What It Means to Be Shiite in Lebanon: Al Manar and the Imagined Community of Resistance

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Abstract
This paper is premised on the understanding that the relationship between media and religion is not new. Media, defined broadly as systems as communication, have always been involved in the mediation of religion through the articulation and circulation of a wide range of religious and spiritual symbols, meanings values and ideas, through, among other means, sermons and the spoken word. Using a historically contextualised perspective and preliminary findings of ongoing research with young Shias in Lebanon, this paper addresses the relationship between the Hizbullah-backed satellite television station Al Manar and the everyday politics of Lebanon's Shias, underscoring that the processes of mediation do not take place in isolation of historical, political and cultural contexts. In detailing the confessional nature of Lebanon and its media, this chapter shows that Al Manar has become one of the de facto voices of the Shias in Lebanon, linking their ethos of resistance to that of the wider Shia community, thus playing a key role in the styles within which this community is imagined.

Introduction

Modern Lebanon is a bundle of paradoxes (Kraidy 2005). Relations between its diverse confessions have moved between peaceful co-existence and open warfare, while discourses in the Arab world and the West about Lebanon have oscillated between romantic idealisation of its role as a cultural bridge between the East and West and revulsion over persistent inter-communal strife in the 1970s. Its political system is based on a power-sharing agreement (a prototype of consociational democracy) among its various confessional groups that occasionally tends to suffer from feudalism and clientelism.

Despite being one of the smallest nation-states in the Arab World, the legacy of colonial rule, its delicate demographic balance, fragile political system, incursions by Israel, Syrian claims over it and its involvement by proxy in the Palestinian-Israeli question have all combined to contribute to a deep identity crisis over what it means to be Lebanese, a crisis that has been exacerbated by myriad 'signature identities' (Harik 2003) flagged under different banners – secular, religious, progressive and reactionary, which 'locate the primary position of a person on the social map' (Ibid, 9).

These signature identities have been described as forms of primordial identities, which in the Lebanese context, translates into religious communalism, a feature of the Lebanese political and cultural landscape since 1943 when the name Grand Liban was inscribed into national consciousness under the National Pact – the unwritten agreement between the country's two largest confessional communities – the Maronite Christians and the Sunni Muslims.[1] Though meant to bring together the country's various groups under the umbrella of Lebanese national identity, the agreement served to foster competing imaginations of what it means to be Lebanese, one envisioned by the country's Christian Maronites as a Christian nation with roots in Christian traditions and Phoenician ancestry, and the other envisioned by the Muslim Sunnis as a Lebanon with Arab and Muslim cultural traditions (Ajami 1986).

These two competing and co-existing imaginations of what it means to be Lebanese have continued to be the *legitimising identities* (cf. Castells 2004, our emphasis) of the Lebanese state, giving other smaller or less influential religious communities, including the Shias, little political room to weave narratives of their own communal history into the grand fabric of Grand Liban (see Beydoun 2003). Though it is not exactly clear when the stirrings of change began to leave clear imprints on the political landscape, Beydoun argues that one of the catalysts for change is thought to have been public discourses of 'confessionalisation' or 'communalisation' by the Iranian-born cleric of Lebanese descent, Sayyed Imam Musa Sadr in the 1970s.

These discourses were given more credence by the establishment of the Higher Shia Council which represents the Shias in Lebanon as a political community and the Movement of the Deprived which tended to the needs of the people who constituted what Sadr called the *community of the deprived,* thus marking the beginning of the Shias' mobilisation as a political community and their movement from a tradition of quietism to one of political agency. In 1974, Sadr founded the military arm known as the Ranks of Lebanese Resistance or Amal (hope) – whose primary mission was to fight Israel.

Three years after the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, Sadr was kidnapped on a trip to Libya, opening the door wide open for contestations over power of what came to be popularly known as the Movement of the Deprived. The diverse Lebanese Islamic groups at the time sought to ally themselves with numerous groupings, the most prominent of which were Amal, the Lebanese Da'wa party and the followers of Ayatullah Mohammad Mahdi Shamseddine. Amal was the largest of these groupings, also attracting the largest number of activists who joined either out of conviction or because of the absence of other alternatives. One such alternative eventually emerged with the formation of the splinter group Islamist Amal and its issuance of the Manifesto of the Nine under Iran's spiritual leader Ayatullah Khomeini and which eventually served to bring together various Islamist groups under the banner of Hizbullah; meaning Party of God (Qassem 2005). Hizbullah's doctrines were based on three principles rooted in Islamic thought: belief in Islam as a comprehensive religion covering all the aspects of one's life, Jihad (struggle) as well as the Jurisdiction of the Jurist-Theologian, a precept particular to Shia thought (Ibid, for a more detailed discussion of the rise of Hizbullah).

