

THE SYSTEM OF POWER IN THE IRANIAN THEOCRACY

Shiites represent 9% of Muslims and were born out of the schism with the Sunnis. After the death of Prophet Mohamed in 632, his father-in-law and one of his first disciples, Abu Bakr, took over the religious movement. His nomination was not unanimous as some would have preferred Ali ibn Abu Taleb, Mohamed's cousin and husband to his daughter Fatima, instead. Nonetheless, Ali and his followers (known as "Shiat Ali", Ali's Party) accepted Abu Bakr's appointment.

The two following Caliphs, Omar (elected in 634) and Othman (elected in 644) were also appointed unanimously. But when it came to Ali's turn to become a Caliph, Muawiyah, the governor of Syria belonging to the same clan as the late Othman who had just been assassinated, rebelled. There followed a civil war and Ali was killed in Najaf, in Iraq, in 661 making the town a holy site for the Shiites. This is how the so-called line of the four orthodox Caliphs – those elected unanimously – ended.

From that moment onwards, Muawiyah self-proclaimed himself Caliph giving birth to the Omayyad dynasty (661/750), but Ali's followers did not recognize him as being legitimate and split. War continued and Ali's son, imam Husseyn, was also killed in battle in Kerbala (another Shiite holy site) in 680 by the Omayyad army led by Yazid.

The schism between Shiite and Sunnis is not only about who is the legitimate heir to Prophet Mohamed. According to the Sunnis, after Mohamed's death – he is considered the last Prophet ("Seal of the Prophets") – there are no more intermediaries between God and men. This means that his succession will have to be decided through the election of political chiefs (imam) and not on the basis of blood lines or dynasty. The Shiites instead deny these principles and worship their 12 imams celebrating their sanctuaries. This is why they are considered by Sunnis to be idolatrous.

Another characteristic of Shiites is their religious predisposition to martyrdom. It all started with the killing of Husseyn, killed in battle by Yazid's troops (four thousand men against 72 people including women and children). The episode, celebrated during the Shiite ritual of the Ashura (from "ashara", ten, referring to the date of the month of Muharran when the clash took place), has had a strong impact on Shiites whom during the feast self-lash their naked bodies with iron whips.

Even though in Islam the distance between religion and State is definitely evanescent, for Shiites it is virtually non-existent.

THE RELIGIOUS HIERARCHY

Iran, cradle of Shiism, is the only country where the clergy is subject to a hierarchy and/or religious

career dictated by theological studies.

At the bottom of the ladder is the “Talebah” (or Taleban, student) whose studies last four about 20 years at the end of which he has to pass two tests. Those who pass the first one, but not the second, become “Mullahs” and are authorized to lead prayer in the mosque.

The students that pass both exams become “Seghat'olesman” and are allowed to interpret Koranic laws. Becoming a Seghat'olesman also means leaving their theological masters and entering the Shiite clergy and its hierarchy.

The next step, always based on theological knowledge, is to become a “Hojat'oleslam”, allowing for more in-depth theological discussions over the interpretation of the Koran. The Hojat'oleslam is also responsible for assisting the Ayatollah in the application of the theological norms he dictates. Above him stands the “Hojat'oleslam was muslimin” whom, besides assisting the Ayatollah, is also allowed – to some extent – to interpret and dictate theological laws.

The next level are the Ayatollah, who to all effects are theology professors. They research Islamic law, teach, study and interpret both the Shaaria and the sacred books. They play an important role in Iran's social and political life.

However, becoming an Ayatollah is usually considered the top of the ladder, Shiite hierarchy includes three more levels above this one:

- “Ayatollah al Ozma” (“Great Ayatollah”), spiritual leader of a school of thought capable of issuing edicts (“fatwa”) that are binding for believers,
- “Marja al Taqlid” (“Source of imitation”), role models in theology and inspiration for disciples
- “Marja al’a al Taqlid” (“Supreme source of imitation”), is the ultimate degree of the religious hierarchy both in Iran and for Shiites around the world.

Moving up the Shiite clergy is determined by the role played by the individual within his community and by the theological writings and studies he is able to elaborate. It is hence a mix of social and theological consensus allowing the individual a double climb to power: in Shiite clergy and in Iran's political life.

This is now a consolidated assumption in Iran's theocracy and this hierarchical pyramid defines the balance of power.

THE STRUCTURE

Iran's theocracy begins with the fall of the Shah Reza Pahlavi and the return from exile in France of Ayatollah Ruhollah Mostafa Khomeini to Tehran on February 1 1979. Khomeini was an Ayatollah al Ozma, a great Ayatollah, and he was the one who created the system allowing Shiite clergy to rule over Iran and which survives to date. Khomeini died on June 3 1989.

