.

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria evolved as the conflict's dynamics changed. Initially, Hezbollah provided covert support to the Assad regime, like Iran (Javed, 2019, p. 20). This included advising the Syrian regime and military leadership, working with Iranian advisors to train paramilitary forces, conducting intelligence operations and providing security for religious sites (Pollak, 2016, p. 3; Slim, 2014, p. 63). These efforts were aimed at helping the regime infiltrate opposition ranks and assess the conflict's on-the-ground dynamics. The collaboration between Hezbollah and Iranian operatives was crucial in tracking and countering the evolving military developments in Syria.

However, this approach caused a significant setback to Hezbollah's popularity among a large segment of the Syrian public. Relations between Hezbollah and the Syrian opposition, particularly the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the FSA, became strained. Accusations from opposition figures suggested that Hezbollah fighters were already involved in combat operations in support of Assad, although these claims were not substantiated at the time (A. Daher, 2018, p. 136).

As the conflict escalated, reports and accusations of Hezbollah's role in the civil war became more frequent. Hezbollah had positioned its forces in the vicinity of Damascus, specifically in the al-Zabadani area, which functions as a crucial supply route leading to the Beqaa Valley, the location of Hezbollah's headquarters (Javed, 2019, p. 18). In September 2011, Lebanese media reported that several Hezbollah fighters had been killed in Syria, allegedly while aiding Assad's efforts to suppress protests. Syrian government defectors accused the regime of deploying Hezbollah snipers against demonstrators, with further claims suggesting Hezbollah's involvement in battles in Zabadani and other areas. Additional reports indicated that many Hezbollah members were killed during clashes with the FSA in Homs and Damascus toward the end of 2011 (Sullivan, 2014, p. 11). These reports signaled a growing perception of Hezbollah's active role in the conflict.

Despite Lebanon's so-called 2012 dissociation policy, also known as the Baabda declaration, which aimed to distance Lebanon from Syria's armed conflict, Hezbollah took the lead in numerous battles on Syrian soil to support the Assad regime's defense (Darwich & Fakhoury, 2017, p. 10). Alvarez-Ossorio argues that Hezbollah's engagement in Syria traces back to February 2012 when it openly participated in the offensive aimed at retaking the strategically important city of Zabadani, then under the control of the Syrian Free Army (SFA)

(2019, p. 49). However, even as late as May 2012, senior Hezbollah officials adamantly stated “We did not, and we will not fight in Syria.” (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 1).

The increasing assertiveness of the Syrian rebels, exemplified by the July 2012 suicide bombing that killed key Assad officials, including his defense minister and brother-in-law, highlighted the regime's vulnerabilities, which also prompted Hezbollah to intensify its military involvement (Slim, 2014, p. 63). By late 2012, credible evidence of Hezbollah's direct participation in the conflict emerged. US officials publicly acknowledged Hezbollah's involvement in August 2012, stating that the group had been training Syrian government personnel and facilitating training by IRGC-QF since early 2011 (Sullivan, 2014, pp. 11–12).

Hezbollah's deeper involvement in Syria became more evident with the increasing number of funerals for its members killed in combat. Despite attempts to keep these events low profile, the frequency and nature of these funerals revealed the extent of Hezbollah's commitment. In August 2012, Hezbollah parliamentarians attended the funeral of military commander Musa Ali Shehimi, who allegedly killed while “performing his jihadi duty” (Levitt & Zelin, 2013, pp. 14–15). Similar acknowledgments followed with the deaths of other commanders, indicating Hezbollah's expanding role in the conflict.

Amid increasing scrutiny, Nasrallah persisted in publicly refuting allegations of Hezbollah's involvement in combat alongside the Assad regime, reiterating this denial in a speech delivered in October 2012 (Dehghanpisheh, 2012). However, he indirectly acknowledged that some Hezbollah members were involved in Syria, claiming they were there independently to protect Lebanese Shia living near the border (Sullivan, 2014, p. 12).

Despite Hezbollah's persistent rhetoric of resistance, American officials conveyed to the UN Security Council in October 2012 that the reality was unmistakable: Hezbollah fighters had become integral components of the “Assad’s killing machine” (Lederer, 2012). This assertion highlighted a stark departure from Hezbollah's professed stance of defending Lebanon's interests against external threats, revealing its active involvement in Syria's internal conflict. Two months subsequent to this revelation, a UN report corroborated the involvement of Hezbollah members in combat operations on behalf of the Assad government (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2012). This confirmation further underscored Hezbollah's significant role in bolstering the Assad regime, despite the organization's attempts to maintain a facade of non-involvement.

By early 2013, the situation for the Assad regime and its Iranian backers had deteriorated significantly. Rebel forces were gaining ground, particularly in Aleppo and the north, and the conflict was becoming increasingly sectarian with groups like JAN playing prominent roles. Iran and Hezbollah faced substantial losses, including the capture of IRGC-QF members by Syrian rebels and the assassination of senior Quds Force General Hassan Shateri in February 2013. The group's early contributions, primarily in advisory and support roles, evolved into direct military engagements as the conflict progressed. This marked a significant shift from Hezbollah's initial public denials and underscored the high stakes involved in their intervention in Syria.

Overall, a delicate balance between public denial and covert operations characterized Hezbollah's foreign policy during the early years of the Syrian civil war. The group's evolving strategy reflected its need to support a key ally while managing the potential repercussions on its standing in both Lebanon and the broader region. As the conflict deepened, Hezbollah's role became more overt, signaling a commitment to securing the survival of the Assad regime at considerable cost.

The overt engagement of Hezbollah in the battle for Qusayr in May 2013 marked a pivotal turning point in the organization's approach to the Syrian conflict, heralding a new era in its policies. This development signified a departure from Hezbollah's previous covert support and marked its transition to a more active role in the Syrian civil war. By openly committing its fighters to the conflict, Hezbollah signaled its unwavering support for Assad's government and its readiness to directly confront opposition forces on the battlefield. This bold move also demonstrated Hezbollah's willingness to escalate its involvement in the conflict to secure its objectives, despite the potential risks and repercussions. The forthcoming section focuses on developments that resulted in the increased support of Hezbollah to the Syrian regime.

5.2.2. Increased Support - Battle of al-Qusayr (April 2013 – May 2013)

The increasing military pressure on President Bashar Assad's regime in 2012 led to an evolution in Hezbollah's role, shifting from political support to direct military assistance. Claims of Hezbollah's technical and logistical support to Damascus surfaced in mid-2012, with allegations of the group aiding Syria's Shiite communities in developing self-defense militias (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 1). The rise of extremist Sunni groups, such as JAN and

ISIL, bolstered Hezbollah's argument for intervention, making confrontation with the Syrian opposition seem inevitable and enhancing the appeal of the Assad regime (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 9).

In March 2013, opposition forces successfully captured the city of Raqqah, leading to significant territorial losses for the Assad government in Syria's rural northeast. These opposition victories forced the regime to relinquish control over the area, prompting increased involvement from external allies, including Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia, to support the Assad regime (Blanchard, 2023, p. 1).

A significant shift in Hezbollah's role in Syria occurred in the late spring of 2013. Nasrallah made two trips to Tehran in April, where he "secretly" met with senior Iranian officials, including Soleimani and Khamenei, to discuss the Syrian situation (Javed, 2019, p. 19). While the details of these meetings remain unclear, shortly after his return to Beirut, Nasrallah publicly acknowledged Hezbollah's efforts in Syria for the first time in a speech on April 30, 2013. He stated, "Hezbollah is giving a hand in Syria," and warned that Syria's regional allies would not allow it to fall into the hands of America, Israel, or extremist groups (Sullivan, 2014, p. 14).

The Assad regime had been a crucial ally, and Hezbollah could not afford to remain passive as Assad faced threats from rebel forces (Pollak, 2016, p. 2). Initially, Hezbollah's military objectives in Syria were to preserve the Assad regime, viewed as a vital ally, and to keep Sunni jihadist away from its borders (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. i). However, as rebel and extremist factions gained strength and began to threaten key regime and Hezbollah strongholds, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria intensified (Pollak, 2016, p. 3).

Nasrallah reiterated his support for the Syrian regime in a subsequent speech on May 9, 2013, hinting that Syria would provide Hezbollah with "game-changing" weapons (Sullivan, 2014, p. 14). This rhetoric came shortly after Israeli airstrikes near Damascus targeted weapons intended for Hezbollah, highlighting the strategic importance of the Syria-Hezbollah alliance.

On May 25, 2013, Nasrallah explicitly acknowledged that Hezbollah forces had been actively present in Syria for months, framing it as a defensive measure to protect the resistance and Lebanon (Slim, 2013). He stated, "The whole war on Bashar al-Assad is because of his backing of the resistance ... Syria is the backbone of the resistance ... and the resistance cannot stand if [Syria] is broken" (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 4; Pollak, 2016, p. 2).

According to Hezbollah, their involvement in the Syrian conflict was in direct response to a formal request from the Syrian government (Javed, 2019, p. 20). They maintained that their actions were part of a legitimate effort to help a long-standing ally in the face of mounting threats from rebel forces and extremist groups, and that their intervention was aimed at stabilizing the region and protecting shared strategic interests.

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria escalated significantly with its decision to lead the ground assault on al-Qusayr, a predominantly Sunni town in Homs province near the Lebanese border. This offensive marked a departure from Hezbollah's previous activities in Syria (Sullivan, 2014, p. 4). The Qusayr assault highlighted Hezbollah's significant role in the Syrian conflict, as its fighters engaged in direct combat, suffering losses but ultimately playing a decisive role in turning the tide against anti-Assad rebels (Blanford, 2013, p. 21). This battle revealed the extent of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria and paved the way for more open and substantial support for the Assad regime (Levitt & Zelin, 2013, p. 14).

In a speech in late May 2013, Nasrallah declared that the battle in Syria was Hezbollah's fight, promising victory and emphasizing the group's commitment to bearing the responsibilities and sacrifices involved: "This battle is ours, and I promise you victory" (Levitt & Zelin, 2013, p. 14). Nasrallah argued that the fall of the Syrian regime would serve Israeli and U.S. interests and compromise the security and stability of both Syria and Hezbollah (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 1). Despite initial denials of involvement, Hezbollah's increasing role in the conflict became undeniable, with significant contributions to key battles and strategic operations (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. i; Levitt & Zelin, 2013, p. 14).

The number of Hezbollah fighters deployed to Syria until May 2013 is difficult to ascertain. However, French intelligence sources indicate that approximately 3,000 to 4,000 Hezbollah members had been sent to support the Assad regime (Levitt & Zelin, 2013, p. 17). This substantial deployment highlights the scale of Hezbollah's commitment to the Syrian conflict, reflecting its strategic interest in preserving the Assad regime. The involvement of such a significant number of fighters suggests a deepening entanglement in the Syrian civil war, underscoring the group's transition from limited engagement to active and large-scale military participation (Javed, 2019, p. 21).

Al-Qusayr is a strategic town near the Lebanese border, connecting Damascus with Syria's coastline. It was crucial for the Assad regime as it was used by opposition groups to transport arms and fighters from Lebanon (Blanford, 2013, p. 18). The Syrian Arab Army

(SAA) initiated a siege on Qusayr in November 2011. After three months, intense combat ensued between Syrian rebels and the SAA for dominance over the town. By July 2012, Qusayr had fallen into rebel hands, leading to sporadic clashes in nearby villages, primarily along a demarcation line between Shia and Sunni communities.

For Hezbollah, the presence of opposition forces in al-Qusayr posed a threat to Shiite villages in the region. Approximately 1,200 to 1,700 Hezbollah fighters participated in the battle, suffering at least 60 casualties (Levitt & Zelin, 2013, p. 17). On May 19, 2013, Hezbollah initiated significant clearing operations in Qusayr. Supported by the SAA, Hezbollah fighters advanced from the south, east, and west towards the town. Despite initial progress, they faced substantial resistance from entrenched rebel forces. Hezbollah engineers played a critical role in neutralizing various rebel defenses, including improvised explosive devices, tunnels, and booby traps. Interestingly, some of these defenses were reminiscent of techniques Hezbollah had previously shared with Hamas, suggesting that the Palestinian group had transferred its knowledge to the rebels. Although rebel mortar fire posed challenges, it was insufficient to halt Hezbollah's advance (Sullivan, 2014, pp. 14–16).

The victory at al-Qusayr dealt a significant blow to the opposition, both militarily and psychologically, and marked a new phase in Hezbollah's overt and effective intervention in Syria. This battle also signified a shift in Hezbollah's rhetoric, with its leader Hassan Nasrallah openly justifying their involvement as necessary to protect Shiite interests and support the Assad regime (Daily Star, 2013).

The fall of al-Qusayr in June significantly bolstered the Assad regime's position, invigorating Hezbollah to expand its military efforts into the Qalamoun Mountains, north of Damascus, and further regions beyond (Napolitano, 2013, p. 82). This victory not only strengthened the regime's strategic foothold but also emboldened Hezbollah to pursue broader territorial control and confront opposition forces in key areas. The extension of Hezbollah's operations into the Qalamoun Mountains marked a critical escalation in the conflict, illustrating the group's deepening involvement and commitment to supporting the Assad regime against insurgent forces.

Following the success at al-Qusayr, the Syrian regime, with Hezbollah's support, sought to reclaim other key areas including Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus (Blanford, 2013, p. 18). Hezbollah's involvement in these battles took various forms, from providing direct combat support to training the NDF and acting as military advisors. Hezbollah's fighters, with their

high level of training and discipline, significantly enhanced the combat effectiveness of the Assad regime's forces (Sullivan, 2014, p. 4).

On June 17, 2013, Hamas publicly called on Hezbollah to withdraw its fighters from Syria, arguing that their involvement was exacerbating sectarian tensions in the region (Napolitano, 2013, p. 78). In a statement issued from the Gaza Strip, Hamas emphasized that Hezbollah should redirect its efforts toward combating its primary adversary, Israel (Al-Arabiya, 2013a). This plea highlighted concerns over the deepening divide between different sectarian groups, which Hamas believed was being aggravated by Hezbollah's actions in the Syrian conflict.

From June to August 2013, numerous Hezbollah fighters, including several senior commanders, were killed in Damascus. Among them was Ayman Said Tahini, a senior Hezbollah commander leading an AFAB battalion, who died in mid-July 2013. Weeks later, rebels ambushed and killed Hossam Ali al-Nasr along with several other Lebanese fighters. Despite al-Nasr's relatively young age of 33, he was considered one of the more senior Hezbollah commanders in Syria. Both commanders were reportedly killed near Sayyida Zainab, suggesting Hezbollah maintains a significant presence and possibly a headquarters in the southern suburbs of Damascus (Sullivan, 2014, p. 19).

The regional situation became increasingly advantageous for Hezbollah in the latter half of 2013. The group's initial support for revolutionary changes in the Arab world had diminished, giving way to a more conservative approach that favored a return to the previous political order. This shift was evident in Hezbollah's positive reception of the July 2013 ouster of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 9). The organization's changing stance reflected its strategic interests in maintaining stability and countering the rise of movements that might threaten its position or that of its allies.

Although Hezbollah admitted to participating in the Syrian conflict, it initially framed its involvement as a defensive measure, either protecting Lebanese communities near the border or safeguarding Shiite shrines, particularly the Sayyida Zainab in southern Damascus. These narratives dominated the propaganda efforts of Hezbollah and its allies in Iran and Iraq (Levitt & Zelin, 2013, p. 14). Over time, this narrative took on a more sectarian tone, with Nasrallah arguing that it was Hezbollah's duty to defend Shiite shrines in Syria from extremist groups, particularly emphasizing the protection of the Sayyida Zainab Shrine. Nasrallah warned that if

these shrines were violated, it could trigger a broader Sunni-Shiite conflict, similar to the violence that followed the 2006 attack on the Imam Askari mosque in Iraq (Slim, 2014, p. 63).

5.2.3. Deepening Involvement (February 2014 – March 2016)

Between 2013 and 2016, Hezbollah was actively engaged in numerous critical battles supporting the Assad regime in Syria (Byman, 2014, p. 93). These battles saw Hezbollah sustain significant losses, sometimes resulting in speculation about the group's commitment to the conflict (Pollak, 2016, p. 3). Hezbollah leveraged its military expertise and well-trained fighters to assist the Syrian government in reclaiming strategic areas during key battles. This period marked a significant escalation in Hezbollah's commitment to supporting the Assad regime.

5.2.3.1. Qalamoun Offensive (February-March 2014)

Following its victory in Qusayr, Hezbollah downplayed its presence in various parts of Syria, including Aleppo. In December 2013, Hassan Nasrallah stated, "Syrians are fighting in Syria; we are not fighting on their behalf. We have no fighters in Deraa, Sweida, Raqqa, or Hasaka. We are only present in Damascus, Homs, and areas near the border. In Qalamoun, the Syrian army is fighting. Hezbollah's participation is minimal" (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 8). Despite these claims, the success at Qusayr emboldened Hezbollah to expand its operations, aiming to secure the entire Syrian-Lebanese border. The group played a crucial role in the regime's February-March 2014 offensive in the Qalamoun region, leading the campaign to capture Yabroud, a key transit hub for car bombs smuggled into Lebanon (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 8). This offensive marked a significant escalation in Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict, highlighting its strategic importance and military capabilities.

5.2.3.2. Southern Syria Offensive (Early 2015)

By 2015, Hezbollah had significantly expanded its operations across Syria, establishing a presence in critical regions to bolster the Assad regime and protect strategic interests. Initially

focused on the Qalamoun region and the suburbs of Damascus, Hezbollah's influence grew to encompass the northwestern cities of Idlib and Aleppo, the southern area near Daraa, and even the central and eastern parts of the country (De Luce, 2015).

In March 2015, intense combat occurred south of Damascus and near the Golan Heights. The rebel FSA, supported by Sunni Jihadi groups, including some affiliated with al-Qaeda, launched an offensive (Ożarowski, 2017, p. 44). This offensive was met with a counterattack from Syrian regime forces and Hezbollah fighters, who were assisted by Iranian commanders. This involvement was crucial in preventing the spread of opposition forces and maintaining the strategic balance in the region.

In May 2015, the Qalamoun region saw another intense and heavy fighting. This area, known for its strategic importance, became a major battleground as Hezbollah and Syrian regime forces engaged in fierce clashes with various rebel groups, including the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front and ISIS (S. G. Jones & Markusen, 2018, p. 4).

5.2.3.3. Battle of Zabadani (Summer 2015)

The Battle of Zabadani, which took place in mid-2015, saw Hezbollah and Syrian government forces launching a significant offensive to reclaim the town from opposition control. Fierce combat and substantial casualties on both sides characterized this battle. Hezbollah's involvement was crucial in securing this strategically important area near the Lebanese border, underscoring their escalating engagement in the Syrian conflict.