The Rise of the Community of Resistance
There are only a handful of Arab scholarly studies on the meaning of religion in the everyday Arab context and even fewer that have employed the Western empirical methods of social science to examine its meaning for people. Except for recent efforts by the Centre for Arab Studies in Beirut and a few scattered studies by a number of Arab social scientists and philosophers, the study of religion as an academic exercise has been rare. Abu Rabi' (2004) argues that this lack of scholarship stems from the understanding of religion as belonging to the domains of the Sacred and the mythical, and therefore does not warrant academic treatment except when invoked by the oppressed or by a political movement. This presents an anomaly because, as he notes, religion has been deeply intertwined with both culture and politics throughout Islamic history and religious dogma has been inseparable from actual life. Thus, he says, religion 'has been shaped by the synergy of history' (Ibid, 127), an understanding that warrants examining the construction of religious meanings and identities within, not outside political, social and historical contexts. [2]

Within the Lebanese political, social and historical contexts, alluded to briefly in the introduction, it thus seems inevitable that a discourse of an all-out *Islamic resistance* did become a dominant discourse among the country's Shiite and that Hizbullah's primacy in the south of Lebanon did earn the organisation, despite its Islamic identity, the role of a protector of the sovereignty of the nation-state including the south. Though this may sound surprising, given the country's

complex confessional groupings, Sami Zubaida (2004) points out that this type of Islamic nationalism is not an anomaly in the Middle East. Indeed, 'Islam as nationalism…does not pertain to territory or state, but is often raised in the context of particular countries and their politics. Its logic is pan-Islamic, but its reality is often particular… It is mostly revived and proclaimed in hostilities towards Western powers and Israel and conceived in terms of religious solidarities' (Ibid, 409-18).

The meanings and acts of resistance up to and following the emergence of Hizbullah were primarily political, aimed at countering the Israeli occupation of Lebanon which was a cause championed by a variety of groups, including leftist, nationalist and Palestinian movements operating in the border regions. However, after the 1989 signing of the Document of National Understanding, better known as the Taif Agreement, all militias besides Hizbullah were disarmed, leaving the Islamic party as the only Lebanese contender on the Southern Front. The Taif agreement focused on reforming institutions and on national reconciliation, and its official text appeared to settle Lebanon's identity crisis by asserting that 'Lebanon is Arab in belonging and identity.'

An overview of the communal history of the Shias of Lebanon implies that there is more at stake than the emergence of a resistance identity to Lebanon's de facto all-encompassing legitimising identities, and which were perceived by Hizbullah to have also been imposed by outside powers, including the US and Israel, therefore confirming some academic views that the cultural constructions of Islam have often taken place against the presence of powerful enemies, colonialism and colonial culture. This means that modern Muslim identity cannot be grasped apart from modern history (Abu Rabi' 2004). [3]

The modern history of Lebanon indicates that the confessionalisation of the Shias and their relatively recent regrouping around a resistance identity or a 'signature identity' places Hizbullah as a distinct Lebanese organisation intent on playing by the rules set by the Lebanese political establishment. This argument is supported by proponents of the 'Lebanonisation' thesis who deride the essentialisation of Hizbullah as an atavistic fundamentalist movement no different from terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, a perspective that argues that Hizbullah has entered its 'phase of political jihad' which involves 'its gradual transformation into a purely civilian political party accommodated by the Lebanese political system' (Harb and Leenders 2005, 183). That said, Harb and Leenders suggest that Hizbullah's *political jihad* should not be dissociated from its *military jihad*, because the party's social and political activities operate as an integrated and holistic network, disseminating the values of resistance while constructing a collective identity derived from the notion of the *hala al-islamiyya*, or 'Islamic sphere'(Ibid, 192-93).

More than fifteen years after the Taif agreement, there is some evidence that the communitarian identity of the Shias of Lebanon has undergone a noticeable transformation since the country's independence in 1943 – moving from one of political quietism and marginalisation to radicalised political agency because of a number of regional and global contextual factors. However, the liberation of the Lebanese South and Western Bekaa regions – with the exception of the Shebaa Farms (whose status as Lebanese territory remains internationally contested) has raised numerous questions regarding Hizbullah's ability to maintain 'its presence without the fact of resistance' (Qassem 2005, 261), questions that have become all the more pertinent to address following the assassination of Former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on the 14th of February 2005, which prompted massive anti-Syrian demonstrations across the country and unparalleled international pressure for the implementation of UN Resolution 1559 calling for complete Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the disarming of all Lebanese militias.