The Iranian theocracy is structured as follows:

- The Supreme Guide, post now held by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is the highest religious (and de facto political) authority in the country overlooking the designation of key positions in the State. The Guide is also the Commander of the Armed Forces and is allowed to declare war or sign peace. The Supreme is at the summit of Iran's political system. He is selected from a list of candidates by another structure:
- The Assembly of Experts (Majlis al Khobregan, article 107 of Iran's Constitution) was founded in 1982 and is composed of 86 religious members renewed every 8 years (the last renewal took place in 2007. The aim is to link its expiration to that of the Parliament. The mandate will be extended to 10 years). The Assembly can nominate the Guide and “virtually” substitute for him. It meets twice a year. The current chairman is Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, elected in March 2011;
- In the management of his authority and for the appointment of key posts, the Supreme Guide is supported by an Expediency Council (“Shura al Tashkhis Maslehat e Nezam”), art. 112 of the Constitution. It has a heterogeneous composition: members appointed by the Supreme Guide (28 people with a 5 year mandate), ex-officio members (top clergy from the Council of Guardians and members of the Council of Chiefs), temporary members (on the basis of the subject: from Ministers to heads of commissions). The Council has a consultative role to the Supreme Guide, but is also called to settle disputes between Parliament and the Council of Guardians on constitutional or national policy issues. Its current secretary is Gen. Mohsen Rezai, former commander of the Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran). Needless to say that both Rezai, Kani and other key officials are politically loyal to Khamenei.
- Another key group is the Council of the Guardians of the Revolution (Shura e Negahban e Mashrutiat). The organism mentioned in art. 91 of the Constitution is tasked with reviewing laws approved by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament) and their conformity with the Constitution and of Islamic norms. The Council has a veto power over candidates to Parliament, government nominations and members of the Assembly of Experts. There are 12 members to the Council, 6 of whom appointed by the Supreme Guide and 6 jurists nominated by the judiciary (who is not independent from the Guide). The clerics rule over conformity with Islamic law, the entire Council debates over the constitutionality of norms. This organism has huge power and can annul parliamentary and presidential elections. Its members are renewed every 3 years on the basis of a rotation system.

This is the basic structure of who holds power in Iran. Everything, directly or indirectly, stems from the decisions taken by the Supreme Guide. In all consultative organisms members of the clergy as Ayatollahs and Hojat'oleslams are prevalent.

One from the top down the Iranian constitutional architecture envisages structures that are similar to those functioning in other countries where, although partially, there is a system of popular suffrage:

- The executive power is held by the President, elected for 4 years through national suffrage and for no more than two consecutive terms (presently it is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad). Since 1989 the President also holds the seat of Prime Minister abolished (this circumstance shows that formally

and informally the office of head of the state goes to Khamenei, not to Ahmadinejad). The President has the power to designate Ministers, to preside the government, to decide on the laws and initiatives that will undergo the approval of Parliament;

- The judicial power, whose designated head is the Supreme Guide (presently Sadeqh Larijani), is comprised of a Supreme Court (whose head is designated directly by the Guide for a five-year term) made up of 32 designated judges – always with the approval of Khamenei – among religious jurists, an office of the general prosecutor, special tribunals (for crimes against the national security) and a special clerical court. Here too the role of the religious guide is predominant;

- The legislative power (i.e. the parliament) is called “Islamic Consultive Assembly” (“Majlis”). It has a single chamber composed of 290 members elected through universal suffrage with a double turn system for a 4-year term on the basis of districts (207 of them) or in representation of minorities. The candidacy of each deputy is subordinated to the approval of the council of the Guardians of the Constitution. The present president of the Assembly, Ali Larijani, is a loyal follower of Khamenei (and brother of Sadeqh, who heads the judicial system, and of Javad, who is a loyal counsellor of Khamenei).

From a close examination of this structure of power it appears that the Supreme Guide's opinion weighs heavily on every aspect of social and political life in Iran. The Iranian system has no balance of powers able to guarantee a democratic model within the theocratic administration.

The doctrine that supports the power structure of Iranian theocracy is that of “Velayat al Fiqh”, which means the adherence of every government act to Shia faith (or rather law) which renders every form of censure applicable. From the theological point of view, this approach is justified by the fact that, while waiting for the 12th Imam (the hidden Imam – the Iranian Shia faith is called “duodeciman” or “imamite” according to further schisms), it is the prerogative of the lawmaker to try to create the social conditions that can facilitate the arrival of the aforementioned Imam.

In the context of the Iranian revolution that has seen this principle introduced with the arrival of Khomeini, the fact that the principle itself did not leave any room for democracy is irrelevant in the eyes of the Shia clerics.

If we were to spell out the names of the two major powers in Iran they would be the Supreme Guide (the predominant one) and the President of the Republic, who finds his strength in the vote cast by the people. However, the power of the Supreme Guide is prevalent. From this dualism of powers, one religious and the other with popular legitimation, there have begun contrasts between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. The first stands on positions of ultra-conservatism, the other has a conservative-populist approach (occasionally the roles are inverted).