Zabadani's geographical significance stems from its proximity to the Lebanese border, making it a key strategic target for both the Syrian government and Hezbollah. Controlling Zabadani was crucial for maintaining secure supply routes and preventing cross-border rebel activities (Phillips, 2016, p. 217). Additionally, the town's location provided a gateway to Damascus, making its control vital for the security of the capital. Prior to the offensive, Zabadani had been under the control of various rebel factions, including groups affiliated with the FSA and other Islamist factions. Its recapture was essential for weakening the opposition's foothold in the region.

5.2.3.4. Battle of Palmyra (March 2016)

Following days of intense fighting, Syrian government forces, with the support of Russian air power, recaptured the ancient city of Palmyra from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Aljazeera, 2016). This victory was particularly significant considering that ISIS had initially seized control of Palmyra in May 2015.

The recapture of Palmyra was seen as a major strategic triumph for President Bashar al-Assad's government. Not only did it symbolize the regime's ability to regain territory lost to ISIS, but it also had broader implications for the conflict's dynamics in the region. By securing Palmyra, the Syrian government gained strategic advantage, potentially enabling further advances into the eastern desert region, extending towards the Iraqi border in the south. Moreover, this victory positioned Assad's forces to exert pressure on ISIL strongholds in Deir al-Zor and Raqqa to the east, further diminishing the terrorist group's territorial control.

5.2.3.5. Hezbollah's Strategic Commitment

Throughout the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah maintained a substantial presence, with estimates of 5,000 to 8,000 fighters in Syria at any given time. This represented a significant commitment given their total force size (45,000 fighters, among which 21,000 full time), underscoring the strategic importance Hezbollah placed on supporting the Assad regime (Pollak, 2016, p. 4).

Hezbollah's involvement in key battles from 2013 to 2016 was instrumental in bolstering the Assad regime's position in the Syrian conflict. This involvement underscores its critical role in the Assad regime's efforts to regain and maintain control over contested regions. Their military expertise, coupled with substantial manpower and resources, played a crucial role in several significant victories. These engagements not only highlighted Hezbollah's commitment to the Assad regime but also demonstrated their capability to operate effectively in various tactical roles, significantly influencing the course of the Syrian civil war.

Between 2011 and 2016, Hezbollah sustained significant losses in the Syrian conflict, with nearly 1,500 fighters killed and 4,500 injured (Javed, 2019, p. 19). Their deep involvement

in the conflict solidified their position as a critical ally to the Assad regime and Iran, strengthening the Axis of Resistance against Western and Gulf state interests in the region.

Hezbollah's military campaign in Syria has achieved notable success, significantly bolstering the Assad regime's position. The successful military campaigns have also strengthened Hezbollah's political standing within the Axis of Resistance, enhancing their influence in the broader Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape. However, this success has come at a cost, with dozens of Shiites in Lebanon killed in an unprecedented wave of suicide bomb attacks inspired by al-Qaeda since the battle of Qusayr. Despite these attacks, Hezbollah remains convinced that their actions have ultimately saved more lives by keeping Syrian rebels away from Lebanon's borders (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. i).

5.2.4. Russian Intervention (September 2015 – July 2017)

In February 2014, a significant rupture occurred within jihadist circles as al-Qaeda formally severed ties with ISIS. Following this split, ISIS swiftly capitalized on the chaos engulfing Syria and Iraq, seizing vast swathes of territory. By June, it boldly declared a caliphate with its capital established in Raqqa. Renaming itself the Islamic State (IS), the group attracted thousands of foreign fighters to its ranks, further fueling its expansionist ambitions.

The escalating crisis prompted international action, with the United Nations (UN) Security Council passing Resolution 2165 in July. This resolution authorized the delivery of cross-border aid into opposition-held areas of Syria, aiming to alleviate the humanitarian crisis gripping the region. Meanwhile, in September of the same year, the U.S. launched airstrikes against IS targets in Syria. These military actions were carried out under the auspices of the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF); with officials asserting that IS represented a direct offshoot of al-Qaeda.

As the conflict intensified, the U.S. forged partnerships with local actors in the region to combat the growing threat posed by IS. In September, an air campaign was initiated to relieve the IS siege on the town of Kobane, leading to collaboration with the YPG. Simultaneously, Congress authorized a train and equip program aimed at bolstering select Syrian forces. This initiative aimed not only to confront IS but also to safeguard opposition-held territories while fostering conditions conducive to a negotiated settlement to end the Syrian conflict.

Recognizing the need for a coordinated approach, the Defense Department established the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) in October. This task force formalized operations against IS forces in both Iraq and Syria, underscoring the multifaceted international effort to combat the jihadist threat and stabilize the region (Blanchard, 2023, pp. 1–2).

Moscow, a key ally of the Assad regime, expressed concern over the spread of jihadist extremism in the region and voiced support for efforts to combat terrorist organizations like ISIS. Moscow criticized unilateral military actions taken by the U.S. and its allies in Syria, particularly airstrikes conducted without the approval of the Syrian government or the authorization of the UN Security Council, reiterating Putin's former statements (Putin, 2013). Russia argued that such actions violated Syria's sovereignty and risked further destabilizing the region. However, Russia's reaction was also influenced by its strategic interests in the region, particularly its desire to maintain its military presence in Syria and protect its ally, the Assad regime. While Russia supported international efforts to combat ISIS, it also sought to ensure that these actions did not undermine the Assad government or impede its own military operations in the country.

Russian President Vladimir Putin sought authorization from the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament, on September 30, 2015, to deploy the nation's military forces in Syria. Subsequently, on the same day, the Federation Council granted approval for the utilization of Russian military personnel in Syria, specifically to combat terrorist organizations, notably the IS (Walker, 2015). The Syrian conflict witnessed a significant shift in dynamics with the intervention of Russia. This intervention, aimed at bolstering the Assad regime, not only altered the balance of power on the ground but also reshaped alliances and strategic calculations in the region. Russian air support provided a considerable boost to the Syrian government's capabilities. Hezbollah fighters worked in coordination with Russian forces, further solidifying the pro-Assad coalition.

Unlike Iran, which sought to create parallel institutions in Syria, Russia focused on rebuilding state capacity, enabling the regime to regain territory and assert its authority. This strategic divergence between Russia and Iran underscored Moscow's efforts to prevent Syria from becoming overly dependent on Tehran, thereby balancing power relations in the region. Due to Russia's support, the Assad regime gained the opportunity to safeguard Syria against Iran exploiting its vulnerabilities (Ali, 2019, p. 11).

Hezbollah played a crucial role in securing key border areas between Lebanon and Syria in this period, by cutting off rebel supply routes and strengthening control over border regions. However, tensions occasionally arose between Hezbollah and Russian forces, particularly regarding the deployment of Russian military police along the Lebanese-Syrian border. In a notable incident occurring on the outskirts of Qusayr in June 2018, tensions arose between Hezbollah and Russian forces, leading to a rare standoff. This standoff was eventually diffused when the Russians withdrew from the area, reportedly replaced by Syrian forces. It is worth noting that just a month prior to this incident, Moscow had issued a call for all foreign forces to vacate Syrian territory (Ali, 2019, p. 12). This call seemingly encompassed implicit pressure on entities such as Iran and Hezbollah to withdraw, reflecting Russia's efforts to assert its influence and establish a degree of exclusivity in its military presence within Syria.

Despite occasional friction, Hezbollah recognized the strategic value of aligning with Russia and deepened cooperation with Moscow over the course of the conflict. This cooperation extended beyond military coordination to include diplomatic engagement and strategic planning. Ahead of the Aleppo siege in 2016, there occurred an informal meeting between Russian and Hezbollah officials. The objective of this meeting was to establish ongoing communication and shared channels between the two parties concerning the developments on the Aleppo battleground. Additionally, they engaged in discussions regarding their mutual future plans (Lieber, 2016). By establishing channels of communication and collaboration with Russia, Hezbollah sought to solidify its position in Syria and leverage its influence to strengthen its standing in Lebanon. The alignment with Russia provided Hezbollah with the opportunity to be among the decision-makers on Syrian issues, securing its position in Syria and bolstering its influence in Lebanon (Ożarowski, 2017, p. 46).

By 2017, following two years since Russia's military intervention, the Assad regime initiated efforts to reassert control over various Syrian militias, including Shia groups aligned with Hezbollah, as it regained confidence and consolidated control (Ali, 2019, p. 11). This move aimed to reaffirm the regime's secular character and assert its sovereignty over all armed factions within its borders. By integrating these militias into the Syrian armed forces and assuming responsibility for their salaries, the regime sought to diminish Hezbollah's influence and ensure its own primacy. This strategic maneuvering by the Assad regime posed challenges for Hezbollah's long-term interests in Syria.

Hezbollah's involvement in key offensives, such as the Aleppo Offensive in late 2016 and the Baalbek offensive in July 2017, underscored its commitment to supporting the Assad regime and combating Sunni militancy. Initiating an offensive against al-Nusrah positions near the Syrian border in Baalbek, Lebanon, Hezbollah aimed to garner local Lebanese support for its endeavors in Syria, seeking to enhance its reputation as the defender of Shia communities against Sunni militancy (S. G. Jones & Markusen, 2018, p. 4). These instances underscored the pivotal role played by foreign Shiite militias, backed by Iran, in securing Assad's most significant victory thus far in Syria's nearly six-year-long civil conflict (Perry et al., 2016).

The period from September 2015 to July 2017 witnessed a complex interplay between Russian intervention and Hezbollah's strategic maneuvers in the Syrian conflict. While Russia's intervention bolstered the Assad regime and reshaped the balance of power in the region, Hezbollah navigated shifting dynamics to consolidate its influence both in Syria and in Lebanon. Despite occasional tensions, the strategic alignment between Russia and Hezbollah reshaped the dynamics of the Syrian conflict.

5.2.5. De-escalation, Post-ISIS and Regional Dynamics (2018 onwards)

As the Syrian conflict entered a phase of de-escalation in many areas post-2018, Hezbollah's role underwent significant evolution. With the Assad regime gradually regaining control over key territories, Hezbollah's focus transitioned from direct military engagement to consolidating influence and supporting political processes conducive to its interests.

Following the reduction in conflict intensity, Hezbollah leadership made strategic decisions to repatriate a substantial portion of its personnel deployed in Syria. However, a strategic contingent of Hezbollah troops remained stationed in vital areas near Damascus, Deir al-Zour, and southern Syria, underscoring the group's continued commitment to its Syrian ally (Kajjo, 2019). In June 2018, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah asserted the group's commitment to Syria, proclaiming that even if the entire global community united to pressure their withdrawal, Hezbollah would remain until the Syrian authorities requested their departure (S. G. Jones & Markusen, 2018, p. 2).

March 2019 marked a significant milestone with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) capturing the last stronghold of the ISIS in Syria. The subsequent detainment of thousands of

ISIS fighters and their families posed complex challenges for regional stability. While the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in a U.S. raid provided a symbolic victory, concerns persisted regarding the enduring threat posed by ISIS detainees. Shifts in the U.S. policy, including the withdrawal of forces from certain areas and their redeployment to the Eastern Syria Security Area (ESSA), also reshaped the conflict landscape (Blanchard, 2023, p. 2).

Post-ISIS, Hezbollah's continued involvement in Syria influenced broader regional dynamics, positioning the group as a pivotal player alongside Iran, Russia, and other stakeholders. While Hezbollah's initial military engagement bolstered the Syrian regime's resilience and solidified its status as a key actor in the conflict, the prolonged duration of its involvement presented multifaceted challenges.

On one hand, Hezbollah's demonstrated military prowess significantly contributed to the survival of the Assad regime, enhancing its regional standing and influence. However, the heavy toll in terms of personnel losses and allegations of civilian casualties tarnished Hezbollah's image and fueled opposition within its Lebanese constituency. Out of the estimated 7,000-10,000 Hezbollah troops deployed to Syria, approximately 1,600-2,000 were reported to have lost their lives in combat (Chulov, 2019). Notable commanders, including Abu Jaafar and Ali Fayyad, fell in the Syrian theater, highlighting the sacrifices and challenges inherent in Hezbollah's protracted engagement in the conflict (Al-Arabiya, 2016).

Despite these challenges, Hezbollah's strategic imperatives necessitated ongoing alliances with groups like Hamas to maintain regional influence and achieve broader geopolitical objectives. While Hezbollah's military effectiveness in Syria remained undisputed, the toll of casualties, surpassing those incurred during the Lebanese occupation, underscored the sacrifices made in pursuit of its objectives.

5.3. A Multi-Level Analysis of Hezbollah's Syria Policy

This section embarks on a comprehensive analysis, seeking to unravel the complex considerations that guided Hezbollah's decisions during the Syrian conflict. At the heart of this exploration lies the role of decision makers within Hezbollah's leadership, whose choices not only reflected the organization's core values but also responded to the dynamic challenges posed by the Syrian civil war.

Simultaneously, Hezbollah's identity, deeply rooted in its Shiite, Lebanese, and anti-Israeli foundations, played a role in shaping its foreign policy outlook. The interplay of these identity factors with the exigencies of regional geopolitics added layers of complexity to Hezbollah's engagements in Syria.

Beyond the microcosm of Hezbollah's internal dynamics, a systemic level analysis offers insights into the broader regional and international factors that influenced the organization's foreign policy decisions. From the intricate relationships with its allies, such as Iran and Russia, to the shifting sands of regional power dynamics, the external environment exerted a profound impact on Hezbollah's calculus in Syria.

This tripartite analysis, delving into decision makers, identity, and systemic dynamics, endeavors to provide a better understanding of the forces that guided Hezbollah's foreign policy during the Syrian civil war. By examining the intricate interconnections between these factors, the study aims to shed light on the complexities inherent in the strategic choices made by one of the most influential actors in the Syrian conflict.

5.3.1. Decision Makers

Hezbollah stands as one of the most clandestine organizations globally, characterized by an intense level of secrecy that obscures many aspects of its internal operations. This secrecy is a strategic choice, intended to protect the organization from external threats and ensure its operational security (Pollak, 2016, p. 5). Consequently, there is limited publicly available information about the detailed structure of its hierarchy, the identities of its key military commanders, and the intricacies of its decision-making processes.

Hezbollah's decision-making process is notably centralized, with significant authority vested in its top leadership. Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General, is the primary figure in determining the organization's strategic objectives and alliances. Nasrallah's authority within the organization has grown significantly, particularly following his notable leadership during the 2006 Lebanon War. This period saw a surge in Nasrallah's popularity throughout the Arab World (Darwich, 2021, p. 5).

The Shura Council, Hezbollah's supreme decision-making body, is headed by Nasrallah and oversees five councils: the Jihad Council (military activities), the Executive Council

(civilian activities), the Judicial Council (internal legal matters), the Parliamentary Oversight Council (political activities), and the Political Consulting Council (political and governmental advice). Hezbollah's military and security operations are overseen by the organization's Jihad Council and are managed by the IRL (Islamic Resistance in Lebanon) general staff (A. Daher, 2018, p. 133).

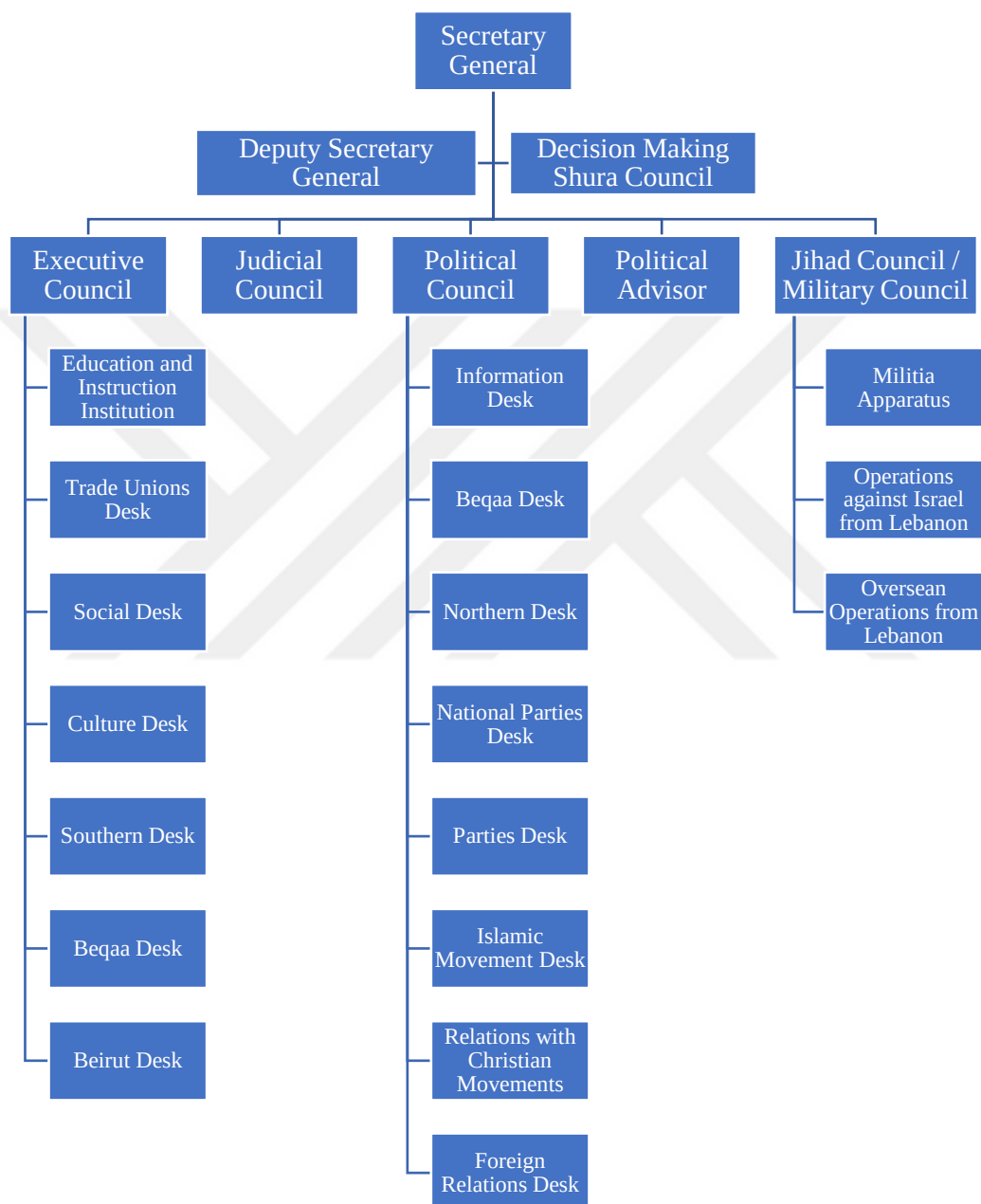


Figure 3. Organizational Structure of Hezbollah (Rudner, 2010, p. 228).