It is within these historically and culturally-specific contexts that this chapter's concerns are situated: how do Lebanon's Shias negotiate mediated meanings about themselves and their religion in their everyday lives; and what role does the Hizbullah-backed satellite channel Al Manar play in maintaining the imaginations of a community of resistance in a post-Taif, post-war Lebanese environment of economic depression, political subservience to Syria, continued conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the war in Iraq, and rising confessional tensions,? The focus on a historical account as a scene-setter for the subsequent discussion anchors our concerns in this paper as well as in the ongoing fieldwork based on open-ended interviews among young Shiites in Lebanon.

Our starting point is that the relationship between communication and religion is not new - media, defined broadly as systems as communication, have always been involved in the mediation of religion through the articulation and circulation of a wide range of religious and spiritual symbols, meanings values and ideas, through, among other means, sermons and the spoken word. Our approach is therefore not concerned with the question of media effects or influence, the focus of much of the research on media's role in societies and which often extract media from the social and political context of its production and consumption. Rather we are concerned with the processes of mediation (Silverstone 1999) that take place within everyday contexts and which allow us to understand how the negotiation of meanings is a process of everyday politics, these are the non-organised or informal actions that are part of the fabric of the everyday and which provide frameworks for thinking about identity and belonging.

Why Identity?

Academic concern with the concept of identity has a long history that derives from the exceptional plurality of its meanings, meanings that are condensed and interwoven as the term circulates in everyday speech, and from its centrality in contemporary debates in media, cultural studies and social theory. Interest in deconstructing the term grew as scholarship began to associate the ways in which identities are constructed in response to systems of representation, which refer to the signifying practices and symbolic systems through which meanings are produced and which position people as subjects.

There is no space here to elaborate on the different schools of thought regarding identity, but the perspective taken here is that identity (cultural, social, ethnic or religious) is a short-hand description for ways of talking about the self and community, and therefore constructed across and within diverse discourses, practices and positions. In this sense, what matters is not who we are or where we came from but what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. This notion of identity as a continuous discursive process, as becoming rather than being, is best captured in the theoretical framework of identification as discourse (Hall 1996), a framework that emphasises how identities are social constructs that are created, maintained and summoned in different ways in different contexts.

In his underlining the ways in which identities are constructed through constant negotiations and competing discourses, Hall speaks of *identity* as 'the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken' (1996, 6), or between the collective and the personal. What this means is that the 'individually unique' and the 'collectively shared' forms of identification are produced and reproduced through the analogous 'interplay of similarity and difference' - at variance with regard to their respective emphases (Jenkins 2004). It follows that in order to understand the 'collectively shared', we must study the 'individually unique' and vice versa; bearing in mind that 'the *internal-external dialectic of identification'* is 'the process whereby all identities – individual and collective – are constituted' (Jenkins 2004, 18, emphasis in original).

Different Forms of Identity Building: Legitimising, Project and Resistance Identities

In discussing the power of identity in the modern world, Manuel Castells (2004) poses an important question: how, from what, by what and for what are collective identities constructed. He argues that the construction of identity uses building

materials from history, from geography, biology, productive and reproductive institutions, collective memory, personal fantasies, religious revelations and power apparatuses, but that individuals 'social groups and societies process all these materials and rearrange their meaning, according to social determinations and cultural projects rooted in their social structure and in their space/time framework' (Ibid, 7). He also notes that it is *who* constructs collective identity and *for what* processes that determines the symbolic content of this identity and its meaning for those identifying with it or placing themselves outside of it, which means placing identity construction in a context marked by power relations. In making his argument, Castells provides an important distinction between three forms of identity building; legitimising identity, project identity and resistance identity, each of which leads to a different outcome. Legitimising identity generates a civil society that is formulated along the Gramscian understanding of hegemony, project identity produces subjects or social actors that seek to redefine the overall social structure, while resistance identity leads to the formation of '*communes or communities*' (Ibid, 8-9, emphasis in original*)*.

 It is the last form of identity that Castells sees as the most important form of identity building in the contemporary world as it constructs forms of collective resistance against oppression and produces communities that are usually based on historical, geographical or biological factors that facilitate the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded while reinforcing and essentialising the boundaries of resistance. These 'identities that start as resistance may induce projects, and may also, along the course of history, become dominant in the institutions of society, thus becoming legitimising identities to rationalise their domination' indicating the significance of exploring *identities* from a historically-specific optic in order to understand their full implications because 'no identity has, per se, progressive or regressive value outside its historical context' (Ibid, 8). Before discussing which forms of identities are produced when discussing Al Manar and Lebanon's Shias, we provide a brief review of the literature on media and identity.