This tension will tend to increase in the coming months when the presidential term of Ahmadinejad (according to the Iranian Constitution he could cover a third term in office but not consecutively) will end on June 14, 2013. The struggle to impose Ahmadinejad's own candidate, his daughter-in-law's father Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei (whose daughter married Ahmadinejad's eldest son) has already begun.

Iran's definition of reformist or moderate (as are described figures such as Medhi Kharrubi,

Mohammad Khatami, Mir Hossein Mousavi), traditionalists (ayatollah Mahdavi Kani), conservators (ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi), ultra-conservators, technocrats or pragmatists (as Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has often been dubbed) or others (there are additional factions within these groups) are just words that have no political implications, but rather bring together figures in a fight of power within power. In this game the strength of the main players is dictated by their rank in the Shia hierarchy, by influence peddling – which often means nepotism, by the connection with other powers within the country, like the one represented by the merchants of the bazaar (economic backbone of the country), by the Pasdaran (paramilitary corp of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution) and by the Basiji (another paramilitary corp of young volunteers).

THE SECURITY STRUCTURE THAT UPHOLDS IRANIAN THEOCRACY

When the Shah of Persia was dethroned after the Islamic revolution the hated instrument of repression called Savak ("Sāzemān-e Eṭṭelā' āt Va Amniyat-e Keshvar", "National Organization for security and information") disappeared with him. This organization's goal was the elimination of dissidents through the use of torture, brutal interrogations and abuses of all sorts. Right or wrong as it may be, it was considered to be one of the most feared and efficient organizations of the kind in the Middle East. It carried out secret police operations (internally) and intelligence operations (espionage, counter-espionage, covert operations). Its members were trained by the USA and it represented the main support for the monarchy of Pahlavi until its end.

The flight of the Shah and the arrival in Teheran of the Ayatollah Khomeini had determined the dismantlement of the organization and the banishment or assassination of many of its members (esteemed to be between 3 and 5 thousand) that were hiding throughout the country. Some of them were re-utilized to re-create the new security structure.

The dismantlement of the Savak coincided with the constitution of various government security agencies that in the year 1980 were regrouped under the umbrella of the "Ministry of Information and Security" ("MOIS" or "Sazman e Ettela'at Va Amniat e Melli" - therefore the acronym SAVAMA) that, true to the Savak philosophy, adopted its uses and abuses.

The Ministry is – just as the Savak was – a mix between secret police and intelligence service. Hierarchically speaking, it is under the command of the Supreme Council for National Security (CSSN), a council introduced by the constitutional changes of 1989 (article 176). Until that year the council was named Supreme Council of Defense. The CSSN is presided by the President of the Republic, it has its own secretary general and has an ample jurisdiction (i.e. security policy initiatives regarding the internal, foreign, social, economic and cultural life of the country). However, each one of its decisions was subordinated to the specific approval of the Supreme Guide.

Its composition, apart from the aforementioned President of the Republic and the Secretary General (designated by the Supreme Guide), includes many of the top figures of Iran: the President of parliament, the head of the judicial system, the foreign and interior ministers, the director of the MOIS, the heads of the armed forces (upon call if required), the head of the Council of the Guardians of the Constitution, the minister of Defense, the inter-force chief of staff (aka the head of the Supreme Council for the Command of the Armed Forces), the head of the Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran, upon call), the vice-President of the Republic with duties of economic planning, the minister of energy, the minister of scientific research, the vice-supervisor of supplies, the vice-supervisor for the nuclear program, two counsellors (non necessarily deputies designated by the Supreme Guide), the diplomatic representative for the UN, the first vice-President of the Republic and experts in planning and foreign policy.

If substance, all of the government and military articulations are represented in this organization that not only decides, but coordinated as well. It is not a hazard that the nuclear program – presently the object of external threats – is represented within the organization. The CSSN is comprised of several sub-committees according to the issues. In many cases it operates with a lighter configuration, called the "Council of Security" presided by the President of the Republic and assisted by a limited number of political figures.

However, in the field of security, compared to the other structures, the MOIS is first among equals. Thus, on paper, these structures depend upon the MOIS (or operate in its shadow):

- The internal security service
- The foreign security service named Vevak (Vezerat-e Ettela'at Va Amniyat-e Keshvar)
- The intelligence apparatus of the armed forces
- The intelligence service of the Pasdaran
- The intelligence apparatus of the Al Quds (elite militia of the Pasdaran)
- The intelligence apparatus of hte Basiji (paramilitary volunteer structure)

Apart from its espionage activity, the MOIS' duties comprise counter-espionage, internal and foreign security and other activities that have made its infamous reputation: the organization of terrorist activity, the elimination of dissidents both in Iran and abroad, the exportation (violently or not) of the revolution in other countries. All of the above intelligence structures concur in these last three duties, but the most dedicated and efficient in undoubtedly the Vevak (that's why the MOIS is sometimes mistaken for the Vevak) which, differently from other intelligence agencies, is part of the MOIS structure.