The Jihad Council, Hezbollah's highest military body, plays a critical role in planning and executing military operations. It is responsible for making high-level strategic decisions,

managing day-to-day military activities, and overseeing the deployment of forces. This council ensures that Hezbollah's military actions are coordinated and effective, maintaining a state of readiness to respond to both immediate threats and long-term strategic goals.

A significant aspect of Hezbollah's military and security operations is its integration with Iranian forces, particularly the IRGC. This relationship involves close coordination and cooperation on multiple levels, including strategic planning, joint operations, and training. Iranian support has been instrumental in enhancing Hezbollah's military capabilities, providing advanced weaponry, and sharing tactical expertise.

During the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah's military and security operations expanded significantly. The organization deployed thousands of fighters to support the Assad regime, participating in key battles and conducting operations critical to the regime's survival. Hezbollah's military strategy in Syria involved both offensive and defensive operations. Offensive operations aimed at recapturing territory and neutralizing rebel forces were complemented by defensive measures to protect critical supply lines and secure strategic positions.

Hezbollah's organizational structure involves multiple levels of contact and decision-making, which, in theory, could lead to a fragmented and inconsistent foreign policy. This is due to the potential for miscommunication or conflicting agendas among the various councils and units within the organization. The division of responsibilities across different bodies, such as the Political Council, the Jihad Council, and the Foreign Relations Unit, might seem to create a risk of disjointed policy outcomes. Despite these potential challenges, Hezbollah has managed to maintain a remarkably coherent and unified foreign policy (A. Daher, 2018, p. 133; Yetim, 2018, p. 367). This coherence is primarily due to the strong centralized leadership of Hassan Nasrallah and the overarching strategic framework provided by the Shura Council.

The identities of Hezbollah's military commanders are closely guarded secrets. While figures such as Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General, are publicly known, the names and positions of many other key military leaders are not disclosed. For instance, prior to his death in 2016, Mustafa Badreddine was recognized as a leading military figure in Syria, but such acknowledgments are rare. Badreddine was implicated in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. Despite Badreddine's high-ranking position, Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah remained heavily involved in Syrian civil war-related decisions, keeping abreast of significant developments and battle dynamics. After Badreddine's

death, a new commander was appointed to lead Hezbollah's forces in Syria. This individual remains anonymous and is noted for not being among Hezbollah's founding members (Pollak, 2016, p. 5).

The U.S. Treasury Department identified two other influential figures in Hezbollah's Syrian operations: Ibrahim Aqil and Fuad Shukr. Both are members of Hezbollah's Jihad Council, the organization's highest military authority. Aqil and Shukr have been pivotal in supporting Hezbollah fighters and pro-Syrian regime forces against Syrian opposition groups. Shukr, in particular, took on some responsibilities from Mughniyah after his death and is regarded as one of Hezbollah's top military commanders (Pollak, 2016, pp. 5–6).

Hezbollah's foreign policy during the Syrian civil war was driven by the need to maintain its strategic alliance with the Assad regime. Syria has historically been a crucial supporter, providing logistical and military support essential for Hezbollah's operations against Israel. Preserving this alliance was vital for ensuring continued access to supply routes and maintaining Hezbollah's military capabilities (Pollak, 2016, p. 5).

Hezbollah's leadership, particularly Hassan Nasrallah, recognized the strategic importance of the Assad regime for regional stability and resistance against Israel. Nasrallah's consultations with Iranian counterparts, including figures like Qasem Soleimani, significantly influenced Hezbollah's Syria policy, highlighting the organization's close coordination with Iran (A. Daher, 2018, p. 136).

Throughout his tenure, Nasrallah has remained steadfast in his ideological beliefs and his conviction in the supremacy of Wilayat al-Faqih, a stance he has held since his early days as a member of Hezbollah (Al-Aloosy, 2023, p. 14). He justified Hezbollah's decision to support the Syrian government by framing it as a defense of the resistance front and the protection of Lebanon's stability. His explanation of protecting Shiite shrines in Syria, particularly the Sayyida Zainab Shrine in Damascus, as a justification for his intervention in Syria and unwavering support for the Assad regime is important in this sense (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 378).

Nasrallah contended that by safeguarding the shrines, Hezbollah was actively working to avert the potential outbreak of a Sunni-Shiite civil conflict in the region. He emphasized that the demolition or violation of these holy sites, as witnessed in Iraq after the 2006 attack on the Imam Askari mosque in Samarra, had the potential to trigger a perilous sectarian strife (Slim, 2014, p. 63).

A significant escalation in Hezbollah's involvement in Syria occurred in late spring 2013. Nasrallah made two trips to Tehran in April. There, he held meetings with key Iranian decision-makers, including Qasem Soleimani, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and other senior Iranian officials, to deliberate on the Syrian conflict. During these meetings, Khamenei called on Nasrallah to take on more responsibility in Syria (A. Daher, 2018, p. 136; Sullivan, 2014, p. 14). After returning to Beirut, Nasrallah acknowledged for the first time in his speech on April 30, 2013, that Hezbollah was indeed fighting alongside the Assad regime in Syria. This decision significantly damaged Hezbollah's reputation among many Syrians. In the subsequent weeks, Hezbollah significantly increased its level of involvement in Syria, culminating in a major Hezbollah-led clearing operation in al-Qusayr. The party eventually confirmed their participation in the conflict between the regime and the opposition in Syria, which occurred in late May 2013.

The increased role of Hezbollah in Syria, facilitated by Nasrallah's meetings with Iranian decision-makers, underscores the importance of high-level strategic coordination in the organization's operations. The meetings in Tehran between Nasrallah and high-ranking Iranian officials made the critical role of top decision-makers clear in shaping Hezbollah's strategic direction. The involvement of figures like Soleimani and Khamenei highlights the deep strategic and operational coordination between Hezbollah and Iran. This coordination ensures that Hezbollah's actions align with broader Iranian objectives in the region, reinforcing the strategic alliance between the two entities.

Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria in 2013 stirred widespread unease both in Lebanon and across the Arab world. To gain backing for this intervention, particularly between Lebanese Shia and a broader regional audience, Nasrallah constructed a compelling narrative. The intricate dynamics between Hezbollah's leadership, Lebanese public sentiment, and regional opinions are key to grasping the timing of the public announcement of the group's intervention. Additionally, understanding the novel sectarian rhetoric employed by Hezbollah to garner support at both domestic and regional levels is essential (Darwich, 2021; Malmvig, 2021).

Nasrallah framed Hezbollah's foreign policy through a nationalist discourse based on anti-imperialism (Tinas & Tür, 2018, p. 140). He justified Hezbollah's intervention in Syria by presenting it as a defensive measure aimed at protecting Lebanon and preserving the resistance front against Israel. He emphasized the protection of Shiite religious sites in Syria, particularly

the Sayyida Zainab Shrine in Damascus, as a key motive. This narrative was intended to prevent sectarian conflict and to protect Lebanon's stability (Slim, 2014).

But Hezbollah's silence in the face of massacres committed against Sunni groups has harmed Hezbollah's Kerbala discourse. Therefore, Suphi Tufeyli, the first Secretary-General of Hezbollah who later split from the organization criticized Hezbollah's discourse of the Aleppo victory, stating that Hezbollah pursued sectarian policies during the Syrian civil war and bore responsibility for Kerbala being in Aleppo that year (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 124).

Hezbollah's foreign policy during the Syrian civil war was characterized by centralized decision-making, strategic alignment with Iran, and a pragmatic approach to regional dynamics. The leadership, particularly Hassan Nasrallah, played a critical role in shaping and justifying the organization's involvement in Syria. Despite the complex and multifaceted nature of its operations, Hezbollah maintained a coherent and strategic foreign policy, leveraging its military and ideological alliances to achieve its objectives in the Syrian conflict.

While Hezbollah's multi-tiered organizational structure could theoretically lead to a fragmented foreign policy, the strong central leadership and effective coordination mechanisms have ensured a remarkable coherence. This central oversight ensured that the diverse activities of Hezbollah are coordinated and aligned with the organization's strategic goals. Hezbollah's ideological commitment to the principles of Wilayat al-Faqih and its alignment with Iranian strategic interests provided a clear and consistent framework for decision-making. Lastly, regular communication and consultation among the leadership and various councils facilitated a uniform discourse.

5.3.2. Sectarian Identity

Hezbollah's foundational principles are deeply rooted in resisting Israeli occupation and defending Lebanese sovereignty, which was demonstrated through political activism, armed resistance and social welfare programs (Danin, 2012). Influential figures like Musa Sadr and Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah shaped its ideological framework, embedding a Shia-centric perspective that emphasizes religious and political solidarity among Shiites in Lebanon, Iran, and Iraq. Especially Fadlallah was known for his conservative and revolutionary interpretations of Shia theology, emphasizing the concept of "Wilayat al-Faqih". This ideological foundation

has often been mobilized to justify Hezbollah's actions, portraying them as part of a broader resistance movement.

Hezbollah's multifaceted identities—including its Islamic, Shiite, Lebanese, Arab, and resistance dimensions—are pivotal in legitimizing its war-related decisions and sustaining its position as an armed non-state actor in the Middle East (Kizilkaya, 2017, p. 80). Each of these identities serves a distinct purpose in its overarching strategy.

Hezbollah's Islamic identity is foundational to its ideology and mission. Rooted in Shia Islam, it draws on religious principles to justify its actions and mobilize support. This identity provides the theological framework that underpins its resistance narrative and positions it as a defender of the faith against perceived threats. By aligning its actions with Islamic teachings, Hezbollah legitimizes its military engagements and presents itself as a protector of Islamic values.

Hezbollah's sectarian identity is central to its legitimacy, particularly within the Shia community in Lebanon and beyond. This identity is crucial in its narrative of protecting Shia interests and holy sites, especially in the context of the Syrian civil war. The defense of Shia communities and religious shrines, such as the Sayyida Zainab Shrine in Damascus, resonates deeply with its supporters and justifies its military interventions as acts of sectarian solidarity and religious duty.

Its Lebanese identity roots it firmly within the national context. By emphasizing its role in defending Lebanese sovereignty and security, particularly against Israeli aggression, Hezbollah garners support from various segments of the Lebanese population. This identity helps it navigate the domestic political scene, presenting itself not just as a sectarian militia, but also as a national resistance movement committed to the protection and welfare of Lebanon as a whole.

Arab identity of the organization enables it to position itself within the broader Arab struggle against Western imperialism and Israeli occupation. This pan-Arab stance allows Hezbollah to build alliances and gain support across the Arab world, transcending sectarian lines to some extent. By framing its actions within the larger context of Arab nationalism and resistance, Hezbollah appeals to a broader audience and strengthens its legitimacy as a regional actor.

The resistance identity is perhaps the most encompassing and unifying aspect of Hezbollah's multiple identities. As an organization committed to resisting Israeli occupation and Western influence, Hezbollah leverages this identity to justify its continued armed presence and military activities. This resistance narrative is deeply embedded in its history and propaganda, portraying Hezbollah as a vanguard of the oppressed and a bulwark against external threats. Hezbollah's adept use of these overlapping identities allows it to maintain a complex but cohesive legitimacy.

The Syrian conflict highlighted a transformation in Hezbollah's resistance discourse. Prior to 2013, Hezbollah supported popular uprisings in the Arab world, interpreting them as movements against oppression and Western-backed regimes (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 115). However, its stance on Syria revealed a selective application of these principles, prioritizing sectarian and strategic interests over broader pan-Islamic solidarity (Yetim, 2018, p. 379). Hezbollah's support for Shia communities in Yemen and Bahrain was framed as standing with the oppressed, but its silence on Assad's atrocities exposed a sectarian bias. This shift in rhetoric and practice undermined Hezbollah's claims of non-sectarianism and highlighted its alignment with Iran's regional strategy (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 117).

During the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah initially framed its intervention in Syria through a defensive narrative, claiming to protect Lebanese Shiite villagers on the Syrian border and Shia shrines like Sayyida Zainab in Damascus from Sunni extremists (International Crisis Group, 2014, pp. 3–4). Nasrallah emphasized the threat posed by takfirist groups, arguing that defending these sites was crucial to prevent a broader sectarian conflict (Slim, 2013). This rhetoric of defense was a key element in the propaganda disseminated by Hezbollah and its allies in Iran and Iraq (Levitt & Zelin, 2013, p. 14).

Hezbollah emphasized that Lebanese citizens living in Syria were under threat from hostile forces, necessitating armed intervention to ensure their safety. Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, highlighted this issue by stating, "There are more than two dozen villages and farms located just inside Syria, north of the border with Lebanon, that are home to around 30,000 Lebanese, many of whom are Shiites and members of Hezbollah." He emphasized that the residents of these towns decided to stay and defend themselves against Syrian armed groups, rather than involving themselves in the broader conflict between the Syrian regime and the opposition (Blanford, 2012).

This rationale was designed to resonate with Hezbollah's domestic audience in Lebanon, portraying the organization as a protector of Lebanese expatriates and aligning its actions with broader nationalistic sentiments. The defense of Shiite religious sites, especially the revered Sayyida Zainab Shrine, was another critical component of Hezbollah's justification for its involvement in Syria (Javed, 2019, p. 17). The shrine holds significant religious importance for Shiites, and its protection was presented as a sacred duty. Nasrallah stated that “the destruction of the Sayyida Zainab Shrine could have led to a sectarian war in the region” (Kızılkaya, 2017, p. 216). By positioning itself as a guardian of these holy sites, Hezbollah sought to strengthen its legitimacy within the Shiite community and rally support for its actions.

This strategic messaging aimed to achieve several objectives. By emphasizing the defensive nature of its involvement, Hezbollah aimed to legitimize its military actions in the eyes of its supporters and the broader international community. This narrative framed Hezbollah's intervention as a response to external threats rather than an aggressive expansion of influence (Pollak, 2016, p. 12). The narratives of defending ethnic Lebanese and safeguarding Shiite shrines were also powerful tools for mobilizing support among the Shiite population in Lebanon and the broader region. These themes appealed to communal solidarity and religious duty, helping to galvanize both moral and material backing for Hezbollah's operations. In the face of accusations that its involvement was sectarian, Hezbollah's emphasis on defensive motives served to counteract such criticisms. By focusing on the protection of specific communities and religious sites, Hezbollah attempted to portray its actions as non-sectarian and universally justified within the context of self-defense.

Nasrallah's speeches in May and June 2013 underscored the preemptive and defensive nature of Hezbollah's intervention, presenting it as a necessary action against a conspiracy involving the U.S., Israel, and Sunni extremists. He maintained that the conflict was not sectarian but a clash of two projects threatening Hezbollah's existence: “The dispute in Syria is between two sides, two axes, two projects, it is not between Sunnis and Shia, it is not between sects.” (Slim, 2014, pp. 63–64).

The narrative promoted by Hezbollah and its allies about defending Shia shrines and communities did little to mitigate the growing perception among Sunni groups that Hezbollah's involvement was fundamentally sectarian. This perception was reinforced by the group's strong ties to Iran, a major Shia power, thereby casting Hezbollah's actions as part of a broader Shia axis against Sunni interests.

A significant shift occurred in late spring 2013, when Nasrallah traveled to Tehran and met with senior Iranian officials, including Qasem Soleimani and Ayatollah Khamenei, to discuss the situation in Syria. These consultations underscored the strategic alliance between Hezbollah and Iran, reflecting a coordinated approach to the conflict (Pollak, 2016, p. 5). Following these meetings, Hezbollah escalated its military involvement, leading to major operations such as the clearing of al-Qusayr.

This period marked a transition from a defensive to a more proactive and offensive role, driven by the need to secure strategic interests. The organization's narrative expanded to include the defense of the Axis of Resistance against Israeli and Western interests, portraying the conflict as an existential struggle against a coalition of enemies (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 5).

The Sunni-Shiite divide deepened as Hezbollah's involvement in Syria became more pronounced, provoking strong reactions from Sunni groups and regional actors. The rhetoric of protecting Shia interests and holy sites resonated with Hezbollah's base but also fueled sectarian polarization (Byman, 2014, p. 93). Hezbollah's military support for the Assad regime contributed to an escalation in sectarian violence. As Sunni opposition groups viewed Hezbollah's intervention as an existential threat, their response became increasingly sectarian, leading to retaliatory attacks against Shia civilians and exacerbating the cycle of violence. This tit-for-tat dynamic entrenched sectarian identities and hostilities, making the conflict more intractable.

Hamas' call for Hezbollah to withdraw from Syria, citing increased sectarian polarization, illustrates the broader regional implications of its actions (Al-Arabiya, 2013a). The intervention strained Hezbollah's relations with Sunni factions within Lebanon and across the region, highlighting the sectarian undercurrents of its strategic choices. Despite its opposition to sectarianism, as consistently voiced by leader Hassan Nasrallah (The Jerusalem Post, 2014), Hezbollah's support for Bashar al-Assad's regime—a predominantly Alawite, Shia offshoot—against a largely Sunni opposition exacerbated sectarian tensions (Miller, 2014).

Hezbollah's justifications for its involvement in Syria evolved as the conflict progressed. Initially focused on protecting Shia villages and holy sites, the narrative shifted to emphasize combating terrorism and preventing the spread of extremism into Lebanon. Hezbollah framed its actions as a fight against Sunni extremists like ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates, presenting itself

as a stabilizing force in the region: “If we didn’t fight in Syria, we would now be fighting in Lebanon” (International Crisis Group, 2014, pp. 4–5).

Nasrallah also contended that the conflict in Syria transcended sectarian lines, asserting that the threat posed by takfirists extended beyond sectarian divisions to encompass all Muslims, regardless of their Sunni or Shia affiliations. He emphasized that the militant groups labeled as takfirist represented a menace to the entire Muslim community, emphasizing unity in the face of this common threat (Slim, 2014, pp. 63–64).

In this vein, Hezbollah employed intensely sectarian rhetoric, comparing the Syrian conflict to the historic seventh-century Battle of Karbala between Imam Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, and the forces of Umayyad Caliph Yazid. This battle holds profound significance for Shiites and is central to the division between Sunni and Shia Islam. Social media was flooded with content advocating for the defense of religious shrines in Syria and lauding young Shiites who died in what was portrayed as a jihad to protect these sacred sites (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 16).

Hezbollah’s growing role in the Syrian conflict has had profound repercussions on Sunni groups and external donors (Javed, 2019, p. 21). The resulting escalation in sectarian rhetoric and orientation among Sunni factions, coupled with the strategic support of sectarian groups by external donors, has deepened the sectarian divide and entrenched long-term instability in the region (Byman, 2014, p. 93). The presence of Hezbollah fighters in Syria acted as a rallying point for both Shia and Sunni militias. On one hand, it galvanized Shia fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, and beyond to join the fight in defense of their sectarian brethren. On the other hand, it provoked a surge in recruitment among Sunni jihadist groups, who framed their struggle as a jihad against Shia oppression. This mobilization on sectarian lines further polarized the conflict and drew in fighters from across the region, transforming the Syrian civil war into a broader sectarian battleground.