Media and Identity Construction
Although German scholar Karl W. Deutsch advanced a theoretical link between media and (national) identity as early as 1966, the literature on this relationship is relatively new. In his theoretical work *Nationalism and Social Communication* (1966), Deutsch made a critical observation about the interplay between national identity and mass communication systems, arguing that communication should be understood as an increasingly sustained mode of being that integrates a given people and provides it with singularity. His argument suggests that national communities are strongly bounded by their socially communicative structures of information and that members of a nation are united by more intensive social

communications and are linked to centres by an unbroken chain of connections in communications.

However, it was not until Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983/1991) that details the relationship between the spread of print capitalism and the imagination of national identity that scholarship took off seriously. In this seminal work, Anderson defines the nation as 'an imagined political community […] It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (1991, 6, original emphasis). Despite its popularity – numerous studies on the relationship between media and identity have been modelled around Anderson's notion of the imagined – his proposal has been criticised for being materially and technologically deterministic, particularly for his assumption that the text as a technological commodity helps the construction of the nation and for his assuming a common end product, a common national identity for the people under investigation. Other criticisms were voiced against his giving too much weight to the power of nationally structured communications systems.

As Silverstone (1999, 5) notes, media institutions 'do not make meanings' but merely 'offer them' to individuals - who may or may not choose to adopt or internalise them. The media may also serve as conduits for symbols, which are 'the instruments of knowledge and communication' that 'make it possible for a consensus (to emerge) on the meaning of the social world, a consensus which contributes fundamentally to the reproduction of social order' (Bourdieu 1991, 166 quoted in Couldry 2003, 44). While media are not the only contemporary sources of symbolic power, they have been often considered to 'stand in' for society and legitimise its dominant discourses. Couldry, for example, has argued that there seems to be a division between the 'media' world and the 'ordinary' world that serves to legitimate the disproportionate concentration of symbolic power in media institutions. This allows for whatever is 'in' the media to be considered more important than what is 'not' in the media and perpetuates what he calls the 'myth of the mediated centre'; a centre that we seem to believe that media institutions 'stand in' or 'speak' for (Couldry 2003).

The notion of the 'myth of the mediated centre' becomes an interesting framework to addressing how in summoning particular communities, media may be seen as speaking for and/or interpellating these communities from and towards a myth or a centre, which may have considerable implications for the ways in which these communities are imagined by their members since 'the capacity of authoritatively applied identification to constitute or influence individual experience affects whether or not individuals internalise the label(s) concerned. This is a matter of whose definition of the situation counts…' (Jenkins 2004, 20-21). In the next

sections, we will discuss how these authoritatively applied identifications are internalised by individuals, largely following Carey's ritual view of communication – a functionalist approach that relegates content to the margins of the study of communicative process and which concerns itself more with the mediation processes or as, Carey (1992) puts it, that deals with the extension of messages in space and the 'maintenance of society in time', a framework that can help explain how identities and communities are constructed, reinforced and maintained.

Lebanon's Media Spaces: The Story of Al Manar
Lebanon is said to have one of the freest media systems and the highest literacy rates in the Arab world despite signs of increasing state repression of the media (Kraidy 2005). This has meant its media space is fragmented, pluralistic, commercialised and characterised by private initiatives, which Dajani (2001) has described as historically lacking professionalism and civic commitment. Even in times of conflict and internal strife, Lebanon's myriad groups had access to diverse media, some of which are illegal, and which have conflictual and competing ideological allegiances and diverse content. In 1995, more than 50 terrestrial television stations and more than a 100 radio stations catered to the country's estimated three million people. The growth of pan-Arab satellite broadcasting in the 1990s exponentially expanded television content, at a lower cost. It has been estimated that following the adoption of the post-war Audiovisual Law in November 1994, there were over 46 'de facto' television stations that had to be shut down. In September 1996, four television stations besides the public broadcaster *Tele Liban*, were licensed according to standards of nepotism and the demographic distribution of the country's main religious sects (see Dajani 2001; Kraidy 2005 for further details).

Hizbullah launched its television station Al Manar (the lighthouse) in 1991, beginning broadcasts from a base in the Harat Hurayk area of the southern suburbs of Beirut. According to one of its founders, Nasser Akhdar[4], for the first five years Al Manar's producers were primarily concerned with transmitting 'the daily realities of the occupation of South Lebanon to Lebanese society and the heroic acts of the resistance to the occupation in an effort to bolster the resilience of the *Community of the Resistance* in Lebanon'. This concern resulted in an output of a variety of low-budget resistance-oriented programming aimed at campaigning for the legitimacy of Hizbullah's operations in South Lebanon and the Western Bekaa and at targeting the greater portion of a Lebanese society that was largely isolated from events in those areas of the country.