Another MOIS also has duties of “procurement”, that is the acquisition of technology and machinery that is mostly used for the development of the nuclear program and in the missile projects (thus the compendium that there is a responsible for such activity within the CSSN). Presently it is an activity of vital importance for a country that is facing sanctions and boycotting.

The Vevak is thus in the full operative availability of the MOIS, yet the other structures are not. The MOIS only provides coordination for the latter. These structures have, in virtue of the internal political balance, a certain level of independence. For instance, the Pasdaran and the Basiji answer to the orders of the Supreme Guide, not to those of the President of the Republic, who is hierarchically speaking in charge of the MOIS.

The Ministry has its head office in Teheran and has important financial means. It's balance is secreted and the structure can count of approximately 4-6000 men (part of whom are Pasdaran) on the national territory and in structures (diplomatic and non) abroad.

Internally speaking the MOIS also administers a few prisons which it uses for its activity of repression against the opposition.

The MOIS is also in charge of censure, disinformation, ideological training, the control and surveillance of foreign diplomats and the control of offices and government personnel. It also has an intelligence academy and administers all of the offices inside the ministry itself.

THE OTHER SECURITY STRUCTURES

The MOIS is no doubt the main structure – or umbrella organization – on which rests the security of Iran, yet there are other organizations that operate in the same field, both within the coordination of the MOIS and outside of it. In 2005 there was a proposal to unite all Iranian intelligence and security structures in a single structure, yet the project was abandoned for two reasons: the fear (and correlated threat) that too much repressive and authoritarian power may be concentrated in a single organization; the interest of various political lobbies – military and religious – to maintain control over their representing structures. Thus, within the operative hierarchy of security that sees the Vevak and the Pasdaran at its head, there operate a myriad of other structures, sometimes together, sometimes pit against each other.

There is Military Intelligence Service that is under the control of the inter-force chief of staff, through the commanders of the various armed forces. It carries out the same activity carried out by similar structures around the globe: military espionage, security of military structures, counter-espionage activity within military units, procurement of equipment and armaments, control of the air and naval traffic in the areas of operative interest (ex. The Gulf, today Syria, yesterday, Iraq), administration of military attachés abroad.

Then there is the intelligence service of the Revolutionary Guards, a military unit created after the Islamic revolution. The Pasdaran unit (“Sepah and Pasdaran” or “Pāsdārān e Enqelāb”) can count on c.ca 120-140 thousand men and has its own army, navy and aviation. Compared to the other armed forces, the Pasdaran is considered to have a higher level of loyalty to the Iranian regime and especially to the religious hierarchy. It is sometimes described as a sort of religious army. Through their commander, the Pasdaran answer – albeit only virtually – to the inter-force chief of staff. The reality is that they are under the control of the Supreme Guide. According to the constitution (article 150) they are also supposed to act in defense of the revolution. The same is said in the unit's charter from 1980. The Pasdaran control industrial defense structures, preside over the missile program and have become an economic power to be reckoned with, a great power within power.

Apart from their military activity, they encompass other, less orthodox, activities: the fight against opposition and dissidents of the regime and the control over police operations tout court.

There are other security structures within the Interior Ministry (Internal security service) that have become more important after the merger, in 1991, of the 3 pre-existing structures: The Gendarmes, the Police and the Komiteh (acronym for “Revolutionary Islamic Committees”, a structure that supports the revolution and that was founded in the time of Khomeini and ratified by parliament in 1983. The Komiteh was initially created within the Mosques and later authorized to operate in the country like a police force in the fight against drugs, opposition groups and “immoral behavior”, thus being a religious police/militia). The Internal security service, together with the Pasdaran, carries out activities of counter-espionage and control over the diplomatic structures with its own special units.

There are also those within the Foreign Ministry that carry out intelligence activity through the diplomatic network and its foreign ramifications. The Ministry works in close contact with the MOIS, has its own analysis and strategic evaluation structure and occasionally provides support for the operations of other organizations (Pasdaran, Basiji, Al Quds) that wish to operate abroad in

subversive actions or in the hunt (or rather elimination) of dissidents abroad. In substance the Ministry's role is one of support and complicity in favor of other security structures within the confusing mix between diplomatic and intelligence activity that often plagues totalitarian regimes.