Critics argue that Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria has led to further violence and human rights abuses. They assert that the organization’s involvement has exacerbated sectarian tensions and contributed to the suffering of the Syrian population. During this process, Hezbollah’s policies have contributed to undermining its claim of a pan-Islamic stance. This includes viewing the dominant Sunni-Wahhabi tradition in Saudi Arabia as more dangerous than Israel and providing significant support to Iran-backed Houthi groups. These actions have positioned Hezbollah as a participant in this process, similar to its role in Syria. As a result, its

policies have cast doubt on its claim of representing a unified Islamic front, as its actions appear to align more closely with the interests of specific sectarian groups and regional alliances (Yetim et al., 2020, p. 117).

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria had significant spillover effects, heightening sectarian tensions in neighboring countries such as Lebanon and Iraq. In Lebanon, for instance, Sunni and Shia communities became increasingly polarized, with clashes erupting in mixed areas and political discourse becoming more sectarian. This regional spillover underscored the far-reaching impact of Hezbollah's actions in Syria, contributing to instability and sectarian strife beyond Syrian borders.

The sectarian dimension of the Syrian conflict, accentuated by Hezbollah's involvement, influenced the strategic calculations of regional and global powers. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Qatar, which backed Sunni opposition groups, viewed Hezbollah's role through a sectarian lens and adjusted their policies accordingly. This alignment along sectarian lines mirrored the broader geopolitical contest between Sunni and Shia powers, particularly the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, thus intertwining local conflicts with regional power struggles.

It is crucial to recognize that while sectarian factors were influential in Hezbollah's choice to back the Syrian government; other elements also shaped its foreign policy decisions. These factors encompassed strategic partnerships with Iran, the imperative to safeguard supply lines and arms deliveries, and the apprehension about the conflict's possible spillover into Lebanon. Moreover sectarian narratives were mostly utilized to cultivate a heightened atmosphere of insecurity and are linked to the deployment of extreme military measures (Darwich & Fakhoury, 2017, p. 2). The subsequent section analyzes these systemic and strategic factors, providing a comprehensive examination of their impact and implications on Hezbollah's foreign policy decisions during the war.

5.3.3. Systemic Factors

The Syrian civil war took place in a broader geopolitical context that also shaped the foreign policy choice of Hezbollah. Although ideational factors, i.e. sectarian narratives influenced the decision-making and propaganda of Hezbollah, materialistic calculations and

realpolitik considerations were pivotal. Hezbollah's alignment with Iran, the necessity to secure strategic interests, and broader regional dynamics shaped its actions in Syria. This section explores these systemic and strategic factors chronologically, highlighting the primacy of materialistic calculations over ideological commitments.

Since its establishment, Hezbollah has maintained a steadfast commitment to resisting Israel and a strong allegiance to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This loyalty has translated into strategic cooperation and mutual support, with Iran providing financial assistance, military training, and weapons to bolster Hezbollah's military capabilities (Danin, 2012). These ties positioned Hezbollah as a crucial player in Iran's regional strategy, making its involvement in the Syrian conflict a strategic necessity.

The civil war took place within context shaped by the regional power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran supported the Assad regime, while Saudi Arabia backed opposition forces. This rivalry had significant implications for Hezbollah, whose strategic calculations were influenced by the need to counterbalance Saudi influence and maintain its alliance with Iran and Syria (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 6). Thus, Hezbollah's involvement was driven by the imperative to preserve its logistical lifeline through Syria, crucial for the transshipment of arms and supplies from Iran (Pollak, 2016, p. 2).

Hezbollah's decision to back the Assad regime was framed as a defensive action. Nasrallah argued that the conflict was not sectarian, but rather a fight against takfirists who threatened all Muslims, both Sunni and Shia (S. G. Jones & Markusen, 2018, p. 2). This narrative was crucial in justifying Hezbollah's intervention and mitigating sectarian backlash. However, the primary motivation was the strategic necessity of ensuring the Assad regime's survival, which was pivotal for maintaining Hezbollah's operational capabilities and regional influence (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 1).

Despite officially maintaining a stance of distancing itself from the Syrian crisis, Hezbollah's military involvement marked a significant departure from its previous engagements, representing its first attack against a non-Israeli and non-Lebanese adversary (A. Daher, 2018, pp. 137–139). As the regime's survival seemed jeopardized, Hezbollah deemed intervention a strategic necessity.

Iran's influence on Hezbollah's decision-making was profound. Nasrallah's visits to Iran in 2013 likely reinforced the pressure to support Assad, reflecting Iran's strategic priorities over Hezbollah's initial reluctance (Ghaddar, 2013).

The depth of Hezbollah's ties with Iran, characterized by a patron-agent relationship, further underscores the materialistic calculations underlying its foreign policy (Al-Aloosy, 2023, p. 4). Hezbollah's ideology and its relationship with Iran are deeply interconnected with the concept of Wilayat al-Faqih, which refers to the rule of a jurisprudent political system established in Iran after the revolution. The Iranian revolution and its ideals served as a major source of inspiration for Hezbollah and a crucial test for its own ideology. Hezbollah has publicly demonstrated its loyalty to Iran and Wilayat al-Faqih, with its officials consistently affirming their adherence to Iran's ruling clergy. Even Nasrallah has consistently reiterated similar statements, demonstrating the group's commitment to Iran (Al-Aloosy, 2023, p. 8).

Hezbollah's use of defensive narratives, such as protecting Shiite shrines and defending Lebanese communities, served broader strategic purposes. These narratives aligned with Iran's framing of its support for Assad, reinforcing the strategic alliance between Hezbollah and Iran (Levitt & Zelin, 2013, p. 14). This approach also aimed to manage perceptions domestically and internationally, mitigating backlash and maintaining Hezbollah's image as a resistance movement rather than an aggressor.

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria was also influenced by the actions of external powers such as Russia and the U.S. Russia's military support for the Assad regime and the U.S. backing of opposition forces contributed to the protracted nature of the conflict, complicating Hezbollah's strategic landscape. Navigating this complex geopolitical environment required Hezbollah to make pragmatic choices based on the evolving balance of power and alliances.

In a November 2013 interview with the International Crisis Group, a journalist in Beirut outlined the key supporters of the Syrian opposition (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 4). These backers included the Saudi and Western-aligned March 14 Alliance, the U.S., France, and Saudi Arabia. The journalist highlighted that these entities were part of the coalition that conspired against Hezbollah in 2006. This historical antagonism left Hezbollah with little choice but to support the Assad regime, despite any personal reservations about Assad himself. The journalist's remarks frame the support of Hezbollah for Assad as a necessary countermeasure to the perceived threats from these powerful adversaries.

Hezbollah's position in the Syrian conflict was further complicated by the sponsorship of the opposition by Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The involvement of these Gulf States significantly heightened the stakes for both Iran and Hezbollah. The potential collapse of the Assad regime represented not only the loss of a crucial strategic ally but also a detrimental shift in the regional

power balance. By the end of 2013, the Syrian conflict had become a battleground for these regional sponsors, leading to an entrenched and self-perpetuating cycle of confrontation. This dynamic exacerbated the complexities of Hezbollah's foreign policy, forcing the group to navigate an increasingly hostile and polarized regional landscape, where the fall of Assad would have substantial repercussions for their strategic interests and influence.

As the Syrian conflict progressed, the emergence of jihadist groups, notably JAN and the IS, presented an additional impetus for Hezbollah's involvement. Initially, Hezbollah did not perceive these groups as significant threats. However, by 2013, Hezbollah's assessment had evolved, prompting a shift in its rhetoric and war objectives. In addition to supporting Assad, Hezbollah now aimed to safeguard Lebanon and the Shiite community from the threat posed by jihadist-takfirist groups operating in Syria. While some analysts argue that Hezbollah's adoption of such language was primarily a justification for its involvement to the Lebanese populace, rather than an acknowledgment of the Sunni groups as genuine threats, the group's expanded rhetoric underscored its evolving strategic calculations in response to the changing dynamics of the conflict (Pollak, 2016, p. 3). This shift highlights Hezbollah's pragmatic approach, where the perception of threats and the articulation of objectives are tailored to suit its broader strategic interests and domestic legitimacy.

It is important to note that, Tufeyli, the former secretary-general of Hezbollah, criticized the decision to support Assad regime, stating, "I know that this decision belongs to Iran... I know that the Lebanese within Hezbollah and Nasrallah himself were not convinced to engage in this war." (Kazdal, 2018). He highlighted that the decision did not necessarily originate from within Hezbollah itself or receive unanimous support from its Lebanese members, including Nasrallah. This implies that Hezbollah's alignment with Syria was not solely driven by internal dynamics but also by external pressures and obligations, primarily from Iran.

A Lebanese security official suggested that Hezbollah's decision was driven by the need to comply with Iran's directives. Similarly, a Lebanese politician remarked, "Nasrallah cannot refuse someone who has provided \$30 billion in aid over the past 30 years." According to a report by Reuters, Hezbollah's annual revenue ranges between \$800 million and \$1 billion, with 70-90% of this income sourced from Iran. This underscores Hezbollah's significant economic dependence on Iran, highlighting the extent of its reliance on the country both politically and economically (Kazdal, 2018).

In conclusion, Hezbollah's foreign policy during the Syrian civil war was shaped by a complex interplay of sectarian ideologies and strategic imperatives. While sectarian rhetoric played a role in justifying its involvement, the overarching drivers were materialistic calculations and realpolitik considerations. The alignment with Iran, the necessity to secure strategic interests, and the broader regional dynamics ultimately dictated Hezbollah's actions in Syria. This duality underscores the multifaceted nature of Hezbollah's foreign policy, where ideological commitments are interwoven with pragmatic strategic decisions.

It can be argued that Hezbollah aimed at maintaining its relationship with Iran, driven by geopolitical necessities, and preserving its alliance with Syria. Iran provides approximately \$200 million in annual financial aid to Hezbollah. This support is crucial for Hezbollah to sustain its activities and strengthen its military capacity. The alliance with Syria emerges as a strategic necessity to ensure the continuation of this financial aid. Essentially, Hezbollah's support for the Syrian government can be understood within the context of its broader strategic interests. The fall of the Syrian government and the rise of Sunni-dominated rebel groups posed a threat to Hezbollah's regional influence and its alliance with Iran. By supporting the Syrian government, Hezbollah sought to protect its sectarian interests and maintain a key ally in the region. Furthermore, Hezbollah perceived the Syrian conflict as part of a larger sectarian struggle between Sunni and Shia forces. The organization viewed its involvement in Syria as a means to counterbalance the influence of Sunni powers, such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, which were backing the opposition forces. Hezbollah portrayed its intervention as defending the Shia community and resisting what it perceived as a threat from Sunni extremists.

To fully grasp the depth of Hezbollah's commitment to the Syrian regime, it is also essential to recognize the critical role Syria plays as Hezbollah's logistical artery. Syria has long been a pivotal conduit for the supply of weapons and military equipment to Hezbollah, with deliveries being facilitated both by air and by overland routes. This logistical lifeline has been managed primarily by the IRGC-QF, under the leadership of Qasem Soleimani (Pollak, 2016, p. 2). Through this arrangement, Hezbollah has been able to significantly enhance the quantity and quality of its arsenal over the years.

Syria's significance to Hezbollah extends far beyond its function as a channel for financial and material support. The Assad regime has also served as a crucial sanctuary for Hezbollah's training camps and weapons storage facilities. This "safe haven" has allowed Hezbollah to enhance its military capabilities and operational readiness (Sullivan, 2014, p. 4).

The strategic alliance with Syria has thus been indispensable not only for the logistical flow of arms and funds but also for providing the physical space necessary for Hezbollah to train its fighters and stockpile its arsenal. This comprehensive support has solidified Syria's role as an essential pillar in Hezbollah's infrastructure and strategic planning.

Nasrallah articulated the essence of Hezbollah's alliance with Syria, stating, "Syria is the backbone and support of the resistance. The resistance cannot remain passive while its backbone is made vulnerable and its support is being eroded. To do so would be foolish" (Nasrallah, 2013).

In an interview with the International Crisis Group in October 2013, a Hezbollah official from Beirut emphasized that their intervention in Syria became a "strategic necessity" by July 2012, a time when the survival of the Assad regime appeared to be in serious jeopardy (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 3). Convincing Hezbollah's base that involvement in the Syrian conflict was a "necessary evil" turned out to be relatively straightforward, suggesting that there had been effective groundwork and preparation for this decision.

The strategic use of Syria as a transit hub has allowed the IRGC to ensure a steady and reliable flow of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah. This relationship has not only bolstered Hezbollah's military capabilities but also reinforced its operational readiness against its adversaries, particularly Israel. The uninterrupted supply chain through Syria has been vital for Hezbollah's ability to maintain and expand its missile stockpiles and other military resources, which are essential for its tactical and strategic operations.

Moreover, Syria's geographical location has provided Hezbollah with a critical strategic depth, allowing it to operate more effectively within Lebanon and the broader region. The alliance with the Assad regime has thus been indispensable for Hezbollah, making the group's support for the Syrian government during the civil war not just a matter of ideological alignment but a strategic necessity to preserve its own military infrastructure and operational effectiveness.

This stance is clearly demonstrated by Nasrallah's statement on May 25, 2013: "Should Syria fall into the hands of the Americans, the Israelis, the takfirist groups, and America's representatives in the region, which call themselves regional states, the resistance will be besieged. Israel would reenter Lebanon, impose its conditions on Lebanon, and renew its greed and projects in it" (S. G. Jones & Markusen, 2018, p. 2). Nasrallah's words highlight the strategic significance of Syria in Hezbollah's regional calculations. He underscores the potential

threats posed by a hostile takeover of Syria, which could lead to a resurgence of Israeli influence in Lebanon and undermine the resistance movement. This statement reflects Hezbollah's perception of the Syrian conflict as a pivotal battleground for maintaining its strategic depth and regional alliances.

In summary, Hezbollah's support for the Syrian regime is deeply rooted in the strategic importance of Syria as its logistical lifeline. The IRGC's role in facilitating this support underscores the interconnectedness of Hezbollah's regional alliances and the material imperatives that drive its foreign policy decisions.

Hezbollah pursues a pragmatic foreign policy rather than one rooted solely in ideological considerations. As also underlined by Daher, Hezbollah's foreign policies indicate an adaptive approach based on contextual factors (A. Daher, 2018, p. 127). The analysis of the organization presents its willingness to change its relationship with the world, demonstrating an explicitly pragmatic logic. Moreover, the projection of relations with other actors through various organizational and institutional supports suggests a multifaceted approach that extends beyond narrow sectarian interests. The flexibility of red lines defined by ideological paradigms implies a willingness to prioritize practical considerations over rigid adherence to ideological principles.

5.4. Preliminary Reflections on Hezbollah

The complexity of Hezbollah's foreign policy during the Syrian civil war cannot be overstated. While sectarian ideologies may have played a role in justifying its involvement, it is evident that materialistic calculations and strategic imperatives were the primary drivers shaping Hezbollah's actions in Syria. The alliance with Iran, the need to safeguard strategic interests, and the broader regional dynamics were paramount in determining Hezbollah's course of action.

Jones and Markusen argue that Hezbollah embarked on the Syrian conflict with a dual strategic agenda (S. G. Jones & Markusen, 2018, p. 3). Firstly, the organization sought to safeguard the Assad regime, recognizing it as a crucial regional ally. Hezbollah perceived Assad's continued rule as indispensable for preventing the re-entry of Israeli forces into Lebanon, a scenario that would pose a direct threat to Hezbollah's military capabilities and

territorial integrity. Moreover, the Assad regime's survival was deemed essential for maintaining stability in the region, a factor considered pivotal for Hezbollah's broader resistance agenda.

According to Slim (2014, pp. 63–64), the intervention in Syria was framed with three distinct objectives that Hezbollah articulated. Firstly, it aimed to safeguard Shiite-majority Lebanese villagers residing along the Syrian border, thus ensuring their safety amid the escalating conflict. Secondly, Hezbollah sought to protect Shiite shrines located within Syria, recognizing the potential for sectarian tensions to arise in the region if these holy sites were threatened or damaged. Thirdly, the intervention aimed to prevent the encroachment of Sunni extremist groups from northern Syria into Lebanon, thereby mitigating the risk of spillover violence and instability.

Nasrallah, in speeches delivered on May 25 and June 14, 2013, characterized Hezbollah's intervention in Syria as a preemptive and defensive measure. He portrayed it as a response to what he described as an extraordinary conspiracy orchestrated by the U.S., Israel, and takfirist elements. According to Nasrallah, this alleged conspiracy posed a grave threat to Hezbollah and its interests, necessitating a defensive stance to protect the organization from external aggression.

Furthermore, Nasrallah framed Hezbollah's involvement in Syria as a defensive war forced upon the organization by external forces seeking to undermine its influence and destabilize the region. By positioning the intervention as a response to imminent threats, Nasrallah sought to justify Hezbollah's military engagement in Syria as a necessary measure to safeguard its own security and preserve its strategic interests.

In essence, Nasrallah's rhetoric underscored Hezbollah's perception of the intervention in Syria as a defensive necessity rather than an aggressive expansionist venture. By framing the intervention within the context of a broader conspiracy orchestrated by external actors, Nasrallah aimed to garner support for Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria while portraying the organization as a defender of Shiite communities and regional stability.

Sullivan (2014, p. 4) also argues that Hezbollah's backing of Assad's regime is driven by three primary objectives. Firstly, it aimed to uphold the Axis of Resistance by bolstering the military strength of the Assad government. This support served to maintain a strategic balance in the region and preserve the resistance against perceived external threats.

Secondly, Hezbollah strove to safeguard its access to Iranian and Syrian material assistance by ensuring the security of communication lines stretching from Damascus to Lebanon, shielding them from any potential disruptions caused by rebel forces. The uninterrupted flow of support from Iran via Syria was vital for Hezbollah's operational capabilities and overall readiness. Any disruption to this logistical lifeline could have severely impeded Hezbollah's ability to sustain itself both militarily and financially.

Pragmatic need to ensure the continuous flow of essential resources, including weapons, funds, and other materials, from Tehran was a very important motivation (Pollak, 2016, p. 2). Prior to the Syrian civil war, this logistical lifeline operated smoothly: Iranian aircraft would land at Damascus International Airport, where their cargo would be transferred onto Syrian military vehicles and escorted into Lebanon for delivery to Hezbollah (Levitt & Zelin, 2013, p. 15). This strategic arrangement highlights Hezbollah's reliance on Syria as a vital conduit for maintaining its military capabilities and operational readiness. Thus, Hezbollah's support for the al-Assad regime is deeply intertwined with its own strategic imperatives and logistical necessities rather than mere ideological allegiance.

Moreover, Hezbollah endeavored to forestall the emergence of a Sunni-dominated regime in Syria in the event of Assad's downfall. Such an outcome would not only have undermined Hezbollah's strategic interests but also potentially posed a significant threat to its existence. By supporting Assad, Hezbollah aimed to prevent the ascendance of a regime that could potentially have aligned with its adversaries, thereby safeguarding its own position and influence in the region.

