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Hizbullah's Ashura: The Ethics of Identity

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This is the occasion, this is the remembrance, this is the event (Hassan Nasrallah)

Introduction

At the beginning of the Islamic year, the first ten days of the month of Muharram, Shi'i Muslims commemorate the battle of Karbala. This battle that took place in 680 AD symbolizes for Shi'i Muslims the grave injustice done to the family of the prophet: during the battle, Imam Husayn, the son of the daughter of the prophet, Fatima, and Imam Ali, is killed along with his companions and family members. Sunni Muslims although acknowledging that an injustice was committed in this battle, do not commemorate this event as a ritual, marking it as a founding moment for the existence of the Shi'i community. Ashura (from the word *'āsher*, ten, in Arabic) has been commemorated in many different ways across time, region, and historical contexts.

The present work aims to shed light on one particular practice of Ashura, that of the Lebanese armed political movement¹ Hizbullah. The reason for this is that Hizbullah's Ashura can help us to understand better the relationship between the religious and the political and how these terms are constantly contested and reworked, a thematic grid so crucial to our understanding of contemporary Political Islam². One of the highlights of Hizbullah's Ashura commemorations are the speeches of its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, a speech that stands apart from the his many speeches given at other commemorations and events occurring throughout the year.

Since the July 2006 war in Lebanon, that pitted Israel against Hizbullah's Islamic Resistance, Nasrallah has been confined to appearing through a television screen when he delivers his

¹ I am indebted to Adham Saouli for finding the best working label for Hizbullah.

² This paper is a sequel to my previous work on the ideology of the party, a cultural production that I have proposed to call the Politics of Remembrance, as I argued that Hizbullah's understanding of its political environment and its capability to plan its political future has much less to do with a developed theoretically informed political worldview and much more to do with a process of writing history and relating to the past in several ways. See Bashir Saade, *Hizbullah and the Politics of Remembrance: Writing the Lebanese Nation* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

speeches. Nasrallah began delivering speeches in the early 1980s when he was barely in his twenties and he has become famous throughout the region of the Middle East for his oratory skills, not just because of his charismatic persona but because of his concise, logical, and orderly structure, yet arguably because of the accuracy of his statements that distance him from the prevalent tradition in Arabic oration that privileges rhetoric at the expense of real, practical implications. Nasrallah's speeches have already attracted the attention of scholars, and a few studies have been published, some by editors sympathetic to the party³, as well as a few written in the English language⁴.

In this article, although I will study the structure of Nasrallah's speeches I will also attempt to account for, firstly, the various performative implications of these speeches, secondly, how they are a symptom of a more general ideological production of the party that is conducive to collective militant action, and third, how they are embedded in a more general ritualistic practice that both rearticulates and fuses together the religious and the political. For David Kertzer, rituals produce symbolic power that is not just a by-product of otherwise material or realist interests but are at the heart of what politics is, and the *raison d'être* of social movements and organizations⁵. The symbolic material dichotomy here is put into question. Ideology provides political vision without which action is severely impaired, if not impossible. Yet it is not just ideology as a discursive production that is at stake but the states of consciousness it aims to foster, that renders collective action effective. Kertzer himself observed how Italian communists espoused Christian rituals such as Easter in order to produce social mobilization in a way that fused Christian and Communist "identity"⁶.

In effect, Hizbullah's Ashura, and specifically through the speeches of Nasrallah, aim at linking identity formation, namely a sense of belonging to a community, to the cultivation of certain set of skills or ethics. It addresses several audiences; the two most important of which are Hizbullah military and other party members, and the community of Hizbullah at large. Again, Ashura is interesting because within Islamic traditions it is a specifically Shi'i commemoration, and although it fosters a sense of communitarian belonging, it also claims that the story and lessons of Imam al-Husayn should have universal resonance. As we shall see in this essay, identity formation is subservient to the cultivation of ethics and specific skills conducive to social and militant action. In the case of Hizbullah, a sense of belonging brings the community together in order to have a common objective in facing the enemy.

Religion and politics here cease to be separate phenomena. This is not just to say that there is no "religious experience" that is isolated from other social and political phenomena, but that the very understanding of the former varies radically over time, so much so that it becomes questionable that there is such a thing as Religion that can ever be analytically

³ For example, see Ali Majed, *Al Khitab `inda Al Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah* (Beirut: Dar Al maaref Al hikmah, 2006).

⁴ A collection of Nasrallah's selected speeches has been published in English. See Nicholas Noe, *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah* (London: Verso, 2007). For an interesting paper on the structure of the speech, see El Mustapha Lahlali, "Repetition and Ideology in Nasrallah's Political Speeches," *Arab Media & Society* 15 (2012).

⁵ D.I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁶ D.I. Kertzer, *Comrades and Christians: Religion and Political Struggle in Communist Italy* (Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, 1980).

separated from other spheres of human life and experience. Since the rise of the secular state in the last two centuries, Religion has been studied in relation to politics or society rather as being suffused into these seemingly separate spheres of life⁷. These conceptual articulations are the product of ideological struggles in the West that lead to the “formation of the secular” as a separate set of sensitivities and epistemologies⁸. One key question to ask: is there a concept of religion that exists at least theoretically outside institutional forces?⁹ I would not go as far as some to suggest that there is no such thing as religion¹⁰, mostly because social and political actors still identify to such conceptualizations, as well as the scholarly community, but the idea is to critically engage in this blurring of conceptual boundaries in order to understand how religion is constantly reinvented while embedded in the various other fields of the human condition.