There is the intelligence and security structure of the Basiji, that operates on the national territory together with the Pasdaran. Their operative presence is especially strong within universities, in government offices and in Mosques. Seen as the commander of the Basiji is among the closest collaborators of the Supreme Guide, the security and control activity of this structure follows the direct commands of Khamenei. The Basiji was a paramilitary organization that gained international renown through the martyrdom of many youths that were used to clear mined fields in the war against Iraq. It now exists within the framework of the Pasdaran. The Basiji have inherited from the Komiteh their function of religious police in the fight against so-called "immorality". In addition to this they have functions of public order (against demonstrations by the opposition), civil defense, religious indoctrination and repression of dissidents. At the local level the Basiji are commanded by the Shia hierarchy (especially the Mullah) and are comprised, in their activity of control/repression, by distinct cells depending on their jurisdiction: university students, public sector, middle school students, etc.

It is difficult to measure the strength of the Basiji in terms of numbers because together with the volunteers there are the full-time members of the organization and the ones (men and women) that operate within the framework of the Pasdaran. The Iranian regimes emphatically attributes a force of about 13 million affiliates to the Basiji, which equals about 20% of the Iranian population. This is both because these numbers demonstrate a strong consensus for the theocracy and because within the ranks of the Basiji are teachers, students, schools and government employees. The roughness of the Basiji is well documented in reports by Amnesty International that speak of abuses, torture, vanishings, beatings and the likes.

It is finally necessary to include in our count, especially regarding police functions, other structures that operate in the control of the masses. We are speaking of true religious police forces (the Basiji are only partially religious) such as the Sarollah ("the path of Allah"), the Jund Allah ("the soldiers of Allah"), the Ya Zehra (from the name of the Shia meditation techniques).

The Al Quds force, elite unite of the Guardians of the Revolution (Pasdaran) is in practice its armed faction used in operations – sometimes dirty ones – conducted especially abroad. Created for the war in Iraq, the Al Quds have been used as an instrument of expansion of the Iranian policy in crisis zones. It allegedly counts about 12-15 thousand units, presently deployed in many countries as armed support, military consultants and for the training of foreign troops (their presence has been reported in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan and Iraq). Although they are part of the Pasdaran, because of the sensible and dangerous nature of their operations, the Al Quds force has founded its own intelligence service.

Then there are the intelligence services of the armed forces and those of the joint chiefs of staff – commonly called J2 in the international jargon – just like every other country in the world. In Iran they became less important after the destitution of the Shah for whom the armed forces played a vital role. With the advent of Khomeini their role/power was decreased sensibly. This minor role remains such in the present, with their intelligence activity suffering the interference of the Pasdaran, of the Al Quds force and of the Basiji.

AN EVALUATION OF THE SYSTEM

If we count and analyze all of the security structures that work together in supporting the Iranian theocracy we find that there are quite a few of them, each with its operative independence, with different institutional referents, yet all of them with a tendency to report, in most cases, to the Islamic hierarchy. This tendency has been accentuated in time not only to guarantee the power of the Ayatollah, but also to contrast the external threats coming from Israel and, in a hidden form, from the various Sunni regimes of the Gulf. There are thus two specific kinds of threats: internal threat and external threat.

The external threat has made it so that the license to operate on a non-conventional level abroad has been granted to quite a few structures. This could theoretically determine a waste of energies and a lack of coordination. On paper this synergy should be guaranteed by the MOIS, but in fact this doesn't happen because of the political struggle between the main pretenders to the Iranian power: The Supreme Guide Khamenei and the President of the Republic Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. We aren't speaking of a clash between religious and secular power, because this distinction is quite evanescent in today's Iran, but rather of a clash between two figures who are legitimated one by the religious hierarchy and the other by the popular vote.

Control over the security structures is considered an element that allows the two contenders to exercise their political power with more emphasis or, in its negative connotation, to guarantee their political survival. It is in this context that the diatribe between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad over the head of the MOIS, Heydar Moslehi, began. Moslehi was designated by Ahmadinejad in 2009 at the beginning of his second Presidential term and fired by Ahmadinejad in 2011 only to be later re-installed by Khamenei.

Internally speaking Iran's control over the masses is exercised with instruments of repression rather than through consensus. It is for this reason that each of the contenders tends to have his own instrument of control to be used against that of the other.

The proliferation of Iran's security structures leads us to two more considerations: Iran has become a police state, meaning that the regime does not feel solidly at the helm of power.

The Iranian security structures are very efficient in the control of the national territory (even though with brutal methods). On the foreign front it is lacking, as shown by the recent operations conducted on foreign ground (elimination of dissidents, acts of terrorism, infiltration of subversive organizations, arms trafficking, smuggling of missiles, technology procurement for the nuclear program). The counter-espionage activity of the Iranian security structures also appears to be lacking as shown by the myriad of Iranian scientists killed in the past years (Ardeshir Hosseinpou, Massoud Ali Mohammadi, Madjed Shariari, Darious Rezaeineja, Ahmed Rezai, Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, Mohammed Esmail Kosari, General Hassan Teherani) as well as by the flight abroad of important figures (General Ali Reza Asgari, scientist Shahram Amiri who then repented) and by the series of attacks that have damaged military and nuclear installations (missile base south of Teheran, explosive cache of Bidganeh, the uranium conversion plant of Isfahan, a metal factory in Yazd involved in nuclear production and the introduction of malware and spyware in the Iranian nuclear computer system).