Hezbollah's sustained involvement in Syria can be viewed through the lens of its long-term strategic interests. The fall of Assad's regime would have threatened Hezbollah's supply routes, military logistics, and its strategic alliance with Iran. Supporting Assad was thus crucial for maintaining regional influence and the operational capabilities necessary to counter Israeli and Western pressures. Realpolitik considerations were central to Hezbollah's decision-making process. The organization's leadership recognized the necessity of preserving its strategic depth and preventing the rise of hostile Sunni powers that could destabilize the Shia axis in the region.

Central to understanding Hezbollah's commitment to the Syrian regime is the pivotal role Syria played as Hezbollah's logistical lifeline. Syria served as a crucial conduit for the supply of weapons and military equipment to Hezbollah, facilitated by the IRGC-QF. This logistical support allowed Hezbollah to significantly enhance its military capabilities over the

years, reinforcing its arsenal with advanced weaponry and strengthening its operational readiness.

Moreover, Syria provided Hezbollah with more than just material support. The Assad regime offered a safe haven for Hezbollah's training camps and weapons storage facilities, allowing the organization to train its fighters and stockpile its arsenal securely (Sullivan, 2014, p. 9). This comprehensive backing from Syria solidified its role as an essential ally in Hezbollah's strategic planning and operational effectiveness.

Hezbollah's strategic objectives in Syria were clear: to protect the Assad regime, preserve, and expand its access to Syrian territory. Maintaining Assad's hold over Syria was deemed vital to prevent Israeli forces from re-entering Lebanon and to secure routes for transporting Iranian missile parts and weapons. These objectives underscore Hezbollah's pragmatic approach, driven by the imperative to safeguard its regional influence and operational capabilities.

Nasrallah's assertion that Syria is the backbone and support of the resistance further highlights the strategic significance of Syria in Hezbollah's regional calculus. His warning about the potential consequences of Syria falling into the hands of hostile actors underscores Hezbollah's recognition of Syria's pivotal role in maintaining regional stability and safeguarding its own interests. Defending the al-Assad regime in the neighboring state was crucial for Hezbollah because the regime's downfall would undermine Hezbollah's strong position in Lebanon, which relies on sustained Syrian patronage, and would cut off its primary supply of weapons (Ożarowski, 2017, p. 45).

Hezbollah's strategic position is further bolstered by another significant factor. Initially, when there was no immediate threat to Syria, Hezbollah attempted to support and even mediate protests within the country. If Hezbollah's stance were solely sectarian, it would have unequivocally thrown its support behind Assad. However, as the risk of regime change in Syria became apparent, Hezbollah perceived a threat to its own interests and decided to align itself with Assad. This decision illustrates Hezbollah's strategic, rather than sectarian, perspective.

Hezbollah's initial efforts to support and mediate protests in Syria demonstrate an approach that transcends sectarian allegiances. At the outset, Hezbollah's actions reflected a pragmatic willingness to engage with dissenting voices and explore potential avenues for resolution. This approach underscored Hezbollah's broader strategic calculus, which prioritized stability and regional security over sectarian considerations.

Moreover, Hezbollah's decision to align itself with Assad in response to the escalating risk of regime change highlights the organization's strategic thinking. Rather than blindly adhering to sectarian loyalties, Hezbollah assessed the evolving geopolitical landscape and recognized the potential consequences of Assad's downfall for its own interests. By throwing its support behind Assad, Hezbollah aimed to safeguard its strategic position and preserve the alliances crucial for its regional influence. This pragmatic approach underscores Hezbollah's strategic acumen and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances in pursuit of its broader objectives. Rather than being driven solely by sectarian motives, Hezbollah's actions in Syria reflect a calculated assessment of its strategic imperatives and the need to protect its interests in a volatile regional environment.

In conclusion, material factors rather than ideational ones shaped Hezbollah's foreign policy during the Syrian civil war. While sectarian rhetoric may have been used to justify its involvement, the overriding considerations were geopolitical necessities, strategic imperatives, and the need to protect its regional interests. This pragmatic approach underscores Hezbollah's adaptability and willingness to prioritize practical considerations over ideological principles, reaffirming its status as a formidable actor in the Middle East's complex geopolitical landscape. It is crucial to underscore that the pragmatic nature of Hezbollah's foreign policy is not a departure from its core principles but rather a demonstration of its ability to prioritize practical considerations in pursuit of its overarching goals. This strategic orientation enabled Hezbollah to respond adeptly to changing circumstances, fostering resilience and relevance in a rapidly evolving regional context.

Despite its self-portrayal as the defender of the marginalized and its historical efforts to downplay sectarian and pro-Iranian affiliations, Hezbollah faced a significant dilemma when it chose to support an Alawite regime against the predominantly Sunni Syrian opposition. Such a move risked undermining its carefully cultivated image. However, the strategic imperative of preventing the collapse of the al-Assad regime ultimately outweighed the concerns about preserving Hezbollah's public image (Levitt & Zelin, 2013, p. 17).

Hezbollah's decision stemmed from the recognition that a regime change in Syria, leading to the ascent of a Sunni-majority government, would likely be less favorable to its interests. Such a scenario could potentially result in a government hostile to Hezbollah, thereby jeopardizing its strategic position and regional alliances. Thus, the group prioritized its long-term strategic goals over immediate public perceptions.

This shift in allegiance underscores Hezbollah's pragmatic approach to foreign policy, where strategic imperatives supersede ideological narratives. By aligning with the al-Assad regime, Hezbollah aimed to safeguard its own interests and regional influence, even at the cost of compromising its image as a champion of the oppressed. This decision highlights the complexities of Hezbollah's role in the Syrian conflict and its willingness to adapt its tactics to suit changing geopolitical realities.



CHAPTER 6: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF HAMAS AND HEZBOLLAH

The foreign policy decisions of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war illustrate an interplay between material and ideational factors. This study posits that material considerations are paramount in understanding the divergent foreign policies of these two actors. While ideational influences such as sectarian dynamics and identity played a role, the pragmatic need to address immediate strategic, financial, and logistical imperatives predominantly shaped their actions. This focus on material factors provides a clearer lens through which to comprehend the differences in how Hamas and Hezbollah navigated the complexities of the Syrian conflict.

The initial decision of Hamas to distance itself from the Assad regime and relocate from Syria to Damascus was primarily driven by material considerations. These included the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the anticipation of the Syrian regime's collapse, and the pressures exerted by Palestinians residing in Syria. Despite these material factors, Hamas' ideological commitments also played a significant role. The organization's adherence to its Sunni Islamist identity and its commitment to solidarity with oppressed peoples highlight the importance of ideational influences.

In a similar vein, Hezbollah's foreign policy during the conflict is also marked by some priorities such as safeguarding strategic interests and ensuring the continuity of logistical support from Iran. These material considerations were central to Hezbollah's decision to support the Assad regime. However, Hezbollah framed its intervention in Syria within an ideological narrative, portraying its actions as a defensive measure against external threats. This narrative emphasized Hezbollah's role as the protector of Shiite communities and regional stability, aligning with its broader identity as part of the Axis of Resistance against Western and Israeli aggression.

This chapter aims to conduct an in-depth comparative analysis of the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war, building upon the crucial case studies presented in the previous chapters. Initially, it will summarize the findings of each case study, focusing on the ideational and material dimensions of the organizations. Following this, the

chapter will offer a detailed account of the similarities and differences in their ideational perspectives and material considerations. By examining these aspects, the chapter seeks to elucidate how these factors influenced the strategic decisions and actions of Hamas and Hezbollah within the context of the Syrian conflict.

6.1. A Comprehensive Comparison of Ideational and Material Dimensions between Hamas and Hezbollah

This section provides a thorough comparative analysis of Hamas and Hezbollah by exploring both the ideational and material similarities and differences that characterize their operational strategies and approaches during the Syrian civil war and beyond. Both organizations share significant ideological commonalities, such as their strong Islamist identities, resistance narratives against Israeli and Western influence, and expressions of solidarity with oppressed peoples. These shared ideational elements provide a foundation for their actions and policies, positioning both Hamas and Hezbollah as key players in the broader struggle against what they perceive as external domination and injustice in the Middle East. Additionally, these similarities extend to their material strategies, where both groups utilize their religious identities, resistance narratives, and anti-Western and anti-Israeli stances to mobilize support, secure resources, and sustain their respective movements.

However, despite these overarching commonalities, critical differences emerge in both the ideational and material dimensions of Hamas and Hezbollah's strategies. Ideologically, Hamas is primarily focused on the Palestinian national struggle, with its Sunni Islamist framework guiding its localized resistance against Israeli occupation. In contrast, Hezbollah operates with a transnational scope that extends beyond Lebanon, supporting Shia interests across the region and drawing its authority from the Shia concept of Wilayat al-Faqih. These differences are mirrored in their material approaches: while both organizations engage in resistance, their methods, sources of authority and strategic priorities differ significantly. Hezbollah's sophisticated military capabilities and broader regional ambitions contrast with Hamas' more localized guerrilla warfare tactics, reflecting the distinct contexts and objectives that shape each group's actions. Understanding these ideational and material dynamics is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian

civil war. Their distinct approaches to the conflict reflect broader strategic and ideological considerations that influence their roles in the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape.

6.1.1. Similarities in Ideational Dimensions

6.1.1.1. Religious Identity

Both Hamas and Hezbollah are deeply entrenched in Islamist ideology, drawing inspiration from Islamic principles to shape their worldview and inform their actions. Their ideological foundations are derived from Islamic principles, which influence their political objectives, strategies, and justifications for their activities. Throughout the Syrian conflict, their Islamist identities influenced their perceptions of the conflict and their strategic responses, guiding their interactions with regional actors and shaping their alliances.

For Hamas, the Islamist ideology is articulated through its commitment to establishing an Islamic state in Palestine, guided by Sunni Islamic principles. This vision is rooted in the organization's founding charter, which emphasizes the importance of integrating Islamic values into political and social governance. Hamas views its struggle against Israel as both a national and religious duty, aligning its resistance efforts with broader goals of Islamic unity and sovereignty.

Similarly, Hezbollah's ideology is grounded in Shia Islam, particularly in the framework of Wilayat al-Faqih, which asserts the authority of the religious leader in governance and political matters. This Islamist perspective shapes Hezbollah's mission to protect and advance the interests of the Shia community in Lebanon and the broader Middle East. The group's actions are informed by its commitment to resisting Western influence and Israeli aggression, framing its military and political activities as part of a larger struggle to defend Shia Islam and uphold its religious and political principles.

In both cases, the Islamist ideology not only informs their resistance strategies but also serves as a tool for mobilizing support, justifying their actions, and establishing their legitimacy in the eyes of their followers. During the Syrian civil war, the Islamist ideologies of both Hamas and Hezbollah significantly influenced their strategies, mobilization efforts, and claims to legitimacy.

6.1.1.2. Resistance Narrative

The narrative of resistance against perceived oppressors, notably Israel and Western powers, has been a central theme in both organizations' rhetoric and actions during the Syrian civil war. This narrative framed their involvement in the conflict, portraying it as part of a broader struggle for liberation and self-determination against foreign intervention and occupation. Throughout the Syrian civil war, Hamas portrayed its support for rebel groups as part of the broader resistance against Israeli and Western influence in the region. It framed its actions as a defense of the Syrian people against oppression, aligning with the narrative of resistance.

Similarly, Hezbollah justified its intervention in Syria as essential for resisting Western-backed efforts to overthrow the Assad regime. For example, Nasrallah's speeches during the conflict emphasized the need to confront external threats to regional stability, portraying Hezbollah's involvement as part of a broader resistance against foreign intervention.

6.1.1.2. Solidarity with Oppressed Peoples

Both Hamas and Hezbollah have consistently expressed solidarity with oppressed peoples globally, aligning themselves with anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements. This solidarity influenced their foreign policies during the Syrian civil war, as they sought to position themselves as allies of other oppressed groups and garner support for their causes. Hamas highlighted the suffering of the Syrian people and condemned international inaction in the face of humanitarian crises. Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime was framed as a defense of Syria against external aggression and a show of solidarity with the Syrian people in their struggle against foreign-backed rebel groups.

6.1.1.3. Anti-Western and Anti-Israeli Stance

Both organizations have maintained a staunchly anti-Western and anti-Israeli stance, viewing Western powers, particularly the U.S., as enablers of Israeli aggression and occupation.

They maintained their anti-Western and anti-Israeli stance during the Syrian civil war. They criticized Western powers for their support of rebel groups and accused Israel of backing efforts to overthrow the Assad regime. Hamas rejected any attempts at normalization with Israel and condemned Israeli airstrikes on Syrian territory. Similarly, Hezbollah emphasized the need to confront Israeli aggression in the region and rejected any compromise with Israel's security interests.

These ideational motivations played a significant role in shaping the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war, influencing their alliances, strategies, and actions in response to the evolving dynamics of the conflict. Despite their differing contexts and operational environments, these ideological similarities contributed to their cooperation and coordination on various regional issues, highlighting the enduring influence of Islamist identity and resistance narratives in their decision-making processes.

6.1.2. Differences in Ideational Dimensions

6.1.2.1. National vs. Transnational Focus

Hamas primarily focuses on the Palestinian national struggle, aiming to establish an Islamic state in historic Palestine, including Israel. Its ideology revolves around Palestinian nationalism and the liberation of Palestinian territories from Israeli occupation. In contrast, Hezbollah's ideology extends beyond national boundaries, advocating for the establishment of an Islamic state based on Wilayat al-Faqih in Lebanon and the broader Muslim world. While both groups resist Israeli occupation, Hezbollah's scope of operations and ideological aspirations are more transnational in nature.

Hamas' involvement in the Syrian conflict primarily revolved around its support for Sunni rebel groups fighting against the Assad regime. Hamas' Sunni identity and nationalist aspirations led it to align with the Syrian opposition, reflecting its focus on the Palestinian national struggle and its desire to challenge Israeli influence indirectly through regional alliances. In contrast, Hezbollah's engagement in Syria was driven by its transnational Shiite identity and its commitment to defending Shiite interests and the Assad regime. Hezbollah's

intervention in Syria aimed to protect the Assad government, prevent the fall of a crucial regional ally, and safeguard Shiite communities and holy sites.

6.1.2.2. Sectarian Identity

While both Hamas and Hezbollah are Islamist organizations, they belong to different sects of Islam. Hamas is primarily Sunni, draws its support from the Sunni Muslim population, while Hezbollah is predominantly Shiite, and represents the interests of Shiite Muslims in Lebanon and the region. This difference in sectarian identity influences their alliances, priorities, and approaches to regional conflicts. The sectarian dimension of the Syrian conflict played a significant role in shaping Hamas and Hezbollah's responses. Hamas' Sunni identity and alignment with Sunni rebel groups positioned it against the predominantly Alawite-led Assad regime, reflecting broader Sunni-Shiite tensions in the region. Hezbollah's Shiite identity and support for the Assad regime aligned it with Shiite militias and the Syrian government, reinforcing sectarian divides and deepening its involvement in the conflict.

6.1.2.3. Defender of Sectarian Communities

Hamas and Hezbollah have positioned themselves as defenders of their respective sectarian communities, with Hezbollah advocating for Shiite Muslims and Hamas championing Palestinian Muslims. This defense of sectarian communities shaped their responses to the Syrian conflict, as they sought to protect their allies and advance their interests within the broader regional dynamics.

Hamas positioned itself as a defender of Sunni Muslims in Syria, aligning with Sunni rebel groups against the Assad regime. It portrayed its support for the rebels as a defense of the Sunni community against the perceived sectarian policies of the Assad government. Hezbollah, on the other hand, presented itself as a defender of Shiite Muslims, particularly in Lebanon and Syria. Its intervention in Syria was framed as essential for protecting Shiite communities from attacks by Sunni extremist groups and preserving the Shiite identity of the region.

6.1.2.4. Sources of Authority

Hamas derives its ideological legitimacy from its interpretation of Sunni Islam, emphasizing populist and nationalist elements within Islamist understanding. In contrast, Hezbollah draws its ideological inspiration from Shiite Islam, particularly the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini and the concept of Wilayat al-Faqih, which grants ultimate authority to a supreme religious leader. This distinction shapes their respective ideological frameworks and political agendas. Distinct sources of authority informed their respective approaches to the Syrian conflict, with Hamas prioritizing nationalist aspirations and Sunni solidarity, while Hezbollah emphasized Shiite solidarity and alliance with the Assad regime. During the Syrian civil war, Hamas' alignment with Sunni opposition groups was driven by its nationalist aspirations and the desire to support Sunni solidarity. Conversely, Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime was motivated by its commitment to Shiite solidarity and maintaining its alliance with a crucial regional partner. Thus, the contrasting interpretations of Islamic authority underpin their divergent approaches to the Syrian conflict, illustrating how their respective religious ideologies shape their political strategies and regional alignments.

Overall, while Hamas and Hezbollah share some ideological commonalities, such as Islamist principles and resistance narratives, their differences in sectarian identity, national vs. transnational focus and sources of authority reflect distinct ideological orientations and strategic priorities. Table 2 summarizes these similarities and differences.

Similarities		
Criteria	Hamas	Hezbollah
Religious Identity	Islamist ideology	Islamist ideology
Resistance Narrative	Resistance against Israeli and Western influence	Resistance against Israeli Western-backed efforts
Solidarity with Oppressed	Solidarity with Syrian people and global oppressed peoples	Solidarity with Syrian people, framed as defense against external aggression
Anti-Western/Anti-Israeli	Anti-Western and anti-Israeli stance.	Anti-Western and anti-Israeli stance.
Differences		
Criteria	Hamas	Hezbollah
National vs. Transnational	Focus on Palestinian national struggle.	Transnational scope; supports Shiite interests beyond Lebanon.
Sectarian Identity	Sunni Islamist organization.	Shiite Islamist organization.
Defender of Sectarian Communities	Defender of Sunni Muslims, opposing Assad regime.	Defender of Shiite Muslims, supporting Assad regime.
Sources of Authority	Sunni interpretation with nationalist elements.	Shiite interpretation, inspired by Wilayat al-Faqih.

Table 2. Comparison of Ideational Dimensions

6.1.3. Similarities in Material Dimensions

6.1.3.1. External Support

Both Hamas and Hezbollah rely on external sources of support, particularly from Iran. Iran provides financial assistance, military training, and weapons to both organizations, enhancing their military capabilities and operational effectiveness. This external support enables Hamas and Hezbollah to sustain their resistance efforts against common adversaries, such as Israel, and pursue their strategic objectives in the region.

Throughout the Syrian conflict, Hamas also received financial and military support from regional actors such as Qatar and Türkiye. These countries provided funding and weapons to Hamas, allowing the group to maintain its military capabilities and resist Israeli incursions into

Gaza. Additionally, Hamas received diplomatic support from some Arab states sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, which bolstered its legitimacy and international standing.