In effect, Hizbullah’s Ashura is not simply an attempt by a political organization to use a religious commemoration in order to advance certain political goals. Although it is definitely the case that the ritual has enabled the organization to mobilize people for a variety of purposes, Hizbullah’s Ashura signals an excellent example of the blurry boundaries of categories of the religious and the political. Nasrallah invites the listener in Ashura to engage in a “spiritual exercise” to use the expression of the French philosopher Pierre Hadot, “a practice that is destined to operate a radical change of the self”¹¹. This process involves the cultivation of a knowledge that is conducive to a quality of living, a “savoir-vivre”. It aims at producing the right state of consciousness, most specifically the skills of firmness and decisiveness – *hazm* and *‘azm* are the words Nasrallah most often uses – in order for the various social actors involved to engage in certain actions.

Yet, these exercises are not just “spiritual” in the modern sense of the term, as located in a transformation of the self, but involves first a process of relationality that moves the center of focus to the social sphere, and second one of authority which moves it again to the political sphere. The model elaborated by Michel Foucault (within his notion of “care of the self”)¹², Hadot and others are interesting in reclaiming a lost tradition of linking philosophy or reason to a “spiritual” practice, but they still bring this connection back to a “care of the self” rather than observing more generally the fusion of the political and the religious, how questions of authority, power, social order, community formation and mobilization, etc belong to both conceptual realms. In fact, as soon as the self is not the locus of attention and relationality, the group or the political community is put into question: Foucault’s

⁷ Talal Asad’s thesis that Religion as belief and practices is historically Western one is instrumental in that regard. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993).

⁸ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁹ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 60, <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195385045.001.0001/acprof-9780195385045>.

¹⁰ Timothy Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (London: Routledge, 2014).

¹¹ Pierre Hadot, *Qu’est-Ce Que La Philosophie Antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 271.

¹² Michel Foucault, *Histoire de La Sexualité : Tome 3, Le Souci de Soi* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984).

overarching conceptual workaround is that of “power” as a multipurpose concept which explains these relations and the transformations undergone¹³.

Before examining the details of my argument, I will outline how Ashura and the changes undergone in this ritual practice has been studied and understood in scholarly literature, then I will provide a slightly different take on the matter or at least highlight unexplored areas of Hizbullah’s Ashura.

Ashura then & now

One central argument on modern Ashura is from Lara Deeb, who claimed that the way modern Islamists re-articulated the ritual was to move its understanding from a “traditionalist” to a “modern” or “rationalist” epistemology. So for example, after 9 days of *majlis ‘aza*, mourning reunions where a qualified speaker retells, sings and at times sobs and cries the story of the killing of Husayn, his family, and his companions, traditional commemorations of the ritual culminate with processions on the tenth day with occasionally mourners spilling their own blood by wounding slightly the top of their head. Many twentieth century clerics, reject or strongly condemn such practices as “backward” or simply not necessary to mourn the battle of Karbala. Deeb proposes the term “authenticated” to label the modernist approach because of the participants claims that they are looking for what they perceive to be a more “correct” version of practice, more attuned with an intellectual effort at making sense with the social and political purposes and ‘reason’ behind the use of such practices and in line with the ruling of qualified contemporary legal experts.

Yet the resilience of some inhabitants of the Lebanese town of Nabatieh to commemorate the tenth day by spilling blood has been a primary focus of scholars and the media at large¹⁴. The sensationalist and gruesome image of blood flowing has helped disseminate a contrast between this highly emotional and seemingly irrational practice and the more “rationalized” toned down version that has been sponsored by Hizbullah and Amal supporters which consists in just beating rhythmically a hand on one’s chest and walking in a very orderly and gender separated procession (whereas in the traditional model, women did not take part in the procession and men mostly walked without the overarching organizational clout that Hizbullah or other political parties provide for the ritual).

Indeed, other scholars who tried to understand modern political Islam have theorized about a “secularized” political Islam, or a political Islam that is mostly concerned by “worldly” matters¹⁵. Notwithstanding the fact that there are many brands of political Islam with radically different political agendas, I am here just trying to address a seeming trend in contemporary scholarship to look at these movements through particular conceptual

¹³ For an interesting rebuttal to this porous notion of power, see Neil Brenner, “Foucault’s New Functionalism,” *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994): 679–709.

¹⁴ For a recent study, see Norton, A. Ashura in Nabatieh, in Peter J. Chelkowski, ed., *Eternal Performance: Taziyah and Other Shiite Rituals* (Greenford: Seagull, 2010).

¹⁵ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford university press, 2003).

binaries that can be informative to a certain extent but need to be transcended. Deeb's analysis is pertinent and draws from her fieldwork with Hizbullah supporters and sympathizers who voice their relation with Islam and the practice of the ritual in such a way. But it is important to reflect on this particular use of term. What is being meant by "rational" as opposed to "emotional" or "modern" as opposed to "traditional"? To use Edith Szanto's formulation: "this binary... simultaneously depoliticizes salvation and desacralizes revolution"¹⁶. And while I agree with Szanto when she says that there is a need for an "analytic focus on affect, rather than political effectiveness"¹⁷, I would even argue that a focus on affect feeds into political effectiveness and broadens our understanding of the political in the way reason and emotion are inextricably entangled.

