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## **“The Name of the Enemy”: the Representation of Foreign Fighters (Hezbollah and Al Qaeda) in the Speech of the Syrian Opposition (2011-2013)**

A discourse analysis

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# "The Name of the Enemy": the Representation of Foreign Fighters (Hezbollah and Al Qaeda) in the Speech of the Syrian Opposition (2011-2013)

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## Introduction: #Halech vs. #Daesh in Syria

- <sup>1</sup> The social network *Twitter* in 2014, received a new hashtag in Arabic, #Halech<sup>1</sup>. Acronym for "Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Levant", this pun draws a parallel between the presence in Syria of Hezbollah and the "Da'esh", the *Islamic State of Iraq and Sham* (ISIS), that is Al Qaeda.
- <sup>2</sup> The authors by this analogy intend to denounce both the practices of Sunni jihadists and those of another "face of terrorism" (Harik, 2006), that of Shiite militias (Lebanese, Iraqi and Iranians) who came to lend a hand to the Bashar al-Assad regime.
- <sup>3</sup> Since 2013, the systematic use of these foreign soldiers on the frontline in the battle was accompanied by the emergence of a popular resolutely identitarian and violently anti-Shiite discourse hitherto unprecedented in Syria. This article, from a paper presented in English at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HUI) and in French at Sciences Po (Menton campus), analyses the representations of these paramilitary units by the Syrian opposition<sup>2</sup>, by studying the speeches on this "new enemy" (*'udû*) and on their place in the collective imagination of Syrians fighting against the regime. This paper will rely in that purpose on a set of semi-structured interviews<sup>3</sup> conducted at the Lebanese-and Turkish-Syrian borders, and on the systematic compilation of materials from the *Tansiqiyyât*<sup>4</sup>.

## "Sûriyah Al Muhtalah"<sup>5</sup>: an overview of the Shiite militia forces in Syria

### The symbolism of the battle of Qussayr (April-June 2013)

- 4 On 25 May 2013<sup>6</sup>, Hassan Nasrallah<sup>7</sup> in a long speech officially recognised the involvement of the military branch of the Lebanese Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict. For the first time since the beginning of the revolution, a regional political actor publicly mentioned its *direct* military support to the Bashar al-Assad regime.
- 5 The speech of the Shiite party leader was broadcast at the dawn of the battle of Al Qussayr<sup>8</sup> (May – June 2013), where thousands of militias took part in the repressions led by the regime. Hezbollah's decisive war effort helped the Syrian government recapture the city from the opposition fighters<sup>9</sup>.
- 6 In this case, in the last days of the battle, fighting was fully carried out and coordinated by Hezbollah. Operating autonomously, the Shiite party gradually replaced the Syrian army:  

Hezbollah's entry into Qussayr was progressive, and not sudden. In the last month, 85% of the fighters were from Hezbollah, and 15% from the Syrian army. Then, in the last ten days of the battle, 100% of the fighters were from Hezbollah, we did not see a single Syrian soldier<sup>10</sup>.
- 7 Within a few weeks, 3,000 Hezbollah men were deployed to address the difficulties of the regime by holding ground against the Syrian insurgents and containing the daily flood of defections within the Army.
- 8 Hence, faced with a considerable operational requirement and the need to win a major and symbolic victory, the Syrian regime<sup>11</sup> decided to solicit the help of the Shiite party. Massively deployed to Qussayr, the Hezbollah fighters were thus able to reverse the balance of power, initially in favour of the Syrian opposition, before expelling them as well as hundreds of residents of the small town now occupied.
- 9 As such, the capture of Qussayr marked a real *turning point* in the Syrian conflict, as mentioned by the FSA spokesman:  

What is unacceptable is the interference [*tadâkhul*] of Hezbollah, which is now controlling [*saytarah*] Qussayr. [...] Hezbollah soldiers were the ones searching houses, handling the artillery, heavy weapons and even the tanks. [...] And in the end, the villagers were expelled by Shiite militias; that's why they hate Hezbollah. They did not only help in the fighting, they expelled the inhabitants of the town.
- 10 Thus, the loss of the town was doubly symbolic: firstly, the blitzkrieg of Hezbollah and the successive bombings helped the regime to recapture the whole territory from the opposition fighters. Held since the spring of 2012, the stronghold of Qussayr fell in barely three weeks, becoming one of the first major defeats of the opposition. However, this would not have happened without the decisive intervention fighters from the Shiite party.
- 11 Then, for the first time since the beginning of the revolution, civilians saw their city occupied by foreign militias, thereby reinforcing the sense of "injustice" (*zulm*) of the conflict. The latter was obviously spread through social networks and the flood of videos showing the exile of the inhabitants of Qussayr or glorifying the action of the Shiite party.

For example, in this excerpt<sup>12</sup> several militias, singing a military song wave a black flag in the colours of Imam Hussein<sup>13</sup>, then hang it at the top of a mosque of the town, marking their victory in the city and sacred places.

- 12 Hence, what is emphasized here is the occupation of this town by a foreign group, the Hezbollah and not the loss of Qussayr.