Iran played a crucial role in supporting Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war. Tehran provided significant financial aid, military equipment, and training to Hezbollah fighters operating in Syria. Iranian support enabled Hezbollah to sustain its military operations and maintain its presence in support of the Assad regime, illustrating the importance of external backers in shaping the group's actions during the conflict.

6.1.3.2. Military Infrastructure

Both organizations maintain sophisticated and well-organized military arms that play a central role in their operational strategies. They have established complex military infrastructures that enable them to conduct prolonged and multifaceted conflicts. Their military structures reflect a high degree of organization and specialization, demonstrating their capacity to execute coordinated operations and sustain their activities over time. This similarity in military structure underscores their role as formidable non-state actors in their respective conflicts, despite the differing ideological and sectarian contexts that shape their broader strategic goals.

Hamas operates its military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, which is responsible for conducting a range of military operations against Israel. This wing is structured similarly to a conventional military organization, with specialized units for various types of warfare, including infantry, artillery, and engineering. The Brigades engage in asymmetric warfare, using tactics such as guerrilla warfare, rocket attacks, and tunnel operations. Hamas has developed a robust network of militants and has invested in acquiring and manufacturing weapons, including rockets and mortars, to challenge the Israeli military effectively.

The Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, with their experience in asymmetric warfare and guerilla tactics, were utilized to support Sunni rebel factions indirectly by providing training and expertise on guerrilla warfare. This involvement was part of Hamas' broader strategy to align itself with Sunni groups and influence the regional balance of power, despite its eventual shift in policy as the Assad regime's resilience became apparent. Hamas' military capabilities

were not directly engaged in the Syrian conflict on a large scale, but their support for Sunni opposition groups was a notable aspect of their strategy during the early stages of the war.

Hezbollah, on the other hand, has developed a highly sophisticated military apparatus, often considered one of the most advanced among non-state actors. Its military wing has a structured command with various specialized units, including infantry, artillery, and missile units. Hezbollah's military capabilities are bolstered by its access to advanced weaponry, including long-range rockets and missiles, which it has acquired through its alliance with Iran and Syria. The group employs a mix of conventional and unconventional tactics, including asymmetric warfare, entrenched positions, and advanced missile technology.

Hezbollah's military structure played a more direct and influential role in the Syrian civil war. The sophisticated military apparatus of the group allowed it to provide substantial support to the Assad regime, including both combat operations and strategic advisory roles. Hezbollah deployed its well-trained fighters, advanced weaponry, and logistical support to bolster Syrian government forces, particularly in critical battles and offensives. The group's military capabilities, including its expertise in entrenched defensive positions and advanced missile systems, were crucial in several key battles, such as those in Aleppo and the Qalamoun Mountains. Hezbollah's involvement was instrumental in securing and stabilizing areas controlled by the Assad regime and in countering Sunni rebel forces and extremist groups.

In summary, the military structures of both Hamas and Hezbollah significantly influenced the Syrian civil war, though in different ways. Hamas' military capabilities contributed to its early support for Sunni opposition groups, reflecting its ideological alignment. In contrast, Hezbollah's advanced military apparatus and organizational prowess were directly employed in supporting the Assad regime, shaping the conflict's trajectory and reinforcing the regime's control.

6.1.3.3. Territorial Control

Hamas and Hezbollah, through their control of Gaza and southern Lebanon respectively, have established robust governance structures that significantly enhance their legitimacy and operational effectiveness. This territorial control is central to their political and military strategies, as it allows them to provide a range of services and maintain authority over their

regions. Both entities exercise *de facto* control over their respective territories, providing governance, social services, and security to the local population. This territorial control enhances their legitimacy and enables them to mobilize support for their political agendas. Additionally, their control over border areas facilitates smuggling activities and the movement of weapons, further bolstering their military capabilities.

Hamas' control of the Gaza Strip allowed it to make strategic decisions regarding its involvement in the Syrian civil war. Initially, Hamas' support for Sunni opposition groups was influenced by its desire to align with the broader Sunni Islamist movements and the Arab Spring's momentum. The governance responsibilities in Gaza necessitated a focus on regional dynamics that could affect the group's political and strategic interests. As the Syrian conflict progressed and it became clear that the Assad regime would maintain its power, Hamas recalibrated its stance, seeking to improve relations with the Axis of Resistance, which includes Iran and Hezbollah. This shift was partly influenced by the need to balance its political alliances and ensure stability in Gaza amidst changing regional dynamics.

The control of Gaza also provided Hamas with access to smuggling networks and border areas crucial for acquiring weapons and resources. This control allowed Hamas to navigate the changing regional alliances and ensure that it could sustain its military operations and political activities. Although Hamas' direct military involvement in Syria was limited, its control over Gaza enabled it to strategically maneuver its support and manage its involvement in the conflict based on the shifting regional power dynamics.

Hezbollah's control over southern Lebanon provided it with a secure base from which to project power into Syria. The group's extensive military infrastructure in this region facilitated its direct involvement in the Syrian conflict, including deploying fighters, managing logistics, and conducting operations. The control of southern Lebanon allowed Hezbollah to coordinate its military activities with the Assad regime effectively and sustain its involvement in critical battles across the border. This territorial advantage was instrumental in enabling Hezbollah to support the Assad regime and maintain its strategic objectives in the conflict.

The group's control over southern Lebanon also played a role in maintaining and expanding its support networks. By providing governance and social services in the region, Hezbollah reinforced its legitimacy and bolstered its ability to mobilize support for its military and political objectives. The territorial control allowed Hezbollah to manage its resources and

operations effectively, ensuring that it could sustain its involvement in Syria and exert influence across the region.

6.1.3.4. Social Welfare Programs

Hamas and Hezbollah operate extensive social welfare programs, including schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations, which provide essential services to their constituents. These programs help to cultivate popular support and loyalty among the local population, strengthening their political legitimacy and resilience. Additionally, they serve as recruitment tools, attracting individuals to their ideological cause and fostering a sense of community cohesion and solidarity.

By addressing the daily needs of the population and providing critical services, Hamas cultivated a strong base of support among Gazans. This support was crucial for maintaining internal stability and resilience, particularly in the face of external pressures and conflicts. During the Syrian civil war, Hamas' ability to demonstrate effective governance and social support in Gaza allowed it to align more closely with Sunni opposition groups, reflecting a commitment to broader Sunni solidarity and regional Islamic movements. The social services provided by Hamas served as recruitment tools, attracting individuals to its ideological cause. By fostering a sense of community and solidarity, these programs enhanced Hamas' ability to mobilize support and sustain its militant activities. This capacity for recruitment and ideological mobilization was important for Hamas as it navigated its shifting policies during the Syrian civil war, adapting its stance based on regional dynamics and the need to balance support for Sunni factions with its internal stability and resilience.

Hezbollah's social welfare programs in southern Lebanon, including schools, hospitals, and community centers, reinforced its legitimacy and influence in the region. These programs not only provided essential services but also helped Hezbollah build a strong support base among the local Shia population. This support was critical during the Syrian civil war, as Hezbollah leveraged its regional influence and social legitimacy to justify and sustain its involvement in the conflict. The group's ability to provide for its constituents strengthened its position as a key ally of the Assad regime and bolstered its role in the Axis of Resistance.

6.1.3.5. External Alliances

Both Hamas and Hezbollah form strategic alliances with other actors in the region, including state and non-state actors, to advance their interests and objectives. Hamas has forged alliances with countries such as Iran and Qatar, as well as with other Palestinian factions, while Hezbollah maintains close ties with Iran, Syria, and various Shiite militias in the region. These alliances provide Hamas and Hezbollah with political, financial, and military support, enhancing their capacity to confront common adversaries and pursue their strategic goals.

During the Syrian civil war, Hamas formed alliances with various rebel factions opposed to the Assad regime. These alliances aimed to garner support for the Palestinian cause and leverage the Syrian conflict to advance Hamas' interests. However, Hamas' alignment with Sunni jihadist groups and its criticism of the Assad regime strained its relations with Iran and Hezbollah, limiting its ability to secure external support from Shiite allies.

Throughout the war, Hezbollah maintained its close alliance with the Assad regime and its Iranian backers. The group played a crucial role in supporting Syrian government forces and allied militias against rebel factions and jihadist organizations. Hezbollah's strategic alliance with Syria and Iran strengthened its position in the region and provided it with critical support and resources to confront its adversaries.

To sum up, despite their ideological differences, Hamas and Hezbollah share several material dimensions, including external support networks, military infrastructure, territorial control, social welfare programs, and strategic alliances. These material resources contributed to their resilience, operational effectiveness, and capacity to assert influence in the region, despite facing significant challenges and opposition from regional and international actors.

6.1.4. Differences in Material Dimensions

In analyzing the differences in material dimensions between Hamas and Hezbollah, it becomes evident that while both organizations share some similarities, such as receiving external support and operating social welfare programs, they exhibit distinct characteristics shaped by their operational contexts and strategic objectives. Hamas, as the *de facto* governing authority in the Gaza Strip, faces unique challenges in accessing advanced weaponry due to

Israel's blockade and must navigate a complex socio-political landscape. In contrast, Hezbollah operates primarily in Lebanon, where it maintains a sophisticated military wing equipped with advanced weaponry provided by Iran and Syria. Furthermore, differences in external support networks, territorial control, regional alliances, and governance structures contribute to varying levels of operational capacity and influence between the two organizations. This analysis sheds light on the dynamics at play within the material dimensions of Hamas and Hezbollah, highlighting their divergent trajectories and strategic imperatives.

6.1.4.1. Governance Structures

Hamas controls the Gaza Strip, where it operates as the *de facto* governing authority. In contrast, Hezbollah operates primarily in Lebanon, particularly in the southern part of the country, where it exercises significant influence but does not hold formal governance responsibilities. Hamas' control over Gaza allows it to implement policies and social programs directly, whereas Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon is exercised through political and military means, alongside engagement in the country's governance structures.

In the Syrian civil war context, Hezbollah's involvement displays its capability to operate beyond its traditional Lebanese territory. The group's active engagement in Syria, particularly in support of the Assad regime, has allowed it to expand its influence and control over strategic areas, demonstrating its territorial reach and operational flexibility. In contrast, Hamas' territorial control is limited to the Gaza Strip, where it exercises governance responsibilities but faces challenges due to the enclave's isolation and blockade.

6.1.4.2. Military Capabilities and Resources

Hezbollah possesses a highly sophisticated and well-equipped military wing, with an arsenal of rockets, missiles, and other advanced weaponry provided by Iran and Syria. Extensive training and logistical support bolstered this military capability. In comparison, Hamas' military capabilities are more limited, relying primarily on asymmetric tactics such as rocket attacks and guerrilla warfare. While Hamas receives support from Iran, it faces greater challenges in accessing advanced weaponry due to Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Hamas and Hezbollah's differing approaches to resistance were evident in their military strategies and tactics in Syria. Hamas supported Sunni rebel groups engaged in guerrilla warfare and asymmetric tactics against the Assad regime and its allies, including the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), small arms fire, and rocket attacks. In contrast, Hezbollah deployed its well-trained and equipped militia forces to Syria, utilizing advanced weaponry, including missiles and drones, to support Assad's military campaign against rebel forces and jihadist groups.

Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian civil war has provided valuable insights into its military capabilities and resources. The group has demonstrated its proficiency in conventional warfare, utilizing advanced weaponry and tactics acquired from Iran and Syria to support the Assad regime against rebel forces. In comparison, Hamas' military capabilities, though significant within the Gaza Strip context, lack the sophistication and firepower of Hezbollah's arsenal, largely due to Israel's blockade and restrictions on weapons imports.

6.1.4.3. External Support Networks

Both Hamas and Hezbollah receive external support, particularly from Iran. However, the nature and extent of this support differ between the two organizations. Hezbollah enjoys more robust and diversified support from Iran, including financial assistance, military training, and weapons. In contrast, Hamas' relationship with Iran has been more transactional, with fluctuating levels of support over time. Additionally, Hezbollah benefits from its close ties with the Syrian regime, which provides access to additional resources and strategic advantages in the region.

Hezbollah's alliance with Iran and Syria has been instrumental in sustaining its military operations in Syria. The group receives extensive support, including financial aid, weapons, and training, from its patrons, enabling it to maintain its combat effectiveness and strategic position. Hamas, while also receiving support from Iran, faces challenges in accessing similar levels of external assistance, particularly in terms of advanced military hardware, due to its geographical and political constraints.

6.1.4.4. Regional and International Alliances

While both Hamas and Hezbollah have forged alliances with other actors in the region, their networks and alliances differ in scope and focus. Hezbollah maintains close ties with Iran, Syria, and various Shiite militias in the region, leveraging these relationships to advance its strategic objectives. Hamas, on the other hand, has cultivated alliances with a broader range of actors, including Iran, Qatar, and Türkiye, as well as with other Palestinian factions. These alliances reflect differences in regional dynamics and strategic priorities between the two organizations.

Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war has underscored the depth of its regional alliances and strategic partnerships. The group's coordination with Iran, Syria, and Shiite militias in Syria has solidified its position as a key player in the broader Middle East geopolitical landscape. In contrast, Hamas' alliances, while significant within the Palestinian context, lack the same level of regional reach and influence demonstrated by Hezbollah, largely due to its focus on the Palestinian cause and its limited operational capacity outside of Gaza.

In summary, while Hamas and Hezbollah share some similarities in their material dimensions, including external support networks and social welfare programs, there are notable differences in their territorial control, military capabilities, external alliances, and governance structures. These differences reflect the distinct operational environments and strategic objectives of each organization. Table 3 summarizes these similarities and differences.

Similarities		
Criteria	Hamas	Hezbollah
External Support	Support from Iran, Qatar, and Türkiye.	Robust support from Iran and Syria.
Military Infrastructure	Operates a military wing.	Highly sophisticated military apparatus.
Territorial Control	Controls Gaza Strip.	Strong presence in southern Lebanon, active in Syria.
Social Welfare Programs	Extensive programs in Gaza, but limited by resources and blockade.	Comprehensive programs in Lebanon.
External Alliances	Alliances with various regional actors, including other Palestinian factions.	Close ties with Iran, Syria, and Shiite militias.
Differences		
Criteria	Hamas	Hezbollah
Governance Structures	<i>de facto</i> control in Gaza Strip.	Legitimate political actor in Lebanon.
Military Capabilities	Limited access to advanced weaponry, relies on asymmetric tactics and guerilla warfare	Advanced military capabilities, supported by Iran and Syria.
External Support Networks	Transactional relationship with Iran.	Strong and diversified support from Iran and Syria.
Regional Alliances	Alliances with broader range of actors; focus on Palestinian cause.	Deep alliances with Iran, Syria, and regional Shiite militias.

Table 3. Comparison of Material Dimensions

6.2. Material Factors Influencing Hamas' Foreign Policy

Initially, Hamas' alignment with the Syrian regime reflected a pragmatic approach rooted in shared geopolitical interests and mutual support. At the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Hamas maintained a cautious stance, balancing its relationships with various regional actors. The Syrian regime, under Bashar al-Assad, had been a supporter of Hamas, providing political backing and logistical support in its resistance against Israel. This alliance was beneficial for Hamas as it offered strategic depth and a supportive regional ally.

However, several factors led to a significant shift in Hamas' stance. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, particularly with the electoral success of Mohamed Morsi in 2012, created a new regional dynamic. The Muslim Brotherhood, a key ideological and political ally of Hamas, represented a burgeoning Sunni Islamist movement that was perceived as a counterweight to the Shia-dominated Assad regime. The anticipated downfall of Assad, bolstered by the Arab Spring's momentum and widespread opposition to his rule, further influenced Hamas' decision to reconsider its alignment.

The pressure from Palestinian refugees in Syria also played a role in Hamas' policy shift. Many Palestinians living in Syria, who were displaced and affected by the conflict, were supportive of the Sunni opposition and critical of the Assad regime's actions. This pressure highlighted the need for Hamas to align more closely with the broader Sunni opposition to maintain its credibility and support among Palestinian communities. Additionally, support from Sunni allies such as Qatar and Türkiye was instrumental in shaping Hamas' new approach. Both countries were vocal opponents of the Assad regime and provided substantial support to Sunni opposition groups. Their backing offered Hamas both financial resources and political advantage, incentivizing the organization to pivot away from its previous alignment with Assad.

In summary, Hamas' initial alignment with the Syrian regime was influenced by strategic considerations and mutual support. However, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the anticipated fall of Assad, pressure from Palestinian refugees, and support from Sunni allies like Qatar and Türkiye all contributed to a significant shift in Hamas' stance during the Syrian civil war. This shift was driven by the need to align with emerging regional power dynamics and maintain its legitimacy and support within the broader Sunni and Palestinian contexts.

The dynamics of the Syrian civil war evolved significantly, as the Brotherhood's influence waned and Assad regime began to stabilize, nearing a decisive victory. These left Hamas increasingly isolated. Facing increased isolation from its former allies and a challenging geopolitical environment after the fall of the Brotherhood in Egypt and the consolidation of Assad's power led Hamas to reassess its strategic alignments. The leadership changes within Hamas, including the ascension of Yahya Sinwar and Ismail Haniyeh in 2017, marked a transition towards a more pragmatic approach. This new leadership emphasized the necessity of realigning with former allies, including Iran and Syria, to secure strategic benefits and ensure the organization's survival. This pragmatic shift was driven by the need to reestablish crucial support networks and adapt to the changing regional landscape.

Hamas' decision to realign with Iran and Syria was significantly influenced by pragmatic considerations. The ongoing blockade of Gaza, coupled with severe financial difficulties and political isolation, compelled Hamas to prioritize material support over ideological consistency. The normalization of relations between several Arab states and Israel further complicated Hamas' position, pushing it to seek renewed alliances with Iran and Syria to maintain its resistance stance. This realignment was driven by the necessity to secure financial aid, military support, and diplomatic backing, which were crucial for sustaining its operations and governance in Gaza.

Despite the initial sectarian undertones of its foreign policy, Hamas aimed to transcend sectarianism to avoid alienating potential allies and complicating its diplomatic relations. This strategic approach was also consistent with its broader Islamist identity, which focused on Palestinian liberation and resistance against Israeli occupation. By emphasizing its commitment to the Palestinian cause and seeking alliances beyond religious divides, Hamas sought to foster a more inclusive stance that could enhance its international standing and operational effectiveness. This non-sectarian approach allowed Hamas to navigate the complexities of regional politics while maintaining its core objectives and strategic interests.

6.3. Material Factors Influencing Hezbollah's Foreign Policy

Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime was primarily driven by strategic considerations rather than purely ideological motivations. Maintaining a strong regional ally in Syria was crucial for Hezbollah, as it played a central role in preserving Lebanon's political and security landscape. The group's support for Assad was motivated by the need to prevent Israeli re-entry into Lebanon, a scenario that would directly threaten Hezbollah's operational base and influence. While protecting Shiite communities and sacred sites, as well as countering Sunni extremist threats, were important, these aspects were secondary to the strategic imperatives driving Hezbollah's alignment with Assad.