Deeb acknowledges that Hizbullah is different from the more extreme authentication wave that is expressed by Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah a notorious Iraqi Lebanese cleric who becomes one of the main source of emulation for Shi'i Muslims¹⁸. In this vein, Hizbullah supporters critique Fadlallah of "overintellectualizing"¹⁹. For Deeb, in the case of Hizbullah, "[t]he energy and emotive power located in the commemoration were redirected and focused onto a shared set of goals"²⁰. While this is certainly pertinent, I would like to explore more this link between "energy and emotive power" with a "redirected and focused... shared set of goals". My overarching purpose here is to question whether the emotion/reason binary is analytically useful. Granted that supporters use it but is it to be taken as self-explanatory? Also, what is the relation between this conceptual binary and the other one of religion and politics?

It is true that there has been a radical change in the way the Ashura ritual has been practiced, and the literature on the subject traces it throughout the twentieth century. But can we then use these terms in turn as categories of analysis? Clearly, what is meant by these terms vary across historical, social and political contexts, including how these terms are used in academia, in great part due to a modern epistemology reaching out from the Age of Enlightenment philosophers to the rise of the social sciences that has favored other binaries of the same sort, such as religion and secularism, object and subject, theory vs reality etc.²¹ In brief, there is something quite emotional about this invocation of reason and something rational about how emotions are deployed. And in effect, when scrutinizing Nasrallah's speech, and this seems to be the function of political speeches par excellence, this reasoning that takes place within an emotional state of being is key to understanding the Husayni position, or *mawqef*.

¹⁶ Edith Szanto, "Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 78.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁸ L. Deeb, "Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning Transformed to Sacrifice," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 1 (2005): 130.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

²¹ For an insightful critique of this conceptual binary in the social sciences, see Andrew Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). And for the link between modernity as an era with its specific epistemology and the theory reality duality see T. Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," in *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1–34.

Indeed, although Nasrallah at one level articulates a very “worldly” dimension of Ashura through his party’s understanding of military action for example, it is also connected to a much more important “other worldly” purpose. If anything, it is the confrontation of death in the battlefield, or in the experience of occupation that forced a rethinking of other-worldly concerns. While it is possible to follow what some cynics have asserted that Hizbullah emulating the actions of Husayn in Karbala and cultivating a connection with and love of the afterlife has been instrumental for very worldly concerns of recruiting and conducting successful military operations, it is also possible to view this culture as inculcating a specific way of living-in-this-world by meditating on a possible other life.

The other focus of the literature on Ashura, is how the commemoration of the ritual has moved from being quietist to politically active, militant, or even “revolutionary”. While it is true that Hizbullah, and a few preceding political movements such as Amal – even the Lebanese Communist Party for that matter²² - have turned Ashura into a platform to organize demonstrations, and political rallies, little exploration has been done to understand how these terms clarify the importance of religious practice in relation to organizational building and social change. Indeed, Ashura has always been a “rallying” ritual in the sense of being paradigmatic to reaffirming community belonging and cohesion, a process which in itself irremediably involves political questions²³. Although the rupture is well spotted, albeit voiced by the protagonists themselves, there was a tendency to forget about how much this new “politicized” Ashura is not only hugely indebted to the quietist or traditional one, but actually builds on the same techniques, as will be seen in the below, while producing small innovations. In effect, I argue that there is a need to take the modernist Ashura more seriously as a re-articulation of the religious in changing contexts.

Ultimately, there is a need to understand politics as envisioned through a the cultivation of a consciousness of history as an intimate daily relation with space and time. These are at the heart of what could be labeled as, for lack of a better term, new religiosities, or in this case new “spiritual” articulations. By spiritual, I would propose the conceptual shortcut of “state of consciousness” in the Marxist tradition, which involves an acute awareness of one’s place in a community and the material conditions that shapes it, a link that seems to have been severed in Foucault’s later work on sexuality and cultivations of the self. New religiosities are products of profound social and political changes. The reworking of the ritual to suit new historical realities, in which Shi’i clerics from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon found themselves drawn to resort to political action. The gradual social change brought about the creation of states in the region, upsetting the cozy relationship between a rich landowning class and a relatively isolated and protected clerical establishment²⁴.

²² Rula Jurdi Abisaab and Malek Abisaab, *The Shi’ites of Lebanon: Modernism, Communism, and Hizbullah’s Islamists* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

²³ See for example, the letters of South of Lebanon prominent cleric Abd al-Husayn Sharafeddin who opposed French colonial power in the turn of the twentieth century and was in favor of a larger Arab state. His passages on Ashura are symptomatic of this.

²⁴ *Ibid.*,

Hizbullah's Ashura, a few remarks

Just like all other prominent clerics related to Hizbullah, Nasrallah has given a speech during the Ashura ritual ever since the formation of the party. Political speeches during Ashura are an innovation given that the typical way of gathering during commemorations were the *majlis 'aza* in which qualified storytellers remembered in great minute details the battle of Karbala. As Deeb notes, an authenticated *majlis* would involve “longer sermon and more [emotionally] restrained narration of the events of Karbala”, mostly used to “teach religious, social, and political lessons”²⁵. An extension to this would be the sermon-like speeches which blends religious motifs with political analyses and ethical lessons. It sounds more like a conference lecture or seminar rather than an ‘artistic’ performance, for lack of a better term. While Ashura has often been used as a platform to express certain community concerns, the political speech during Hizbullah’s Ashura has become a cornerstone of the commemoration and due to the latter’s sophisticated organizational capacity it has pushed the structuring of commemorations to unprecedented levels.