In May 2000, the station began satellite transmission. It has since extended its reach to the Arab world and beyond. What has distinguished Al Manar from its

counterparts – it is often listed as one of the top four news stations in the Middle East – is its focus on Hizbullah's resistance operations in the south. Indeed, it is its status as *the channel of the resistance* as well as the intervention by Syria that prompted the Lebanese government to grant it a license as a second 'Shia' station distinct it from *Tele Lumiere*; an unlicensed religious Christian channel that continues to broadcast at the time of writing with 'tacit government approval' (Dajani 2001, 8).

To date, little empirical research has been carried out on Al Manar or its audience, which is not only national, but also regional and transnational – one major, but highly controversial work being Avi Jorisch's study (2004) claiming the station as terrorist and as dangerous to Israel and the US. In terms of funding, it is an open secret that its main income comes from Hizbullah, the small funding from Iran has dropped dramatically and there is little money earned from advertising.[5] Paradoxically, Al Manar's output is not overtly fundamentally religious compared to other religiously-affiliated channels in the Arab world, such as the Saudi Iqra' (read) channel. In fact, its religious identity is often associated with its broadcasting calls to prayer to the wide Muslim nation as well as its extensive and exclusive coverage of Shia religious ceremonies and events.

What is interesting, however, is that its categorisation as a political channel has been associated with its championing a religious and moral discourse – what An Na'im (2006) calls the politics of religion - and its adoption of the notion of the community of resistance. Its discourses of the community of resistance initially referring to the Shiites in the south, but since extended to include the Palestinians and suicide bombers in Palestinian occupied territories and in Iraq[6] and its adoption of the motto *qanat al-muqawama* (the station of the resistance) have earned it a huge following in the Arab world and beyond. Al Manar has continued to promote Hizbullah's culture of resistance, considered an integral aspect of the Party's Iranian-inspired Islamic Sphere in Lebanon, and, which along with its constituent resistance identity and culture, are essential products of Hizbullah's institutions which 'operate today as a holistic and integrated network which produce sets of values and meanings embedded in an interrelated religious and political framework – that of *wilayat al-faqih*[7]' (Harb and Leender 2005).

Akhdar concurs. 'There is no doubt that Al Manar, with the Islamic awakening (renaissance) in the area, has served to increase people's interest in this awakening and has increased their conviction in the usefulness of projects that belong to this Islamic Sphere. The station has been able to formulate a public opinion that in general supports and belongs to this Islamic Sphere through increased enculturation and enlightenment, coupled with an archaeology of our enormous cultural resources, and the re-casting of Islam in a manner that accommodates it to the needs of the age […] Al Manar has a comprehensive view in re-transmitting

Islamic culture in general as a framework for the project of the resistance. So in the end, the resistance belongs to this cultural project'[8].

 That said, we cannot ignore that Al Manar itself is a cultural project, making it necessary to acknowledge the historical emergence of the station, or what Akhdar describes as the 'dialectical relationship (between Al Manar and the cultural context) started with the (historical) act of resistance. With the act of resistance you can produce a media of resistance. After that it becomes a dialectical relationship and they nourish each other. But the act of resistance is the basis.'

The rhetoric of resistance is reflected in Al Manar's references to the grand narratives of Shia history such as the Battle of Kerbala[9], narratives that serve to interpellate all the country's Shia population, as well as other Muslim Shias beyond Lebanon's boundaries, while indirectly excluding members of other religious communities. This rhetoric also serves to link Lebanon's Shias to a greater Shia community that extends beyond the borders and history of the Lebanese state.

With the liberation of the primarily Shia areas of South Lebanon and the Western Bekaa from Israeli occupation in May 2000, it is worth asking how the ideology of the culture of resistance persists and appeals to the young generations of Lebanon's Shias when the focus of their efforts as a community can now be turned towards domestic Lebanese matters? In view of the perspective of resistance identity as countering the legitimising identities in the formulation of Grand Liban, it is also worth asking how young[10] Lebanese Shias perceive themselves and their 'Islamic' community and how they relate their media consumption to these perceptions of sense of self and community, which could help situate their consumption practices in their broad historical and socio-political contexts. Given the fact that the research among Lebanon's young Shiites is ongoing, it would be opportune to say at this stage that the analysis of the interviews with young informants provided below must be seen as indicative rather than conclusive. However, it would be safe to say that the analysis does present some interesting insights into some of the key patterns and themes of identification that may pertain to the larger Shia community, which includes the vehemently secular Shias of Beirut, the pro-Amal Shias and the die-hard, almost forgotten communist Shias.