THE MANY SOULS OF THE HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah's role in Lebanon and the Middle East is born out of the 1943 political-religious allocation system put in place at the end of the French mandate. The religion based scheme assigns key offices in the State according to the faith: the President of the Republic is a Maronite, the Prime Minister a Sunni, the Parliament Speaker is a Shiite, the Chief of Staffs a Maronite, the government equally representing all creeds, the Parliament with the same share of Christians and Muslims (until 1989 the relationship has been of 6 to 5 in favour of Christians).

Such a system worked and guaranteed peace until 1975. Then problems arose: the arrival of Palestinian refugees chased out of Jordan by King Hussein (Black September), the mutating demography altering 1943's parameters, the social disequilibrium affecting the population, external interference.

The Palestinian issue had a devastating effect on the stability of Lebanon: chased of the West Bank after the 1967 conflict, they landed in Jordan where their armed groups created several problems to the Hashemite kingdom. King Hussein fought them and forced them to flee to Lebanon (with Israeli help that allowed them to transit through the West Bank in order to weaken the so called "Front countries"). The Palestinians settled on Lebanese soil (mainly in the South) and tried to recreate what they had attempted in Jordan: a State within a State. When they started their guerrilla warfare against Israel, the internal and external conflict worsened: the Maronites sided with the Israelis, the Sunnis (and later the Shiites) with the Palestinians.

It is on these basis that civil war broke out in Lebanon and lasted until the 1989 Taif Agreement. A religious based civil war fueled by external actors: the Israelis supporting the Christian militias in the South of Lebanon (Major Haddad and then Col. Lahad), the Syrians initially protecting their expatriates working in the country (where they had been invited by the Christians), but then – following the loss of the Golan heights in 1967 – they put forward the agenda for a Great Syria until the withdrawal of their troops in 2005.

Hezbollah's (from the Arabic "Party of God") history starts during the civil war. They are first a militia and then a party. In the beginning they were in favor of Israel because it fought against the Palestinians. However, following Tel Aviv's occupation of Southern Lebanon (1982), their resentment turned against the foreign occupiers. Their military capacity had been strengthened by Khomeini's Pasdaran – that had taken over power in Tehran in 1979 and preached the fight against the Jews – with training and armament supplies.

Hezbollah was thus born as a secret resistance group. Its chief at the time was Hossein Musawi, an Iranian with ties to the theocracy (he later became a famous reformist) sent to Lebanon by Khomeini. The Party of God was a splinter group of a bigger Shiite organization: the "Harakat Amal", a secular group accused of corruption and siding with the Zionist enemy. Hezbollah's first official document was published in February 1985: "Letter to the oppressed in Lebanon and in the world".

The Taif Agreement stated that all militias operating in Lebanon had to be dissolved and disarmed. But Hezbollah avoided disarming claiming they were a "resistance force" against Israel (as did other groups like Hamas, Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine even though their weapons were "officially" confined inside the refugee camps). Besides not respecting the military side of the Taif deal, they also ignored it politically. The agreement called for the ban of "political sectarianism" which was the core of the confessional agenda of the Party of God.

In 1989 Subhi al Tufaily took over as Secretary General of Hezbollah. In 1991 his post was given to Abbas al Musawi. He was supported by Lebanese cleric Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah even though he proposed a secular vision for Hezbollah opposed to Hassan Nasrallah's radical views. Musawi

had previously been the head of the Security apparatus of Hezbollah's military wing. He supported the fight against Israel by all means: attacks, kidnappings and terrorism. By accepting the Taif agreement, Musawi voted down the creation of a theocracy in Lebanon. Hezbollah's new political approach was supported by then Iranian President Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

On February 16 1992 an Israeli Apache helicopter struck Musawi's convoy in Southern Lebanon killing him, his wife, his 5 year old son and four members of his escort. The killing of Abbas al Musawi paved the way for the rise of Hassan Nasrallah, still at the helm, with the blessing of the Iranian Supreme Guide Khamenei.

MODUS OPERANDI

On the operational level, Hezbollah have since their debut committed acts of terrorism, kidnappings, taken hostages, hijacked airplanes (TWA flight from Athens to Rome in June 1985), carried out suicide attacks against Israel (attack on the Israeli embassy in Argentina in 1992) and of countries perceived as being hostile like France and the United States (car bombs and suicide bombings against French and American troops in October 1983).