It is important to note that Hizbullah’s Ashura in structure does not differ from regular commemorations that take place in a *husayniya*, which is a simple room usually adjacent to a mosque used for all kinds of Shi’i gatherings, except for its impressively disciplined and orderly execution. One of the main locations where Hizbullah supporters commemorate Ashura is *Mujama’ al Shuhadā*, which is a very large hall that basically works as a *husayniya* and from which most televised appearances take place on Hizbullah’s related TV channel, *Al Manar*. While *husayniyas* are not organically or officially controlled by political parties like Hizbullah or Amal, one interesting innovation in Hizbullah’s Ashura is the setting of an overarching slogan that the party would disseminate amongst those locations that would inform the *majalis*. The slogan is usually taken from Husayn or other Imams sayings. For example one recurring slogan is the now famous *hayhāt minna al-zulla*, which literally translates as “away from us oppression” a sentence known to have been uttered by Imam Husayn after gathering his supporters ahead of the Karbala battle. In effect, Amal has also been setting a slogan too and some clashes have occurred such as the present year (2016) where Hizbullah had chosen a slogan that was used by Amal the previous year (*nufūsun abiyatun*) and after intense negotiations opted to settle for *sabrun wa nasrun*²⁶.

The slogan novelty is I think crucial not just in understanding how the ritual has become organized by an institution, but also as a prelude to the *mawqef husayni* (The Husayni stand) for Ashura on a particular year that Nasrallah would so eloquently and dramatically map out on the tenth day. The *mawqef* exemplifies how both reason and emotions are blurred in its deployment. This *mawqef*, in emulating Husayn’s decision to fight and be martyred in Karbala is supposed to help distinguish what is right from what is wrong, *al haq minal batel*. At the risk of simplifying here, Husayn’s martyrdom is but a living example of this distinction. And every successive commemoration of the ritual, year after year, is the practice of rendering conscious this distinction but mapping it in current social, moral, political, etc., pressing issues.

²⁵ Deeb, “Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning Transformed to Sacrifice,” 126.

²⁶ Anonymous Ashura participant, Interview with the author, Sept 2016.

On the tenth day, when the procession takes place, Hizbullah and its scouts, *kashāfat al mahdi*, deploy an impressive and colorful array of men and women brandishing flags of the party or with Ashura slogans, to the extent that the main entrance roads of the Southern Suburbs of Beirut are closed during the procession. These processions are simultaneously happening in the rest of the country wherever Hizbullah has a political presence. During the first nine days, a typical Ashura day, while people listen to the above *majlis*, they also listen to *nadbiyāt* or *latmiyāt* which consist of poems and chants to the Imam Husayn and, typically in those recordings, the sound of a rhythmic beat, supposed to mimic the beating of a hand on one's heart, and which is supposed to be done as a group. While in family houses, people would just listen to the *nadbiyāt*, Hizbullah's organized Ashura, which happens in the Husayniyya or in the *mujama' al shuhada* in Dahyeh, can be broadcasted live on TV. So that a typical Hizbullah managed Ashura involves speeches from prominent members in the party, including Nasrallah almost every other day, a *majlis*, and then *nadbiyāt*.

Notably enough, because speeches or sometimes lectures are distinct from the *majlis* and do involve a blend of social, political and religious discussions drawn from the battle of Karbala, the prophet's legacy and that of the Imams especially al-Husayn, the *majlis*, which has specific qualified people to conduct it, reverts to being solely focused on raw storytelling to move people to cry. In the latter case, the stories of the Karbala event are so detailed that some have qualified certain "readers" (*qāre'*) of not being credible, if not boring²⁷. In effect, some of Hizbullah's sponsored Ashura seem to be considered slightly less 'rational' or less 'making sense' for a crowd in quest of 'authentication' as a source of emotional stimuli. Of course people should not be thought of as two distinct groups but rather as individually different in sensitivities.

In the midst of this, Nasrallah's Ashura speeches are part and parcel of Hizbullah's Ashura. It should be understood as one part of the overall framework and the fact that it is followed by a *majlis* and then by the more "physical" interaction of the *nadbiyāt* has, intended or not, the consequence of privileging a more classical *majlis*. The speech fuses reasoning and affect in a powerful mix. The *majlis* comes to crystallize what has started in the speech, and these emotions are put to communal action during the *nadbiyāt*.

The Ashura speech of Hassan Nasrallah

Nasrallah typically speaks on the third, seventh, ninth and tenth days of Ashura. These speeches are slightly different from his usual political ones in content but similar in structure as they are still argumentative lectures with key points usually announced at the beginning. The difference only resides on the choice of theme which involves Islamic ethics and commentaries on stories and events that happened mostly around the Karbala incident but also other prophet related events. Especially in the first three days, the tone remains mostly calm, Nasrallah has a clear outline with a core set of concepts he wants to discuss. A favorite, and a recurrent theme is asceticism (*zuhd*), which, if properly practiced, leads to a

²⁷ This is drawn from discussions with anonymous participants in Ashura commemorations.

consciousness and belief of the afterlife (*imān fi al-ākhirā*) and a capacity to detach from this worldly one (*dunya*). There is a great description of what *dunya* and its illusory privileges are, all the things one fights for in life such as money, family, work ambitions, power etc.

For Nasrallah these are all linked to the satisfaction of desires and instincts that we all have, and yet these are the same individually or collectively centered desires and instincts that lead people to “steal, cheat, do injustice, oppress, and enslave” (kitāb ‘āshūrā’, 225). This is a great example of the direct link Nasrallah relentlessly makes between self-realization and the possibility of social justice, an instance of the link between the religious and the political here, between individual, collectivity, and virtuous community.