Religious Commemorations and Identity

Collective memory plays an important role in the shaping of the self-image of nations and communities (Renan 1996; Castells 2004). Stuart Hall (1993) has, too, commented on how 'identity is formed at the unstable point where the stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history' (Hall 1993, 153), which makes it

important to explore how the informants incorporate their imagination of the past in their present sense of identity and to address the role of media representations in these processes. Across the board, the respondents' discourses reflected how Al Manar's narrativisation of religious events compelled them to reflect on their religious identity, reflecting the ways in which mediation processes involve meanings that are circulated beyond the moment of consumption. In talking about their identities, they suggested their imagination of themselves was linked to the ways in which Al Manar assumed its role as the communal voice of the Shias of Lebanon particularly during its coverage and religious programming in the Shia holy months of the year. During Ramadan (the Muslim fasting month), for example, the respondents said they turned to Al Manar only, pointing to the functionalist uses and need of media, such as the need to know what time to break fast in the evenings.

A female respondent in her late 20s said that during Ashura, which marks a period of mourning for the death of Imam Hussein, it is necessary spend more time than usual watching Al Manar. Another respondent who described himself as 'not religious, but not an infidel either', said:

> During Ashura you watch the commemoration ceremony. In the whole year there are these ten days where you have to put everything aside…. Ashura has to be watched. The ceremonies only began to be conducted in this grand manner during the civil war or towards the end of it. In the past, the news of Ashura used to appear in three sentences in the newspaper "today the Shia community commemorates Ashura".

Another respondent concurred: 'During Ramadan I'll watch the channels that have religious programmes and prayers like Al Manar, but mostly Al Manar.'

Significantly, it was in their talk about mediated commemorations of these events that notions of what it means to be a Lebanese Shiite became pronounced. One male participant linked his imagination of Ashura to events in South Lebanon:

> …It makes us have a certain attachment. They (Hizbullah) mobilised us to commemorate these rites because they know that in doing so, we will always remember this event. If I were to compare Ashura with what happened in the south, to the liberation of the south, they have a lot in common. I mean, the person who used to go and fight, knowing that he is the weaker party in military terms, had taken lessons from there, from Ashura. They call this the victory over the sword.

The 'victory of blood over the sword' that the above respondent referred to emphasises the communal rather than the national identity of Hizbullah, but it is ambivalent combination of two forms of identification – religious and national –

that can only make sense if understood within Lebanon's complex confessional paradigm. The emergence of the Lebanese resistance as a Shia resistance, coupled with the relatively recent confessionalisation transformation of this community, as noted in the sections above, has allowed for the construction of a grand narrative that links the history and culture of the previously marginalised Shia community with the history and culture of the Lebanese nation. All respondents talked of, and therefore constructed, their identity in terms of a signature resisting identity - which they expressed either as a 'Shia' or a 'Southerner' or a 'Beiruti Shia from the South'. 'I am happy that I am a southerner and a Shiite. In terms of my lifestyle and my environment, I am really happy and I would say my Shiite identity is the most important because there is life and an afterlife.' (Male, 29)

That said, when asked about their perceptions of what it means to be Shiite, there were differences in defining what this meant. A female respondent (29), for example, situated her imaginations with imaginations of the narratives of the past.

> ….How to explain it….it is a path that emerged after the death of the Imam Ali and Imam Hussein that has a certain ideology and slogans that one commits oneself to. And a person begins to want to live it in all the details of his life.

A male respondent, however, said being Shiite meant abiding by Shiite laws. 'Not to say you're a Shiite and behave like a Druze or a Christian…..'

When pressed to reflect on the meaning of identity, most respondents' accounts were ambivalent, pointing to how the term itself has no corresponding meaning in the Arabic language. The female respondent, for example, defined identity in terms of belief and ideology. 'Well, it is a place…not necessarily a place. Something that you belong to out of conviction. Something that expresses you… and the way you think.' Her husband, however, had different views, linking this to belonging to a community.

> ….Identity is…every person is born in a specific place and feels that he belongs to that community. That is identity: belonging to a certain community… (it is) adhering to certain norms and traditions that emanate from that community.

Interestingly, at the start of the interviewing process and when asked to describe (identify) themselves, all respondents said they were Lebanese as well as Shias, suggesting there was no fundamental conceptual contradiction in their minds between religious, national, local, and other (professional) identities. However, contradictions emerged when asked what being Lebanese means to them. 'Well, it

doesn't mean anything to me, being Lebanese, so I wouldn't know how to answer. It is someone who belongs to Lebanon.'

In addition, some of the informants' talk reflected that identifications cannot be understood out of their political, economic and religious contexts.

> There are Shias in Bahrain, in Iraq, in Iran, in practically every country in the world. What we have in common with these people is Shiism. There is something that brings us together. As for the Lebanese, what we have in common with them is the nation. There are matters that I might live through with a Lebanese that I might not live through with others. It becomes relative, depending on the situation…Let me clarify a bit more. With a Lebanese person, for example, I have economic concerns –whether he's a Maronite or someone from any other community. So we share these concerns with other Lebanese and not with Shias from different countries. Another time, we might be faced with a situation where the Shias of the world are under threat; which is something that unites us with them again. That's what happens.