At the beginning of the 90's Hezbollah turned to guerrilla warfare against Israel attacking their outposts, launching rockets, detonating car bombs while leaving terrorism to other groups like the Islamic Jihad. Hezbollah's growing military strength was confirmed by the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

On the political level, the birth of the Party of God has created an organization representing the Shiite community in the South of Lebanon (and mainly in the Bekaa valley) and in the outskirts of Beirut. At the same time, it has become the focal point for other groups (Fadlallah's Da'wa, the Association of Lebanese Ulema, Amal). Hezbollah has also dedicated, and still dedicates, its efforts in assisting the population (Lebanese Shiites are amongst the poorest) employing a large number of volunteers: hospitals, clinics, schools for children and disabled, orphanages, school camps, sports, pharmacies, garbage collection, micro-credit and financial support to war victims. These activities were developed thanks to the support of Lebanese Shiites living abroad, by the collection of the "zakat" (charity devolved in favor of the religious community), by money from Syria and Iran.

All of this has gained Hezbollah wide popular support in Lebanon. They have a satellite tv station (Al Manar) on air since 1991, a radio (Al Nur) and several websites fueling prodromes of a State within a State.

THE STRUCTURE

Hezbollah's complex military, political and social activities have lead to an organizational structure that was modified and refined over time.

The heart of the structure is the Consultative Council (Majlis al Shoura) lead by the Secretary General of the Movement, Hassan Nasrallah. This is where all strategic decisions of the Party of God are taken. There is then an "Executive Committee" where all the different branches of the organization are represented (security, military affairs, health, finance, welfare, information, finances, trade). Lastly there is a "Political Office" grouping all Hezbollah elected in the Lebanese Parliament.

A big administrative apparatus supports the Executive Committee in the application of the decisions of the Majlis both at a central and peripheral level. A military command structure (a sort of Chief of Staffs) answers to the "Council of Islamic Resistance" (also known as the Jihad Council).

Overall, the structure of the Hezbollah follows the philosophy of the Iranian theocracy. Likewise,

decisions are mainly taken in the most religious organism of all, the Majlis. There are no feet apart between military and political activity, they go hand in hand.

THE MILITARY CAPACITY

Hezbollah's military apparatus is considered particularly efficient as the recent clashes with Israel have shown. Hassan Nasrallah should take the credit for modernizing the military tool and, at the same time, allowing for meritocracy in the military and security apparatus without religious interference from the clerics (no militia heads are mullahs). Over time both training and logistics (the labyrinth of underground deposits and posts where weapons are cached) have improved.

Hezbollah's military branch is estimated around 2000 men. But this figure should be verified considering that alongside "full time" soldiers there are also volunteers or reservists that can rise the group's strength to 10 thousand men. Hezbollah's pyramidal structure is well disciplined and answers to Nasrallah and the Council for the Jihad.

What has exponentially increased is the quality of the weapons the organization can rely on, especially with regard to missiles (thanks to Iranian supplies) and anti-tank heads. Furthermore, Hezbollah is capable of operating in various military theatres, of supplying military assistance, and of carrying weapons across borders (as the Fajr 5 Iranian missiles that landed in Gaza) giving the group a reputation that goes well beyond the borders of Lebanon.

HEZBOLLAH TODAY

Today, the Party of God is considered a clean organization (as opposed to the rampaging corruption in other Lebanese parties) and the only military force capable of confronting Israel. On the social front they are involved in assisting the poor and reconstruction following Israeli bombardments. All these activities grant Hezbollah the popular support of the Shiites who represent 30% of the Lebanese population.

Yet, there are those who oppose the Party of God in Lebanon: the Sunnis, a good portion of the Christians and the Druses. There are 12 Hezbollah MPs in the Lebanese Parliament out of 27 seats assigned to the Shiites according to the Taif Agreement. Even though they are part of government, Hezbollah are suspected of being, together with Syria, behind several political killings (including the killing of Rafik Hariri in February 2005 by a Shiite kamikaze with ties to Hezbollah and the recent assassination of General Wissam al Hassan).

The killing of Hariri and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon (April 2005) have forced the Party of God into participating directly in the government in Beirut to compensate Damascus' exit. But Hezbollah, as we have said, are facing an internal political front that includes Jumblatt's Druses, Sunni clans and Christian groups. It is not by chance that these are the same groups supporting the Syrian rebels fighting Bashar Assad.

The United States have blacklisted Hezbollah as a terrorist organization since October 8 1997. Regardless of pressure from Israel, Europe (with the sole exception of the Netherlands) has not done so too. The United Kingdom has banned the military wing of the organization, but not its political wing trying to distinguish between the two souls of the Party of God. A distinction that does not exist in reality.