Nasrallah is keen on repetitively pointing out that detachment from this life, which usually involves a constant meditation on death, does not mean inaction in society. Rather, detachment leads to a certain awareness that informs the actions we undertake. These actions are not solely aimed at preparing one to face the possibility of death, but to provide a method to reach happiness in this life. Thus it is clear that for Nasrallah the adept, whoever he/she is, cultivates a state of being-in-action in the present through this reflection on death and the afterlife. To illustrate for Nasrallah, “the person (*insān*) who thinks of death, he is the one who possesses an open heart to life (*dunya*) and afterlife (*ākhirā*) on the *mulk* and *malakūt* and all that exists (al wujūd)” (khitāb āshūrā, 91). And yet Nasrallahs discredits senseless death, for example, in an early speech, he was commenting on suicide attack operations in the following manner: “not every one who kills himself thinks of death in this way” (Ibid,.). Strikingly, this is very much echoed almost ten years later, in Nasrallah’s assessment of “takfiri” movements, Sunni radical organizations, engaging in such attacks.

The relationship between asceticism, detachment from worldly affairs and meditation on death is a constant in all spiritual practices across time and place. The ethical work Nasrallah proposes in his various speeches throughout the years all feed into this same logic. In this sense, what Nasrallah develops here is not new to what we call a religious tradition. Yet it is the particular way in which “reason” is used through the medium of the speech and how it produces a certain set of sensitivities and dispositions in an audience that is at stake here. In line with what has been argued so far, Nasrallah works on changing a specific state of consciousness, that is spiritual (in the sense of “of the spirit”) and reaching through reason to untapped affects that are conducive to different forms of political? actions.

Although the many passages devoted to *zuhd* and meditation on death and afterlife in Nasrallah’s Ashura speeches (that may have well triggered the media campaign that dubbed such ideological production a “culture of death” by Hizbullah’s political opponent in Lebanon), are aimed at disciplining everyday life, they also feed into informing understanding of *jihād* and *shahāda*. This remembrance where meditation on death brings actual triumph in this life is central to the resistance as a military project; “we don’t remember *aba ‘abdellāh al-husayn ‘alayhi-s-salām* and Karbala only when martyrs of the Resistance fall, we also remember him when we take over hills and plant our weapons in the highest peaks” (khitāb āshūrā, 257). Countless times, Nasrallah describes every detail of the experience of the combatant through a direct link to a remembrance act, to actions

undertaken by Imam Husayn or others like him that were present during at the battle of Karbala.

Leadership and the hierarchy of knowledge

A recurrent theme in Nasrallah's Ashura speeches is the importance of the leader, whose authority rests solely on a type of knowledge that only he possesses. For Nasrallah, people have different types of knowledge according to the skills they develop due to their position in the community. Knowledge is here squarely equated with skills echoing with Aristotelian and Platonic Greek philosophical articulations. Political knowledge/skill is not given to "everyone from this community". It is worth pausing here to consider the relationship between knowledge and skills. For Nasrallah, knowledge-come-skills involves "the realization of a problem or to look into a political issue" (*khitāb ashurā'*, 109). This notion of political knowledge while highly polyvalent leads to an understanding of leadership that spreads across a hierarchical understanding of community. The Leader can refer to the *wāli*, and the latter can be the Imam, such Husayn himself, and it can be the now famous *wāli al-faqīh*. Yet this political knowledge relates to the cultivation of ethics mentioned above and thus involves not just some intellectual analysis but a specific virtuous condition or state of consciousness that depends on the contexts in which each social actor is embedded.

The story goes as follows. Husayn during his lifetime was *wāli al amr*. He was succeeded by his son 'Ali, known as *zayn al 'abideen* (the ornament of the worshippers) as he was known for his piety. In turn the latter was succeeded by his son, and so on until one reaches the twelfth descendant of the daughter of the prophet, Imam al-Mahdi who disappears (*ghayba*) and is expected to return. Each one of these imams were *walis* in their own time. But after the disappearance of Imam al Mahdi, what gradually becomes the Shi'i tradition is split over the question of the proper *wāli'*, where the classical position has been that in the absence al-Mahdi, there is no *wāli* and therefore the twelver Shi'i community is mostly "quietist". With Khomeini's juridical innovation that a jurist could assume the position of *Wali al faqih* (literally: the rulership of the Jurist), and which is now held by Ali Khamenei, for Shi'i individuals and groups who accept this rule, Khamenei is considered *wāli al amr* at least until the return of Imam al-Mahdi.

This doctrine no matter how it is lived or practiced, at the very least creates a clear understanding of lines of authority, and thus of politics. In Nasrallah's speeches, this doctrine permits a constant timeless connection between Imam Husayn as an authoritative figure and the various authoritative figures today, whether it is Khamenei, or even Nasrallah himself. For example, the 2014 slogan, for Ashura was *labayk* (literally translated as at your command) which, as I said, like all these slogans are drawn from *ahl al-bayt*, the family of the Prophet hadith literature. While *labayka ya husayn* is a clear reference to a rallying cry to husayn, crowds have always cheered Nasrallah in the same way, scolding *labayka ya nasrullāh* whenever he appears to give a speech.