Discourses of Othering: The Shias as Community of Resistance

Importantly, it was the informants' awareness of perceptions of competing discourses about what it means to be Shiite and what it means to be Lebanese in the media, that discourses of othering became prevalent. The Other in this sense was the Lebanese Other, non-Lebanese others, the US, Israel, Western powers or all of them combined. The informants' imaginations of the 'Other' were apparent in discourses of 'us' and 'them' that came to the fore when they discussed the Lebanese media, particularly LBC1, which they saw as the voice of the Christian Lebanese community.

> Look, a broadcaster can give you an idea of the community. There are certain things that I may have misunderstood that it can clarify. For me, the most important thing is to know their stance towards us. Since LBCI is the station that speaks in their name, it expresses their stances towards us; stances that I sometimes felt were very negative.

Discourses of othering were also evident in their talk of the present or the everyday. Referring to the one-million-man Hizbullah demonstration against the application of UN Resolution 1559 after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, they said the Shias were being provoked by both Lebanese and non-Lebanese opponents and so the protest was needed in order to assert their 'existence'. The terminology used by all respondents in reference to this demonstration was strikingly similar.

In this case, what is clear is that the primary *Lebanese Other* are members of the Maronite Christian community and that the resistance identity was an identity constructed to counter the hegemony of the imposed legitimising identity, that of the Maronite Christians.

> The opposition alliance tried to give the impression that the entire Lebanese population agreed with their (those opposed to Hizbullah) stances. Now these stances are correct in some aspects and incorrect in others but they were trying to say that the entire Lebanese population agreed with them. But that's not true. There are sectors of the Lebanese population with different views; not completely opposing their views, but different in certain respects. So this group needed to tell the world that we also exist….the Shia community is the community of the resistance, it is the community that is…now of course in the past there were other people… but more recently, it has been the community which is the pulse of the resistance. And since the US is threatening the Resistance – irrespective of its sect – then it is threatening the Shia community. The Shia community is threatened.

A related theme was the sense of empowerment that was linked to the notion of resistance. This sense of empowerment was also expressed in respondents' views of their community's dealings with perceived Lebanese and non-Lebanese Others. 'The community of resistance means that there is a certain culture in the society (that was not there before the civil war). Not one of them (the Shias) was ever able to do anything.' This notion of empowerment came across in another interview: 'This is the important question. The resistance has made the Shiite raise his head and say he's proud to be a Shitte. The Shiite now speaks with a strong heart and without fear from anyone. …the resistance has empowered people.'

Media Use; Al Manar and Imagined Identities

In talking about their media use, all the respondents said they engaged with diverse media and even actively sought out various media to see how they are reporting the same event – switching channels is not unusual among Arab audiences. Indeed, an examination of their media consumption practices showed that they used a variety of local, international and transnational media, but that during certain times of the year, particularly during the Islamic holy periods, such as Ramadan[11] and Ashura, their preferred station was Al Manar. However, this preference was also linked to perceptions that this channel was the only medium that represented them and their interests. All respondents also cited Al Manar as a primary source of news about the Shia community, arguing this was not a bad thing because every Lebanese station has its own communitarian agenda and that Lebanese media outlets speak for their respective communities. 'I watch a variety of channels…Al Manar, LCB1, a cocktail really. I'm not really an avid television user. I just turn it

on for the news and then I turn it off. But Al Manar is first because I feel it is my channel.'

Furthermore, their talk suggested that they turned to Al Manar when the news concerned them and their imagined community. This is how one male respondent put this:

> It depends on the news item I am looking for. If the news is about us – the Shias – then I turn to Al Manar because other Lebanese channels are not going to cover it….There are people who are biased. Even in the newspaper that I read, Al Balad, I find that certain writers are biased. There's a sense of sectarian belonging. For example there was a big fight here in Chiah (a Beirut suburb) a few weeks ago; some stations didn't even bother to mention it. If the people who died and were wounded were from their side, they would have raised hell. Only Al Manar covered it.

Another respondent said he turned to Al Manar during times of instability.

> Al Manar represents those who like it (its audience). If anything happens to me, I a sure Al Manar will cover it. Yes, it does represent me, but also whoever belongs to the party. I'm proud of it as something that draws attention to my religion, to my existence as a Shiia living in this country. It is a station that draws attention to us, our objectives, out politics. There is nothing hidden

Significantly, despite referring to Al Manar as their station and the station that supports and reinforces their views as a community, their talk suggested that their identifications and ideologies were linked to the ways in which Al Manar labels itself or discusses them.