Material support and logistical considerations were central to Hezbollah's operational capabilities. The group's military strength and endurance were heavily dependent on the uninterrupted flow of material support from Iran, which was channeled through Syria. Securing these supply routes and ensuring the continuity of military logistics were essential for Hezbollah's effectiveness in both its domestic and regional operations. This reliance on material

resources underscored a pragmatic approach where logistical necessities often took precedence over ideological purity, reflecting a practical assessment of the group's strategic needs.

Geopolitical necessities further shaped Hezbollah's foreign policy during the Syrian civil war. Supporting the Assad regime was vital for maintaining the Axis of Resistance, a strategic alliance that includes Iran and Hezbollah and opposes Western and Israeli influence in the region. The rise of a Sunni-dominated regime in Syria, hostile to Hezbollah's interests, was perceived as a direct threat. Thus, Hezbollah framed its intervention as a defensive measure against external conspiracies and potential regional destabilization. This alignment was consistent with the group's broader strategic goals of preserving its influence and safeguarding its geopolitical position.

Pragmatic adaptability was a key feature of Hezbollah's foreign policy approach. Initially, Hezbollah engaged in mediation efforts in Syria, reflecting a strategic flexibility that transcended sectarian loyalties. However, as the conflict evolved and the Assad regime's position became more precarious, Hezbollah's shift to full support for Assad demonstrated a recalibration of its strategy. This shift was driven by changing geopolitical dynamics and evolving threat perceptions, highlighting Hezbollah's ability to adapt its policies in response to shifting regional circumstances and strategic imperatives.

6.4. Summarizing Material Considerations as Primary Determinants of the Foreign Policies of Hamas and Hezbollah

While both Hamas and Hezbollah operated within ideational frameworks shaped by their respective religious and resistance narratives, material considerations were the primary determinants of their foreign policies during the Syrian conflict.

6.4.1. External Support

Hamas' fluctuating alliances and pragmatic realignments were primarily driven by financial and military needs. The severe blockade of Gaza and the resulting isolation forced Hamas to seek material support wherever it could be found. Initially aligned with the Syrian regime, Hamas shifted its stance due to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and

anticipated changes in regional power dynamics. However, the eventual fall of the Brotherhood and Assad's near-victory left Hamas isolated once more, prompting a return to former allies like Iran and Syria to secure necessary resources.

In contrast, Hezbollah's sustained support for Assad was crucial for maintaining its logistical lifelines and operational capabilities. The uninterrupted flow of material support from Iran, facilitated through Syria, was indispensable for Hezbollah. This support ensured Hezbollah's ability to continue its operations and maintain its influence in Lebanon and the broader region.

6.4.2. Military and Strategic Necessities

Hamas' limited military infrastructure and resource constraints necessitated pragmatic alliances to ensure its survival and operational efficiency. The organization's reliance on external support for weapons, funding, and training made it essential to align with powerful regional actors that could provide these resources.

Hezbollah, with its more advanced military capabilities, focused on preserving the Assad regime to protect its strategic interests. Supporting Assad was essential not only to maintain the material lifelines from Iran but also to prevent the rise of a hostile Sunni-dominated regime in Syria. This underscores how Hezbollah's foreign policy was heavily influenced by material considerations to sustain its military strength and strategic position in the region.

6.4.3. Adaptability to Geopolitical Shifts

Hamas demonstrated a high degree of adaptability to the changing regional dynamics. Its alliances shifted based on the pragmatic need for support against Israeli and Western pressures. This flexibility was essential for navigating the complex geopolitical landscape and securing the necessary resources to continue its resistance activities.

Similarly, Hezbollah's intervention in Syria was framed ideologically as a defensive necessity but was primarily motivated by the need to secure strategic interests and maintain regional influence. The organization's ability to recalibrate its strategies in response to

geopolitical shifts highlighted its pragmatic approach to ensuring its survival and operational effectiveness.

To conclude, the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian conflict were predominantly shaped by material considerations. While sectarian dynamics and ideological narratives influenced their frameworks, the overriding factors were geopolitical necessities, strategic imperatives, and the need for material support. Both organizations demonstrated pragmatic adaptability to the changing regional landscapes, prioritizing practical considerations over ideological principles to maintain their influence and operational capabilities.

6.5. Conclusion

The analysis of Hamas' foreign policy during the Syrian civil war challenges the simplistic notion that its stance was primarily sectarian. While Hamas initially appeared to align with the opposition in Syria, driven by the Sunni identity prevalent within its ranks and the expectation of regime change, a closer examination reveals the underlying material considerations behind its seemingly sectarian stance. Hamas' decision-making was influenced by a pragmatic assessment of its interests and strategic calculations rather than solely ideological motivations. The organization's shift towards supporting the Assad regime and realigning with Iran and Syria underscores its pursuit of material benefits, such as financial and military support, amidst shifting regional dynamics. This pragmatic approach is evident in Hamas' willingness to engage with former allies, despite ideological tensions and geopolitical complexities.

The chapter on Hamas reveals an interplay between ideological commitments and pragmatic necessities, elucidating the group's strategic maneuvering amidst the ever-shifting regional dynamics. Initially, Hamas' relocation from Syria to Damascus marked a significant strategic shift, driven by factors such as the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt, anticipation of the Syrian regime's impending downfall, and pressure from Palestinian factions in Syria to openly confront the Assad regime. However, with the Brotherhood's fall in 2013 and the near-victory of the Assad regime, Hamas found itself increasingly isolated.

By 2014, Hamas confronted a myriad of challenges, including the ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip by Israel and Egypt, severe financial constraints, and political isolation. Limited support from Qatar and Türkiye proved insufficient, prompting Hamas to reconsider rapprochement with former allies like Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah. Yet, this strategic realignment faced internal discord, as Hamas navigated between nationalist elements focused on the Palestinian struggle and factions influenced by Sunni Islamist ideology, staunchly opposed to renewing ties with Assad.

Leadership transitions in 2017, coupled with the release of a new policy document distancing Hamas from the Muslim Brotherhood, underscored the organization's evolving strategy. Yahya Sinwar's assumption of leadership in Gaza and Ismail Haniyeh's ascent to head Hamas' political bureau facilitated this shift, emphasizing a pragmatic approach to foreign policy. Sinwar's leadership, particularly his ties with the military wing and support base, played a pivotal role in reestablishing connections with Iran. Hamas' strategic recalibration amidst the Syrian conflict reflects a delicate balancing act between ideological principles and pragmatic necessities.

The organization's realignment with Iran and Syria from 2013 to 2017, despite internal and external challenges, underscores its pursuit of financial and military support amid shifting regional alliances. The pragmatic nature of Hamas' decision-making, driven by its perceived interests, is evident in its willingness to engage with former allies, even amidst ideological tensions and geopolitical complexities.

The normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel has left Hamas with dwindling allies, compelling it to collaborate with Iran to confront Israel. This pragmatic shift, driven by interest-driven political decisions, highlights Hamas' adaptability to the evolving regional landscape. While maintaining a non-sectarian stance, Hamas seeks to broaden its alliances beyond religious divides, emphasizing solidarity with oppressed peoples worldwide and preserving its legitimacy as a principled resistance movement. In conclusion, Hamas' strategic choices during the Syrian conflict reflect an interplay between ideology and pragmatism, shaped by evolving regional dynamics and internal pressures. The organization's ability to navigate these complexities underscores its adaptability and resilience amidst challenging geopolitical realities.

Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict has also been perceived through the lens of sectarianism in the literature, since its alliance with Syria and Iran is widely viewed as driven

primarily by sectarian affiliations. However, a closer analysis reveals that Hezbollah's foreign policy was guided more by material considerations than sectarian motivations. The organization's existential and material ties with Iran, coupled with strategic imperatives, outweighed its sectarian allegiance.

Hezbollah's strategic agenda in Syria encompassed both ideological and pragmatic objectives. Primarily, it aimed to safeguard the Assad regime, crucial for preventing Israeli incursions into Lebanon and maintaining regional stability. Additionally, Hezbollah sought to protect Shiite communities along the Lebanese-Syrian border, safeguard Shiite shrines within Syria, and prevent the infiltration of Sunni extremist groups into Lebanon.

The group portrayed its intervention in Syria as a defensive measure against external threats orchestrated by the U.S., Israel, and Sunni extremists, emphasizing the need to protect its own security and regional stability. Hezbollah's support for Assad's regime was also driven by the pragmatic imperative to uphold the Axis of Resistance and maintain access to Iranian and Syrian material assistance, crucial for its operational capabilities.

Furthermore, Hezbollah's backing of Assad was motivated by the need to ensure the uninterrupted flow of essential resources from Tehran, including weapons and funds. Syria served as a vital logistical conduit for maintaining Hezbollah's military capabilities and operational readiness.

Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime in Syria, despite its portrayal as a champion of the oppressed, underscores the organization's pragmatic approach to foreign policy. While Hezbollah has historically positioned itself as a defender of marginalized groups and resistance against perceived oppressors, its actions in Syria demonstrate a willingness to prioritize long-term strategic goals over immediate public perceptions. By aligning with the Alawite regime against the predominantly Sunni Syrian opposition, Hezbollah made a calculated decision based on strategic imperatives rather than ideological alignment.

The Syrian conflict presented Hezbollah with complex geopolitical dynamics and strategic calculations. The Assad regime's survival was deemed crucial for Hezbollah's broader regional interests, including safeguarding its access to Iranian material support and preserving its strategic depth. In this context, Hezbollah prioritized the preservation of its own security and regional stability over ideological consistency or popular perception.

Moreover, Hezbollah's decision to support Assad reflected its adaptability and pragmatism in navigating the shifting dynamics of the Middle East. The group recognized the strategic significance of maintaining its alliance with Iran and Syria, even if it meant siding with a regime that faced international condemnation for its actions during the conflict. Hezbollah's ability to prioritize practical considerations and long-term strategic goals underscores its resilience and relevance as a formidable actor in the region's geopolitical landscape.

In essence, Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime in Syria highlights the complexities of its foreign policy orientation, where material considerations often outweigh ideational narratives. By prioritizing strategic imperatives over immediate public perceptions, Hezbollah demonstrated its capacity to navigate challenging geopolitical realities and pursue its overarching objectives in a volatile and unpredictable region.

In conclusion, Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict reflects a pragmatic orientation driven by strategic imperatives rather than sectarian ideologies. The organization's strategic calculations and material dependencies with Iran and Syria played a central role in shaping its foreign policy decisions, reaffirming its significance as a key actor in the Middle East's geopolitical landscape.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The Syrian civil war presented a unique backdrop against which the foreign policy choices of Hamas and Hezbollah diverged markedly, despite their historical ties and strategic collaborations among themselves and with Syria. This study has critically examined the prevalent academic discourse that attributes this divergence primarily to sectarian factors, arguing instead for the predominance of material considerations in shaping these policies.

The research covers the period from the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011 to “Saif al-Quds” battle in May 2021, which represents the beginning of coordinated efforts and a closer alignment between the organizations, during which they collaborated in a joint operation center. This timeframe is important as it encompasses significant developments that have influenced the foreign policies of both Hamas and Hezbollah. The study places the Syrian civil war as the central case study while also situating its findings within the broader regional dynamics, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry, and the Sunni-Shia divide.

A comparative analysis of two crucial cases is employed, leveraging a multi-level analytical framework to explore the ideational and material drivers behind Hamas and Hezbollah’s foreign policies. This includes combining data from various sources such as scholarly literature, official statements, media reports, and expert analyses to construct a comprehensive narrative. The research acknowledges the limitations due to the unavailability of field studies in Palestine and Lebanon, primarily because of security concerns. This constraint is addressed by relying on secondary data sources to ensure a robust analysis despite the challenges of asymmetrical information and the dynamic nature of the political environment.

The comparative analysis of two crucial case studies grounded in the “Ideational vs. Material” theoretical framework and utilizing the MSSD, has yielded compelling evidence that both Hamas and Hezbollah’s actions during the Syrian conflict were principally driven by strategic imperatives rather than sectarian allegiances. Hamas’ alignment with Sunni opposition groups, for instance, was less about sectarian solidarity and more about pragmatic calculations regarding the potential benefits from the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and other regional

dynamics. Similarly, Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime was not merely a reflection of sectarian loyalty but was deeply rooted in material and strategic interests, particularly concerning its critical alliance with Iran.

In addition, this research demonstrates the primacy of material considerations, contrary to prevailing arguments that attribute the divergence to sectarian affiliations, i.e. ideational priorities of these non-state actors. This study also offers new perspectives on how both ideational and material factors influence the foreign policy decisions of non-state actors within comparable geopolitical environments. These findings challenge the conventional wisdom that sectarian/religious identities are the foremost determinants of the foreign policies of non-state actors in the Middle East. By demonstrating that material considerations often outweigh ideational priorities, this research underscores the importance of strategic and material factors in influencing the decisions of Islamist non-state actors operating within complex and fluid geopolitical environments.

In conclusion, this study highlights the need for a broader analytical perspective that considers both ideational and material factors when examining the foreign policy choices of non-state actors. Such an approach not only provides a more comprehensive understanding of these actors' behaviors but also offers valuable insights for policymakers and scholars seeking to navigate the intricate dynamics of Middle Eastern geopolitics. By recognizing the primacy of material considerations, future research can better anticipate and explain the actions of non-state actors in similar contexts, contributing to more effective and informed policy responses.

7.1. Primary Findings

The foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah underwent significant shifts during the Syrian civil war, reflecting both strategic calculations and evolving regional dynamics. Initially, both Hamas and Hezbollah adopted a calculated stance of neutrality, consciously choosing not to overtly align themselves with any of the factions involved in the Syrian civil war, despite their inherent sectarian affinities and historical alliances. This approach can be understood as a deliberate attempt to avoid the potential pitfalls of becoming embroiled in a conflict where the outcome was highly uncertain and the stakes were exceptionally high.

For Hamas, whose ideological and sectarian ties align with Sunni Islamism, neutrality offered a way to navigate the complex and volatile landscape of the Syrian conflict without prematurely jeopardizing its position. By not openly supporting the Sunni opposition or the Assad regime, Hamas aimed to keep its options open, allowing it to adapt its strategy based on how the conflict evolved. This neutrality was a pragmatic choice, recognizing that taking sides too early could alienate important regional allies or compromise its long-term strategic interests.

When Sunni groups across the Middle East began to gain significant political traction, particularly marked by the electoral successes of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Ennahda party in Tunisia, Hamas saw a strategic opportunity to reshape its position within the region. Hamas viewed these developments as a potential turning point, signaling a broader ascendancy of Sunni Islamist movements that could alter the balance of power in the Middle East. The triumphs of the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda were not merely regional political victories; they represented a broader ideological shift towards Sunni political Islam, which Hamas believed could herald the establishment of a new regional order more favorable to its own interests.

In this context, Hamas decided to align itself with Sunni opposition groups in Syria, anticipating that supporting these groups would allow it to secure a stronger foothold in this emerging order. The decision to back the Sunni opposition was driven by the expectation that the success of these groups would lead to the formation of a new power bloc within the region, one in which Hamas could assert greater influence and autonomy. This expectation was rooted in the belief that the Arab Spring, particularly the rise of Sunni Islamist parties, would lead to the creation of governments sympathetic to Hamas' cause, thereby providing it with new opportunities for political and military support.

As the Syrian civil war dragged on, the expected surge in Sunni political dominance that had initially seemed so promising to Hamas began to lose momentum. The anticipated regional shift, driven by the early successes of Sunni Islamist movements during the Arab Spring, started to unravel in the face of complex and entrenched geopolitical realities. The Syrian regime, led by Bashar al-Assad, demonstrated remarkable resilience, largely due to substantial support from powerful allies such as Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah. This resilience not only ensured the survival of the Assad government but also signaled to Hamas that the regional power dynamics were not shifting in the way they had hoped.

The collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, which had been a key source of optimism for Hamas, further complicated the situation. In 2013, the Egyptian military, under the leadership of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, orchestrated a coup that ousted President Mohamed Morsi. This coup marked a decisive blow to the broader Islamist movement across the region, dramatically reversing the gains that had been made during the Arab Spring. The rapid suppression of the Morsi government not only extinguished the immediate prospects for Sunni Islamist governance in Egypt but also served as a broader warning of the limits of Sunni political ascendancy.

Faced with these developments, Hamas was compelled to reassess its strategic position. The realization that the Syrian regime was likely to remain in power, coupled with the decline of the Muslim Brotherhood's influence, forced Hamas to reconsider its earlier support for Sunni opposition groups in Syria. The initial expectation that Sunni political movements would dominate the new regional order had proven overly optimistic. Instead of a Sunni-led transformation of the Middle East, the region appeared to be stabilizing around a reassertion of old power structures, with the Axis of Resistance—comprising Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah—remaining a formidable force.

This recalibration of strategy led Hamas to seek a rapprochement with the Axis of Resistance, recognizing that maintaining ties with this bloc was essential for its survival and continued relevance in the region. The shift was a pragmatic acknowledgment that the regional environment had not evolved as Hamas had hoped, and that aligning with the enduring powers of the region, rather than betting on a nascent and ultimately unstable Sunni political rise, was the more viable path forward.

Hezbollah, despite its strong Shia identity and close relationship with the Assad regime, also initially refrained from taking an explicit stance in the early stages of the conflict. Its relative neutrality at the onset of the Syrian conflict is a testament to the organization's strategic calculus, which prioritized regional geopolitical considerations over immediate sectarian loyalties. When the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011, sectarian divisions, pitting the predominantly Sunni opposition against the Alawite-led Assad regime, which has deep ties to Shia Islam, rapidly characterized the conflict. Given Hezbollah's identity as a Shia militant and political organization with close ideological and military ties to the Assad regime, one might have expected an immediate and unequivocal alignment with Assad. However, Hezbollah's leadership chose a more cautious approach in the early stages of the conflict.

This initial neutrality did not signify indifference or a lack of interest in the outcome of the Syrian conflict. Rather, it reflected Hezbollah's recognition of the complex and volatile nature of the situation. The group understood that the Syrian civil war was not only a domestic conflict but also a battleground for broader regional power struggles involving numerous state and non-state actors, each with its own interests and objectives. Hezbollah's leadership was aware that the decisions it made at the onset of the war would have far-reaching consequences for its own position within the region, as well as for its critical alliances, particularly with Iran.

Hezbollah's initial caution was also influenced by the group's broader strategic objectives. At the time, the organization was heavily invested in maintaining its resistance narrative against Israel and positioning itself as a defender of Lebanese sovereignty and regional Shia interests. Engaging too early in the Syrian conflict could have diverted resources and attention from these priorities, potentially weakening Hezbollah's standing both within Lebanon and in the wider Middle East.