Husayn as *wāli al amr* just like Imam al Mahdi is also called *baqiyatullāh* (*khitāb 'āshūrā'*, 111) which literally translates as "rest of God", signaling the central importance of the imams in the Shi'i tradition. For Nasrallah, it is this single instance that makes the killing of Husayn a central event in the formation of the prophet or Islamic legacy and not just an

allegory for understanding more general issues of social justice. But away from inspecting the intentional extensions of these beliefs, crucial here is the time continuum that links communities in a vertical relationship from past, present, to future around a form of knowledge that remains hidden. It is in the interstices of *ghayb* (the hidden), of the mystery of the form of knowledge imam have that one witnesses another instance of politics and religion fusing, through the meeting *'aql* and *qalb*.

Indeed, another important dimension of this hierarchy of knowledge is the notion of *'ālam al ghayb*, the unseen world. *Ghayb* is not just the notion that there are things we don't know or that one's spiritual ranking determines the type of knowledge that is manifest to him. *Ghayb* also presupposes a specific notion of time. As Nasrallah argues, although we don't know *ghayb*, it is still transmitted in one way or another, as if woven into acts of reporting and of narrating. And where *shahāda* is testifying, *ghayb* begins. *Shahāda*, the act of testifying of a cause, a legacy, or a (noble) rationale of action and which is the lot of martyrs can be grasped by the common mortals, where as *ghayba* is built-in knowledge in sheer prophetic revelation or in the living embodiment of imams. Indeed only prophets bring clarity and meaning to what is otherwise hidden. Humans can only tell the story of these actions that were first rendered clear by prophets or imams, what Nasrallah calls "*al ikhbār bel ghayb... mā lā nashhaduhu, mā lā nuhītu bihi*", telling about the hidden, what we haven't witnessed, what we did not surround ourselves with (Nasrallah Ashura speech, 10th day, 2006).

This is important for the present purpose because of this interplay between reason and emotions that is manifest in imagining the presence of *ghayb*, understanding prophecies and trusting the messenger, especially the last imam, Mahdi, who is always there but in a parallel dimension and is expected to return. Nasrallah mentions that *ghayb* is related to the notion of *wahi*, intuition, which is an attribute of prophecy. This type of knowledge almost springs from nowhere from within if not from the heart. To this effect Nasrallah quotes a few Ayas of surat *al najm*, *innahu wahyun yuha*, and *ma kazzaba-l-fouad mā yara* (Ibid.). In effect, in the Qur'anic tradition the siege of reason or *'aql* is the heart (*qalb*, or *fuād*). Here reason is once more, not just instrumental intellectual reason, but self-encompassingly and intuitively emotionally laden.

The power of story-telling and the narrative form

More generally, Nasrallah's Ashura speeches are built to bring about a certain form of knowledge that cannot be deduced just from discursive articulations even if it is suggested through speech form. But Nasrallah can merely suggest that this form of knowledge exists. There are two consequences to this phenomenon. First because not every form of knowledge from events and actions can be fully grasped, storytelling is the best medium to remember an event as it carries some built-in knowledge. The motives behind Husayn's decision to go to Karbala and die as a martyr is not fully understandable to the common mortal (*khitāb āshūra*, 140), The story is a reservoir of layers of lessons that resonate in different ways according to the various states of consciousness cultivated. Second, this narrative aspect of knowledge invites the listener to trust and rally to a specific cause while

partly understanding the reasons behind action and partly trusting the motives of respectable actors such as Imams, leaders, etc.

In Nasrallah speeches, argumentation suffuses storytelling in order to make a powerful link between affect and rationales of action. Indeed, the myriad of events taking place before, during and after the battle of Karbala fosters a consciousness of history that does not just occupies the past but very much the present and anticipates the always arriving future. Hizbullah's politics of remembrance involves an interplay of temporalities where history has already been written and where the past is always instantiated. *Ghayb* is a crucial notion here as through the actions of prophets and imams this hidden knowledge simply hangs between past, present and future (Ibid.).

Although one cannot understand all the factors that led Husayn to leave Mecca and die resisting Yazid's forces in Karbala, for Nasrallah, it was not just the fight against oppression or for social justice that was at stake but the very legacy of the prophet, the very preservation of Islam as a tradition of practices. The link here between identity and ethics is here at its best. In this vein, those who stood by al-Husayn were not just "followers", but were fully "conscious" (*wā'yin*) of what they were doing, and they fought for long years alongside his father, Ali (Ibid., 175). This is a clear allusion to the rationale that drives today's fighters to join the Islamic Resistance. The parallel between the Husayni movement and the Islamic Resistance is here again at play and Nasrallah constantly shifts between both temporalities at various moments of his speech. Same for Islamic resistance fighters who are fighting the Israeli, to liberating a territory because preserving a specific legacy that transcends the protection of land but involves the upholding of a whole set of values.

Khurūj and the physicality of action

The relation between upholding Islamic values and esoteric knowledge is manifested by a meditation on the reasons of Husayn's decision to go to Karbala and die as a martyr. This action is usually referred to as the "going out" of Husayn or *khurūj al-husayn*. If Husayn's *hijra* was aimed at protecting Islamic values and the legacy of the prophet (Ibid., 193), Nasrallah often repeats that it is not entirely clear for human cognition why he decides to leave the comfort of Mecca where he was performing Hajj and go to Karbala. Nasrallah's speeches stress time and time again this action of going by not just mentioning its story but by carefully dissecting new aspects of the story constantly emerging according to the context and argumentation, and by trying to extirpate different types of wisdom from it. This is the only way to grasp the ever vanishing nature of "identity". Nasrallah, time and time again links this question "What is the wisdom of *khuruj al-husayn*" (Ibid., 128) to an answer: "In this [Husayn's] stand, the Islamic Resistance is like Karbala" (Ibid., 132). It is not just a set of ethics that is learned from Husayn's decision to face the oppressor, to not prioritize idle piety (for example performing the hajj) and stand by what social or political justice means in different historical contexts, but also what is at stake here is the physicality of going out, which is what the 10th day procession of the ritual is partly about.