> Look, not all your fingers are the same…..you'll find people who pretend they are in the party, but they catcall girls and hang around in nightclubs…But what you see on TV, on Al Manar, the resistance of the fighters, they are the real members, the ones that take the right path. Al Manar lets you know what's really going on in the country.

Indeed, though respondents talked of how Al Manar reinforced the label of resistance and promoted it, most of the respondents said their ideologies were formed through face-to-face meetings with Hizbullah party members in their neighbourhoods. As one respondent starkly puts this point across:

> If someone watches Al Manar, it doesn't mean he is going to become a supporter of the party….It's not Al Manar that makes you support the party or oppose it. Any media outlet speaking in their name is probably informing more than it is proselytising. I don't consider that a person could take one's

views from Al Manar. One takes one's views from one's community, one's environment and then might turn to Al Manar to see what these people are doing. The viewer has to have a certain background and then maybe after watching the station he might get excited but that's as far as it goes.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a historically-contextualised study of the relationship between Al Manar and identity discourses among a preliminary sample of young adult Shias in Lebanon. After establishing Al Manar's role in promoting the Hizbullah-championed ideology of the culture and community of the resistance within a historically-informed perspective, we provided an analysis of semi-structured interviews with a select sample of young adult Lebanese Shias to underscore that processes of mediation do not take place in isolation of historical, political and cultural contexts.

In detailing the confessional nature of Lebanon and its media and through interviewing one of its founders, this chapter has shown how Al Manar has become one of the de facto voices of the Shias in Lebanon, linking its ethos of resistance to that of the wider Shia community. These views were supported by the informants who confirmed that they saw Al Manar as 'the voice' of the Shia community of Lebanon, thus playing a key role in the styles within which this religious community is imagined.

This imagination of this identity, as an imagined community in resistance, this paper has argued, cannot be understood without its historical depth. In the context of the mediation of religious identity, elements are selectively unearthed from the imagined past and integrated in the present to make sense of the present. The informants framed their narratives about themselves in a religious historical context where they drew on a particular view of history and religion rather than multiple histories and trajectories.

Though they did engage with other media, what was relevant to them was the way in which Al Manar perceived and represented them. Through its contextual historical and empirical analysis, this paper has demonstrated that the domestic appeal of this communitarian resistance identity lies in its indirect imagination as resisting the historical marginalisation of the Shias of Lebanon from collective identity-building processes on a national scale. Through an examination of the participants' discourses, it can be said that the relationship between media and identity construction is not a one-way process. What was clear, however, was that mediation processes do activate processes in people's minds whereby the past and the present are mutually invoked to make sense of each other, highlighting the

point that confessional identities are contingent and best understood as historically constructed relations, not as ahistorical, primordial essences. Though the informants' accounts of what it means to be Shiite produced essentialising and othering discourses, these discourses are clearly relational and cannot be isolated from their historical and existential dimensions.

Having underscored some of the historical meta-narratives that underpin the label of *community of the resistance* for Hizbullah's constituency and taking account of the limitations of the current findings, the ongoing research would hope to explore how this new label – and the sense of empowerment it brings – can be used to make a contribution to Lebanese national culture that is inclusive – rather than exclusive – of other religious communities.

Notes
[1] This decreed that the president of Lebanon should be a Maronite and the prime minister a Sunni Muslim.
[2] There are different views, but one interesting view is the one proposed by An-Naim (2006) of religion as socially constructed, dynamic and embedded in socioeconomic and political power relations, always in the particular context of specific religious communities.
[3] This does not mean that both the West and Islam are essentially at odds, but that the modern historical evolution of the West in the form of capitalist modernity put itself in a collision course with the Muslim world, leading to responses taking diverse forms; fanaticism, revivalism, reform, secularism and revolution (Abu Rabi' 2004).
[4] Interview with co-author.
[5] It is alleged that it turns down potential advertisers because of their violation of its standards. It does not accept commercial for alcohol, tobacco or ones in which women are presented as objects for sale or temptation.
[6] Akhdar interview with co-author.
[7] Ayatullah Khomeini's theory of the Rule or Jurisdiction of the Jurist-Theologian
[8] Interview with co-author.
[9] It was the death of the Prophet's grandson –– m the Imam Hussein – in the battle of Kerbala in Iraq that led to the emergence of Shiism as a distinctive sect of Islam. This event is commemorated annually during Ashura; which literally means the tenth day of the month of Muharram.
[10] The co-author conducted semi-structured interview with mainly young adults, meaning in their late 20s.
[11] The holy month of Ramadan for Muslims is the month during which the angel Gabriel first appeared before the Prophet Mohammad with verses from the Holy Koran. Religious obligations during Ramadan involve fasting from dawn till dusk.

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