Hezbollah is today facing tough choices to address the instability in the region. Their biggest problem is the crisis in Syria. The historical ties between the Party of God, Tehran and Damascus have forced Hezbollah to side with Syrian loyalists. This is a desperate war, both in military and political terms, that has led the organization to support the authoritarian and repressive regime of Bashar Assad and that could lead to a crisis of consensus in Lebanon.

Today Hezbollah are hence fighting for their survival. If the Alawite regime were to fall, the territorial continuity between Lebanon and Iran would be interrupted, hampering military supplies from Tehran. The Ayatollah regime would turn out to be weaker and this would directly impact Hezbollah in case of a future military clash with Israel. If Assad were to fall, Syrian revanchism over Lebanon with the support of the Party of God would also fall.

Hezbollah's current involvement in Syria and its political difficulties in Lebanon could favor, within the Shiite organization, a further option: terrorism. If this were to happen, it will happen only with the decision of the Majlis al Shoura, but thanks to Iranian instigation.

Hezbollah have recently increased their cooperation with Iran. They have done so by equipping a cyber warfare center in the Dahya neighborhood in the South of Beirut. Part of the organization's security apparatus lead by Wafiq Safa (one of his sons has married Nasrallah's sister), the centre operates with the assistance and under the guidance from Tehran of General Hossein Mahadavi.

The project is part of Iran's priorities to stop Israeli cyber attacks against its nuclear sites and to move from a defensive to an offensive phase (with conspicuous funding to the project estimated around 1 billion dollars). Besides the technical aspects, the event confirms the reliability – and the technical expertise – granted by Hassan Nasrallah's organization to the Ayatollah's regime. The government in Tel Aviv has admitted that, during the recent military operations in Gaza, its institutional websites underwent a huge cyber attack (around 44 million attacks). Even though not officially recognized, most of these attacks came from Beirut.

The recent standoff between Hamas and Israel has also shown how Iranian missiles reached the Gaza Strip with the logistical aid of Hezbollah. This has put the Israeli “Iron Dome” anti-missile system to test. The recent flight over Israel and its shooting down over the Negev desert of a drone from Lebanon has once again seen the involvement of Hezbollah with the support and supply of Iran. Hezbollah used a drone in its war against Israel in 2006. This time the launch of October 6 2012 is part of an Iranian project aimed at developing and improving these aircrafts (mainly the UAV “Ardebil”) that needed a test to assess their operative capability. The drone left Lebanon and entered the Israeli airspace from the sea. The circumstance confirms the unlimited confidence the Iranians have in the Party of God.

It is pretty clear that the only credible and effective military force facing Israel – directly or as a proxy – is Hezbollah and its militias. In April last year Israel has begun constructing a wall along the Lebanese border in the Metulla area in High Galilee. Another border wall will be built, with US aid, in the near future along the Golan Heights.

Rumors – coming mainly from Saudi security forces – claim that there is an ongoing coordination between Hezbollah and the Al Quds Force of the Iranian Pasdaran in supporting Bashar Assad to avoid the fall of the Alawite regime. And even in this hypothetical context there are talks of a return to terrorism. Investigations over recent attacks carried out by the Al Quds Force against Israeli targets (Bangkok, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Kenya) have shown direct links with Hezbollah and/or their logistical support. The chief of the Pasdaran, Iranian General Ali Jafaari, announced in September 2012 that Al Quds' units were deployed in Lebanon.

Another element indicating a return of Hezbollah to a subversive path is the involvement of the organization in the kidnappings of foreigners. From 1982 to 1992 the Party of God was strongly involved in hostage taking to support its military operations and/or political agenda. Over that period of time almost 100 kidnappings took place, one out of four involved US citizens. The recent capture and liberation in December 2012 of NBC journalist Richard Engel in Syria with four other colleagues seems like a resurfacing of old habits. Apparently the kidnapping was carried out by militias trained and/or piloted by Hezbollah with the aim of exchanging the hostages with 4 Iranians

and 2 Lebanese in the hands of the rebels.

Hezbollah's military strength in the war against Israel is definitely one of the elements that has gained the Party of God sympathies and support. Israeli past, and often clumsy, attempts at eliminating its leadership have also helped. Besides from the killing with a car bomb in February 2008 of Imad Maghniyah in Damascus (he was the military chief of the organization, post now occupied by Wafiq Safa), the Israelis have always failed to kill Hassan Nasrallah. They tried to bomb the buildings where he was thought to be in 2006 (as the former Israeli Chief of Staffs Dan Halutz has admitted). In 2008 a failed attempt to poison Nasrallah was also foiled. Similar failures involved attacks against Fadlallah in March 1985 and in 2006.

The Party of God has publicly declared the one of its primary objectives is the elimination of Israel. This is not only political rhetoric, but a growing menace for Israel fueled by news of Hezbollah militants protecting chemical weapons stocks in Syria. The issue is not what the Party of God has been in the past, but what it could become in the future following events in Syria and, on a wider scale, in the Middle East.