The physical nature of the *khurūj* in Nasrallah's speech is of paramount importance. The audience is constantly called to relive the conditions of travel of Husayn, and then his

encirclement in Karbala, the thirst he experienced in the middle of the desert, and so on. The wisdom here is suffused in the experience of being ready to leave, as if to take arms or at least in some social or political action that shakes us from the daily routine. It is in sense the type of states of consciousness and mode of action that Nasrallah wants to cultivate are as much military as they are religious, so much so that a clear distinction of these is useless, or at least analytically poor. A very recurring and important theme, the courage of the Husayn, is mostly understood through his stubborn stand despite all the odds. This was important because as Husayn knew fully well that he was going to die, what triumphed is the preservation of the Islamic tradition. The “believer’s” resistance of Hizbullah works in the same way. It understands the magnitude of the task in the real world, but *faith* comes from the *rational* certitude that the notion of resistance will be preserved and eventually triumph against the Israeli enemy. The interplay of trusting, rallying to the cause of Husayn or resistance, and yet being fully conscious of the consequence of one’s action even if this involved dying, is at its best here.

In effect, the ultimate test, the impetus for action is triggered by Nasrallah’s haunting question: “Are we going to leave husayn alone?” (Ashura 2013, 13-11-2013, day 9). The climax of several days of Ashura is reached on the 9th day when Nasrallah pushes his audience to choose this path that he gradually constructed through discussions of history, ethical principles upheld and political analyses, but boiling it down to a simple form of human allegiance. In effect, the highly analytical style of Nasrallah has charged an emotional rallying to the cause. The crowd becomes “the supporters of Husayn, ansār al-husayn” (Ashura 2013 day 10, 14-11-2013) and they are constantly interpellated with these terms all throughout the speeches. The rallying cry to Husayn as a impetus for community cohesion ties into another strong trigger of this, which a clear sense of leadership. To most of these heightened moments in Nasrallah’s speeches, the crowd cheers: “labayka ya Husayn, labayka ya Nasrallah”, at your command oh Husayn, at your command Nasrallah (Ashura 2013, 10th day). Lastly, the physicality of the images Nasrallah sometimes uses are striking: “The one who backs down is like the one who leaves the Husayn in the middle of the night (Ashura 2015, 9th day). Or the saying of Zuhair Bin Yaqin, one of Husayn’s companion when the latter tells his followers to abandon him because there is no escape from death, Zuhair answer, “If I wanted to be killed, then burnt, then [my ashes] spread into the air, even if they do this one thousand times, I won’t leave you oh Husayn”²⁸.

The *mawqef* and the clarity of action

The rallying cry, scanded time and time again is substantiated by what could well be the most important purpose of Hizbullah’s Ashura. On the 9th day, Nasrallah usually opens up with the objective of *hasm al mawqef*, determining the stand where “we distinguish our line (*khattuna*), our path (*tariquna*), our camp (*mu’askarina*)” (khitāb ‘āshūrā’, 95). This is the culmination of the Ashura ritual. The *majāles*, *nadbiyāt*, the listening to sermons and speeches of the preceding nine days all feed into giving clarity to the *mawqef*. The latter has already been insinuated by the overarching annual slogan. Even more so, Nasrallah’s speech

²⁸ There are many versions to this hadith depending on the various Shi’i sources, but this is the one Nasrallah always uses. It is also attributed to other companions such as Sa’id Bin ‘Abdallah al Najafi.

on the 9th day elaborates the “reasoning” behind the *mawqef*. But the 10th day, shortly before the public “outdoor” procession starts, Nasrallah reiterates the Mawqef in a briefer fashion to remind the listeners of last night’s speech.

“On this night, we need to make a pact with al-Husayn, and vow allegiance to him” (khitāb ‘āshūrā’, p.94). This declaration of utmost fidelity is not just intellectual; it involves a holistic disposition to act as a community in sharply demarcating right from wrong. And right is illustrated by those who “went out” like Husayn, and rallied to his cause. The cause here is not only understood theoretically, say Israeli or the US is an oppressor because of a general theory of oppression, but also because it fits a possible story which *operationalizes* it. The narrative property of the story renders manifest *al haq*. The act of wanting to rally to the cause of al-Husayn, understanding his plight and the righteousness of his cause, helps understand the cause of the Islamic Resistance as it keeps both, and other struggles throughout history, contextual rather than involving absolute and abstract definitions of what is oppression.

Indeed, all the argumentative and narrative elements I have discussed so far feeds into the clarity of the *mawqef*. It was the relentless studying of *khurūj al husayn* that led to this mawqef. This is not just a rational decision (as we understand reason) but a heightened state of consciousness that involved argumentation, meditation, tapping into various emotions, the cultivation of all types of ethics such as humility, courage, trust, etc. It is also the moment when an intellectual inquiry turns into an embodied action. The binary of right and wrong, of with or against Husayn, of accepting or dismissing, gradually intensifies as Nasrallah draws a shrewd political analysis of the contemporary condition while punctuating with sayings of Husayn or his son Ali. It is then only understandable that Nasrallah’s speech is usually followed by collective *latmiyāt* that acts as an extension to the emotional outburst of the speech.