However, as the Syrian civil war intensified and the Assad regime's survival came under serious threat, Hezbollah's calculations shifted. The group increasingly saw the preservation of the Assad government as vital to its own survival and the maintenance of the Axis of Resistance, the alliance that included Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran. This realization led Hezbollah to gradually abandon its initial neutrality and take a more active role in the conflict, ultimately committing significant military resources to support Assad. This transition from neutrality to direct intervention was driven by strategic necessities, such as safeguarding supply routes, maintaining influence in Syria, and preventing the rise of hostile Sunni forces that could threaten Hezbollah's interests.

The looming possibility of Assad's defeat posed a direct threat to Hezbollah's own position within the region. The survival of the Syrian regime was crucial not only for maintaining the geographical continuity of the Axis of Resistance but also for preserving the vital supply routes that connected Hezbollah to its primary patron, Iran. These supply lines, which ran through Syria, were essential for the group's military capabilities, providing it with the weapons, funds, and logistical support necessary to sustain its operations. Without Assad's regime, Hezbollah would have faced a severe strategic disadvantage, potentially isolating it from its key sources of support and undermining its ability to function effectively as a major political and military actor.

Recognizing these stakes, Hezbollah's leadership decided to move from a position of neutrality to one of active engagement in the Syrian conflict. The decision to offer explicit support to the Assad regime was a calculated response to the shifting dynamics of the war. While Hezbollah is a Shia organization with deep sectarian ties to the Alawite-led Syrian government, its decision to intervene was driven less by sectarian solidarity and more by the necessity of preserving the regional power structure that underpinned its own security and influence.

Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war was thus a strategic move aimed at safeguarding its long-term interests. By intervening directly in support of Assad, Hezbollah sought to prevent the emergence of a hostile, potentially Sunni-dominated regime in Damascus that could disrupt the Axis of Resistance and weaken Hezbollah's standing in the region. A pragmatic understanding that the fall of the Syrian regime would not only destabilize Syria but could also embolden its enemies, particularly Israel and Sunni extremist groups, thereby threatening the delicate balance of power in the Middle East, motivated the group's actions.

Furthermore, Hezbollah's commitment to defending the Assad regime reinforced its role as a critical player within the Axis of Resistance, solidifying its ties with Iran and ensuring continued support from its allies. This alignment was crucial for Hezbollah's broader strategy, which relied on the maintenance of a regional bloc capable of countering Western and Israeli influence in the Middle East. By supporting Assad, Hezbollah demonstrated its willingness to act decisively to protect this alliance, even at the cost of becoming embroiled in a protracted and bloody conflict.

In essence, Hezbollah's initial neutrality during the early stages of the Syrian conflict underscores the organization's strategic pragmatism. By initially refraining from taking a direct sectarian position, Hezbollah demonstrated its ability to prioritize long-term regional strategic needs over immediate ideological or sectarian impulses. This calculated approach allowed Hezbollah to navigate the complexities of the Syrian civil war, positioning itself to intervene more decisively when it became clear that the survival of the Assad regime was essential to its own strategic objectives in the region.

Hezbollah's decision to back the Assad regime was also a reflection of its broader strategic objectives, focused on maintaining the regional balance of power and safeguarding its alliance network. While sectarian affinities played a role, the primary driver of Hezbollah's intervention was the imperative to preserve its own position within a region where power

dynamics were rapidly evolving. This calculated intervention highlights Hezbollah's strategic acumen and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances in order to protect its long-term interests.

Evolution in the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war reflects a broader pattern of adaptation by non-state actors to shifting regional power dynamics, where ideological affinities are often subordinated to strategic necessities. This pattern of adaptation is emblematic of how non-state actors, especially those deeply embedded in regional conflicts must constantly reassess their positions in light of changing circumstances. For Hamas, the early optimism about the rise of Sunni political power in the wake of the Arab Spring gradually gave way to a more cautious approach as it became clear that the anticipated new order would not materialize as expected. This shift in strategy, from supporting Sunni opposition groups to seeking rapprochement with the Axis of Resistance, underscores how ideological goals were subordinated to the strategic necessity of ensuring the organization's long-term viability.

Similarly, Hezbollah's transition from neutrality to active support for the Assad regime illustrates how the group prioritized the preservation of its regional alliance over sectarian considerations. Despite its strong Shia identity, Hezbollah recognized that the collapse of the Syrian government would have devastating consequences for its own strategic interests. By choosing to intervene on behalf of Assad, Hezbollah demonstrated that its foreign policy decisions were driven primarily by a need to maintain the balance of power and safeguard its operational capabilities, rather than by a simple alignment with sectarian allies.

This broader pattern of adaptation by Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war reflects a fundamental characteristic of non-state actors operating in volatile environments: the ability to prioritize strategic necessities over ideological consistency. In a region where power dynamics are fluid and alliances are often temporary, these groups have shown a remarkable capacity to shift their policies in response to external pressures, ensuring their continued relevance and influence. This pragmatism allows them to navigate complex conflicts and survive in an ever-changing geopolitical landscape, even when it requires compromising or redefining their ideological positions.

In addition to the aforementioned strategic and ideological dimensions, the Syrian civil war has underscored several other crucial factors that have shaped the conflict and the responses of key actors like Hamas and Hezbollah. These include the significance of external support

networks, territorial control and governance structures, as well as the intricate web of regional and international alliances. Each of these elements has played a pivotal role in determining the outcomes on the ground and the broader geopolitical ramifications of the war.

The Syrian civil war has highlighted the critical role of external support networks in sustaining the operations of non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah. Both organizations relied heavily on substantial aid, particularly from Iran, although the extent and impact of this support varied. Hezbollah, benefitting from robust Iranian assistance and logistical backing from the Syrian regime, managed to maintain sophisticated military capabilities and played a decisive role in supporting Assad's government. This external backing was crucial for Hezbollah's ability to project power and influence across the region. In contrast, Hamas, despite receiving Iranian support, faced significant challenges due to the Israeli blockade on Gaza, which severely restricted its access to advanced weaponry and resources. This disparity underscores how material realities can shape the operational capacities of these sectarian actors.

Territorial control and governance structures also played pivotal roles in the operational dynamics of Hamas and Hezbollah. Hezbollah's control over parts of southern Lebanon and its influence in Syrian territories enabled the establishment of strong military and logistical bases, facilitating its operations and securing strategic positions. Conversely, Hamas' governance of the Gaza Strip, while providing a base of operations, presented significant challenges due to the Israeli blockade. The ability to control and effectively govern territory directly affects the operational flexibility and strategic options available to these groups.

Furthermore, regional and international alliances formed by Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war were heavily influenced by material considerations. Hezbollah's alliance with Iran and the Assad regime was rooted in mutual interests, including maintaining Shiite dominance and countering Sunni extremist groups, which provided Hezbollah with vital military and logistical support. On the other hand, Hamas initially aligned with Sunni opposition groups but had to recalibrate its alliances to secure material support from Iran, demonstrating a pragmatic approach to foreign policy driven by material needs.

Overall, the Syrian civil war has brought to the fore the critical importance of external support networks, territorial control, and regional and international alliances in shaping the strategies and outcomes for non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as for state actors like the Assad regime. These factors have not only influenced the immediate conduct of the war but have also had lasting implications for the regional power structure and the future of

the Middle East. The conflict has shown that survival and success in such a complex environment depend not just on ideological commitments or battlefield victories, but on the ability to leverage external support, maintain control over territory, and navigate the intricate web of alliances that define the region's geopolitical landscape.

In conclusion, the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war provide a striking illustration of how even actors deeply rooted in sectarian identities and conflicts often prioritize material realities over purely ideological motivations. While both organizations are driven by strong sectarian and ideological commitments—Hamas as a Sunni Islamist group and Hezbollah as a Shia militant and political organization—their actions during the Syrian civil war reveal a pragmatic approach to foreign policy that underscores the importance of material considerations in their strategic calculations.

At the heart of this pragmatism is the recognition that ideological solidarity alone cannot sustain their long-term survival and influence in a volatile and competitive regional environment. For both Hamas and Hezbollah, the Syrian civil war presented complex challenges that required a careful balancing of ideological commitments with the material realities of power, resources, and alliances. This balancing act was evident in the way both organizations adapted their foreign policies in response to the evolving situation on the ground.

Hamas' initial decision to support Sunni opposition groups in Syria was influenced by the early successes of Sunni Islamist movements during the Arab Spring, which appeared to herald a new era of Sunni political dominance in the region. However, as the conflict progressed and the anticipated rise of Sunni power failed to materialize—exemplified by the resilience of the Assad regime and the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt—Hamas was compelled to reassess its strategy. The shift from supporting the opposition to seeking rapprochement with the Axis of Resistance, despite its sectarian differences, highlights Hamas' pragmatic recognition that material realities, such as maintaining alliances and securing resources, were more critical to its survival than ideological consistency.

Similarly, Hezbollah's decision to intervene in support of the Assad regime, despite initially maintaining a stance of neutrality, was driven by material considerations. The group understood that the collapse of the Syrian government would not only weaken its strategic position but also threaten its access to vital supply lines and support from Iran. Hezbollah's actions, therefore, were guided by a pragmatic assessment of the need to preserve the regional

balance of power and its own operational capabilities, rather than by a simplistic sectarian alignment.

The analysis of these material and ideational factors in the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah underscores the inherently pragmatic nature of their strategies. This is not to suggest that sectarian or ideational factors were entirely absent from the formulation of their foreign policies. On the contrary, ideas and beliefs—particularly sectarian priorities, as explored in this study—play a crucial role in shaping foreign policy. These ideational elements serve as essential heuristics and cognitive shortcuts, aiding policymakers in making sense of complex situations and guiding their decisions. Moreover, they function as an institutional framework that helps construct shared systems of thought within a particular context, fostering a collective understanding of political realities. Sectarian and ideational factors also act as strategic tools, employed to construct political discourse and to mobilize support, both domestically and internationally. They serve as vital conduits, or "transmission belts," linking systemic stimuli—such as geopolitical shifts or economic pressures—to the resulting foreign policy actions.

However, despite their significance, these ideational factors are analytically secondary to the more dominant systemic influences and the decisive role of leadership. While sectarian and ideational elements can shape and influence policy, they are often subordinate to the broader systemic forces that drive state behavior, such as security concerns, economic interests, and power dynamics. The strategic decisions of leaders, who navigate these complex systemic pressures, ultimately take precedence in determining foreign policy outcomes. Thus, while ideas and beliefs are important, they operate within a framework that is primarily dictated by the external environment and the strategic imperatives that it imposes.

While sectarian identity remains an important element of their political and military actions, it is clear that both organizations are willing to adjust their ideological stances when necessary to align with the material realities of the regional power dynamics. This pragmatic approach allows them to navigate the complexities of the Middle East's geopolitical landscape, ensuring their continued relevance and influence despite the shifting tides of conflict and power.

Ultimately, the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah during the Syrian civil war reveal that, even in the context of deeply sectarian conflicts, material considerations—such as the preservation of alliances, access to resources, and the maintenance of strategic positions—and the role of the perceptions and interpretations of the leaders often take precedence over

ideological motivations. This understanding of their pragmatic strategies offers valuable insights into the broader dynamics of non-state actors in the Middle East, highlighting the importance of material realities in shaping the behavior of even the most ideologically driven groups. While these actors may invoke sectarian rhetoric to legitimize their actions or rally support, their actual foreign policy choices tend to be guided by strategic calculations that respond to external pressures and opportunities. In this sense, the role of leadership in interpreting and responding to these systemic stimuli becomes crucial, often overshadowing the influence of ideational factors in determining the direction and outcomes of foreign policy.

7.2. Further Research

The multi-level approach employed in this study offers a novel theoretical framework for analyzing the foreign policies of non-state actors, particularly those with religious or other ideational priorities. This framework integrates various analytical dimensions to provide a more nuanced understanding of foreign policy behavior. At the systemic level, broad imperatives such as international power dynamics and security concerns shape an actor's overarching strategic orientation. However, unit-level variables—including sectarianism, religious identity, and other ideational factors—are essential in explaining the specific variations in foreign policy decisions. These factors deeply influence how non-state actors perceive their roles and responsibilities, guiding their strategic responses to external pressures and opportunities.

Leadership-level factors further refine this analysis by determining how these systemic and unit-level variables are interpreted and operationalized. Leaders play a crucial role in integrating ideational factors, such as sectarian loyalties and religious identities, into coherent foreign policy strategies, often balancing these with pragmatic considerations driven by material needs.

This study presents a structured, generalizable, multi-level approach that goes beyond traditional state-centric frameworks, such as neoclassical realism, and beyond leadership studies that focus predominantly on individual influence. By incorporating the significant roles of sectarianism, religious identity, and other ideational factors at the unit level, this framework provides a deeper understanding of the foreign policies of non-state actors, especially in the context of proxy power politics and transnational governance in the Middle East. While this study establishes a foundational approach for such analysis, it also highlights the necessity for

future research to explore further the specific interests and constraints that non-state actors face, particularly in regions where ideational factors play a pivotal role in shaping strategic outcomes.

Future research on non-state actor foreign policies could delve into several key areas to enhance our understanding of their behavior and impact on international relations. One avenue for exploration is the role of non-state actors in regional power dynamics and geopolitical shifts. This research could examine how these actors interact with state counterparts, influence regional dynamics, and shape broader geopolitical trends. Additionally, further analysis could focus on the evolving strategies and tactics employed by non-state actors in response to changing geopolitical landscapes, technological advancements, and security threats. Understanding these dynamics is essential for anticipating and responding to the evolving nature of non-state actor behavior in international affairs.

Another area ripe for investigation is the impact of external support networks on the behavior and decision-making of non-state actors. This research could examine the role of state sponsors, financial backers, and ideological supporters in shaping the objectives, capabilities, and alliances of non-state actors. By exploring these dynamics, researchers can gain insights into the mechanisms through which external actors influence the behavior of non-state actors in conflict and security contexts.

Comparative analysis of non-state actor foreign policies across different regions and contexts may offer valuable opportunities for deeper insights into their behavior and impact. For instance, researchers may conduct comparative studies of non-state actors operating in different regions, such as Hezbollah in the Middle East and the Taliban in South Asia. By identifying common patterns and unique characteristics, such research could elucidate broader trends in non-state actor behavior and inform strategies for addressing their challenges.

Similarly, comparative analysis of non-state actors with similar ideological orientations but operating in different contexts, such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, could shed light on how contextual factors shape their foreign policies. Additionally, comparative analysis of non-state actors engaged in different types of conflicts, such as insurgencies, civil wars, and transnational terrorism, could reveal variations in their strategies, objectives, and impact on conflict dynamics. By conducting such comparative studies, researchers can generate nuanced insights into the behavior and impact of non-state actors across diverse contexts and settings.

Advancements in research methodologies are essential for enhancing our understanding of conflict dynamics and improving conflict resolution efforts. One promising avenue for

methodological innovation is the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods. By combining these approaches, researchers can provide a comprehensive understanding of conflict dynamics, triangulate data from multiple sources, and enhance the validity of their findings.

Additionally, the utilization of innovative data sources and analytical techniques, such as social media analysis, and network analysis, holds promise for capturing and analyzing complex conflict dynamics in real-time. Such approaches enable researchers to access new sources of data, identify emerging trends, and monitor conflict dynamics more effectively. Moreover, incorporating participatory research methods and community-based approaches is essential for engaging with conflict-affected populations and ensuring their voices are heard in research and decision-making processes. By involving local communities in research design, data collection, and analysis, researchers can enhance the relevance, validity, and impact of their research on conflict zones.

7.3. Concluding Remarks

The analysis of Hamas and Hezbollah's foreign policies reveals the predominance of material interests and strategic calculations over purely ideological motivations. Throughout this study, several key points have emerged that shed light on the behavior and impact of these non-state actors in the Middle East. Both Hamas and Hezbollah are primarily driven by material factors in shaping their foreign policies. While they are ideologically guided by Islamist principles and a commitment to resistance against perceived oppression, particularly by Israel, their actions are heavily influenced by pragmatic considerations.

The foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah reflect their adaptability and strategic acumen in navigating the complexities of the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. Despite their ideological differences and sectarian affiliations, both groups have demonstrated a willingness to engage in pragmatic decision-making to pursue their objectives and ensure their survival. For instance, Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian civil war was driven by the material necessity of maintaining a strategic ally in Assad's regime and securing the supply routes for weapons and financial support from Iran. On the other hand, Hamas' decision to distance itself from the Assad regime and align with Sunni opposition groups during the Syrian civil war was driven by the material consideration of gaining support from emerging regional

powers like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and addressing the pressures and needs of Palestinian communities in Syria.

This study underscores the significance of external influences, including state sponsors and regional dynamics, in shaping the foreign policies of Hamas and Hezbollah. The support and alliances they received from external actors, particularly Iran, played a crucial role in enhancing their capabilities and influencing their strategic choices. During the Syrian civil war, Iran's financial and military backing was pivotal for Hezbollah, enabling it to sustain its involvement in the conflict and bolster its regional influence. Similarly, Hamas experienced a significant shift in policy following the ousting of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt. The removal of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government, which had been a crucial ally, left Hamas in a precarious position. To ensure its survival and maintain its operations amid the challenging circumstances, Hamas sought to restore and strengthen its external support network, particularly with Iran. The necessity of securing financial and military assistance from Iran became a critical factor driving Hamas' strategic realignment and its approach to regional alliances.

In terms of the study's contribution to Middle Eastern studies, it provides valuable insights into the behavior and impact of non-state actors in the region. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach and integrating insights from political science, international relations, and foreign policy analysis, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play in the Middle East. This pattern is not unique to Hamas and Hezbollah; it reflects a broader trend among political Islamist groups whose foreign policies are often influenced by a combination of ideological goals and pragmatic considerations. The foreign policy of political Islamist groups frequently entails balancing ideological commitments with the necessity of securing material resources and external support. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, while grounded in an Islamist ideology, pursued foreign policies aimed at garnering international legitimacy and economic support. Their short-lived government under Mohamed Morsi sought to strengthen ties with both regional allies and global powers to ensure political and economic stability.

Overall, the analysis of Hamas and Hezbollah's foreign policies highlights the importance of material factors in determining the actions of sectarian actors, even in sectarian conflicts. Recognizing the interplay of these material factors would allow policymakers and scholars to develop more effective strategies for addressing conflicts, promoting stability, and

advancing peace in the region. Recognizing that the actions of sectarian groups are often driven by pragmatic needs rather than solely by ideological commitments allows for the development of more effective strategies to address conflicts. By focusing on the material support networks and addressing the strategic needs of these groups, policymakers can promote stability and advance peace in the region. This comprehensive approach, which considers both material and ideational influences, is crucial for effectively managing and resolving sectarian conflicts in the Middle East.



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