The last three years and the thin line between ethics and identity

What has been discussed in the preceding runs across more than a decade of Ashura ceremonies. I have looked at Nasrallah speeches from the mid 1990s until today. While there is a clear constancy in the structure of Nasrallah’s speech and the development of the Ashura ritual when managed by Hizbullah, the last three years, especially since Hizbullah’s military intervention in Syria, has seen a notable change in tone as the main enemy fought in Syria were the various radical sunni militant organizations present there. The shift from the Israeli to the Takfiri involves significant implications. Of course, Nasrallah is keen to point out that Israel remains the primary enemy and beyond that the United states and its various proxies in the Middle East. In fact his *mawqef* of the last three years provides for a clear link between these various political actors down to Takfiri organizations. Yet the rise of this new enemy transforms the relation between ethics and identity that I have outlined so far. For one thing, Israelis never targeted Shi’ism per se while Takfiris do.

I have shown that in his speeches and through the Ashura ritual as a whole, Nasrallah develops a notion of identity that is conducive to ethical practices namely that of building a strong, united community rallied around a common project. Strong identity involves here

not just effective resistance but also the cultivation of ethics of brotherly relations which in turn feeds into a collective self-assurance that is open to other groups in Lebanon and beyond²⁹. One way this sense of belonging to a community that preserves a long-held tradition was nurtured, at least in these speeches, was through utmost loyalty. In the 1990s the enemy was not just the Israeli army but those who could weaken and fragment the community from within, such as collaborators. Echoing this concern throughout the 1990s Nasrallah comes back to this through the Ashura speeches by stressing the fact that Husayn was not killed in Syria where he was not followed to start with but in Iraq, by those who had pledged allegiance to his father. Those who killed Husayn in Karbala were from Kufa, the land who were mostly sympathetic to the family of the prophet, “they knew the haq”. Nasrallah is explicit in this, “they were friends of his father and friends of his brothers, people in his army” (khitāb ‘āshūrā’, 17).

In the later fight against the “takfiri” movements, Nasrallah will reiterate this quest, but in this case, in an attempt to defend the the legacy of the prophet against an enemy that targets the legitimacy of Hizbullah to uphold the tradition the latter strived to cultivate for the past two decades. Sunni radical militant organizations share ideological affinities with Wahhabism and other Salafi movement that disseminate anti-Shi’i sentiments. In 2013, Nasrallah proclaimed on the 9th day, “Tomorrow on the 10th day, it will be different from all previous years, because we are going out (*khurūj*) on Ashura in a completely different situation”. And on the tenth day, Nasrallah for the first time in years of confinement behind a TV screen, made a public appearance in the middle of Dahyeh to “renew our bay’a, our vow of allegiance, to Sayyid al mujāhidīn, Abi Abdellāh al Husayn”. The intensity of the crowd reached a paroxysm because of the physical presence of their long absent leader and in subsequent years, Nasrallah only appeared in public during the last two Ashura speeches he gave.

While in Ashura in 2013, the mawqef was announced in a cooperative way that “the takfiri problem is one for all Muslims, it targets everyone, Muslims and Christian and other, irrespective of creed, as long as one disagrees with them, but if we cooperate we can solve this problem”. In 2015, in a dithyrambic speech on the ninth day, Nasrallah differentiated between *haq* (right) and *bātel* (wrong), by pointing to US foreign policy in the Middle East as the source of all problems, driving Saudi Arabia in an all out confrontation with Iran, and as the main ideological repository of Salafi thinking which leads certain individuals to join these radical militant groups such as ISIS and Jubhat al Nusra. On the tenth day, after a harsh condemnation of Saudi politics in Yemen and in Syria, again punctuated by references to Husayn’s legacy in Karbala, and in completely unprecedented fashion, a group of people standing towards the front of the podium from where Nasrallah was giving his speech, gave their pledge of allegiance, to Nasrallah and to Khamenei (a practice that so far has been done during military practice):

Send your blessings to Mohammad and the family of Muhammad, O' Sayyed son of
Al Husayn, we are the Sons of Khomeini, and we have pledged our allegiance to Ali
Khamenei, O' Sayyed Son of Muhammad, these shrouds stand as witness
We wear the shrouds of sacrifice for Ali Khamenei, we are the defenders of Lady

²⁹ I have explored in detail Hizbullah’s outlook on “the other” in *Hizbullah’s Politics of Remembrance*.

Zainab. We will only see the beauty of God's acts, a promise from the god of the heavens to Ali Khamenei, this is the complete story, we are the devoted adherents of *al-wilāya*, And we conclude with a prayer for Ali Khamenei, God is Great, we reject humiliation.”

The rise of this new enemy changes the performative role of identity and redraws the type of religio-political dynamics at play. If as Aurelie Daher would say “Hizbullah’s Islam” is subservient to the imperative of military resistance³⁰, maybe one can add that it is military practices in its delineation of an enemy, in grouping people into a way of life and with the potential to mobilize for collective purposes that produce new forms of piety. It is also the case that most nationalisms led to such mobilization strategies whether in development, state formation or military formation. Instead of studying Hizbullah's Islam in light of nationalist movements, we need to reverse our attention to Hizbullah's legacy and what it does teach us about the “spiritual” nature of nationalism. We haven’t given sufficient attention to the way nationalism affects states of consciousness, consciousness as a living process that cannot be clearly separated into terms such as the “religious” or the “political”, separating reason from emotion, but also how such forms of belonging can shift in its dynamics depending on the contexts in which it operates.

³⁰ Aurélie Daher, *Le Hezbollah : Mobilisation et pouvoir* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France - PUF, 2014).