### The "occupation forces": an indicative prosopography of foreign combat troops in Syria

- 13 Mapping out precisely the additional non-native units of the regime is a complex exercise. As an introductory remark, it should be recalled that since the battle of Al Qussayr (spring of 2013), the "Assadist Army" (*Al Jaysh Al âssâdî*) seemed to rely on the systematic use of military and paramilitary forces or foreign militia to suppress the revolution.
- 14 However, these fighters looked increasingly less like auxiliaries, but more like real proxy *micro*-armies. In fact, the decision to export these troops primarily responded to the need to address the strategic and tactical shortcomings of the Syrian armed forces, which were poorly trained, poorly equipped, and seemed to have completely fallen apart over the past three years. With the exception of the notorious 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Republican Guard (RG), which remained loyal to the regime and remained operational, the rest of the army was plagued with defections (up to 80% in some units), killed and wounded soldiers. Furthermore, the armed forces were characterized by a chronic lack of experience and an almost non-existent operational maintenance: since 1982 (during the Lebanon war), Syrian soldiers had not fired a single shot.
- 15 Therefore, the massive importation of foreign militias was adopted to respond to the disintegration of the Syrian army, with each of the concerned forces having their own motivations:
- 16 - *The Lebanese Hezbollah*: about 2,000 militias were currently in Syria (with peaks at 3,000 or possibly 4,000 depending on the operational imperatives), implementing a counter-insurgency know-how patiently acquired during the past decades, especially against Israel. Hezbollah was at the forefront of the battle, sometimes taking the place of the Syrian army vertically and horizontally, as was the case in Qussayr and now Aleppo. Officially, the party provided material and logistic support to Lebanese at the borders, helped Syrian refugees, guarded sacred sites (the Sayyida Zaynab mausoleum, in the Damascus *rif*, especially) and protected the religious minorities they considered as threatened<sup>14</sup>. However, the massive involvement of the Shiite party clearly seemed to meet the need to preserve the Bashar al-Assad regime, a historical ally.
- 17 - *The Guardians of the Iranian revolution*: concerning the Pasdarans, the equipment available for then was extremely limited. So far, only the British channel *BBC* succeeded, in the summer of 2013, to obtain a video showing a group of fighters of the *Al Quds*<sup>15</sup> force in the field<sup>16</sup>. Contrasting with the image of a massively deployed Hezbollah, it shows some atomized elements of the Iranian Special Forces, moving from town to town, following orders and offering training or advice to regime forces (elite corps of the Syrian Army, *hezbollahis* militias or Yemenis). Occasionally these wandering Iranian servicemen fought against the opposition.
- In all, several hundreds of Iranian military advisers were reportedly deployed to the

Syrian territory, near sensitive strategic sites and also in Shiite-concentrated localities (for example, Latakia).

- 18 - *Iraqi forces*: Iraq was represented by the Abu Al Fadl Al Abbas brigades and the Mahdi Army. It is very difficult to precisely quantify their militia strength, but it seems that several thousands of fighters crossed the Iraqi-Syrian border in recent months. The brigades (*Katâ'ib*) defended the holy shrines of Shiite Islam, especially the Sayyidah Zaynab mausoleum (alongside Hezbollah), the Umayyads and Aleppo mosques, the *Krak des Chevaliers* and the city of Bosra Sham, stronghold of a medium-sized Shiite community.
- 19 In all, between 8,000 and 10,000 foreign fighters fought in Syria on behalf of the regime. Mainly Iraqi and Lebanese, these privates, trained and heavily equipped rotated in and out (*back-to-back*), bringing the operational reserve to 30,000, or about twice more than the foreign fighters (jihadists) of the opposition<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, the presence of some Yemeni (*houthis*), Afghan and Pakistani soldiers can also be emphasized.

## "The name of Satan": the Shiite threat through the prism of the Syrian narrative

### The "Rafidi party": a look at Hezbollah representations by the Syrian communities in exile

- 20 You must first *name* your enemy (*udû*) before representing him. Among the many nicknames attributed to Hezbollah by opposition fighters, the "Party of God" (*Hizb 'Allah*) became for example the "The Party of Satan" (*Hizb Al Shaytan*). This 180 degrees semantic shift follows a plural sense: firstly, it allowed the revolutionaries to personify the ills they faced. In their eyes, *Shaytan* embodied absolute evil, which should be fought against for religious and even humanitarian imperatives:  

Hezbollah is the enemy. They participate in the fightings, they help the regime [*Nizâm*], and they kill, as Bashar, is actually doing. They are called the Party of God. But who are they to call themselves thus? They are nobodies; they are the enemy, the enemy indeed, that's why they are called the Party of Satan.
- 21 The party of "God" has become that of "Satan" in order to delegitimize its name. This is what Youssef Al Qaradawi explains in a video posted in May 2013 on the social network *Youtube*. For the Sunni preacher, Hezbollah has no right to be called "God" because in killing Muslims, they are in fact drifting away from God<sup>18</sup>. It can legitimately be described as the *alter ego* of God, *Al Shaytan*. The party leader is also not spared by this term because Nasrallah (literally, the "victory of God") is transformed to *Nasr Al Shaytan* (and therefore, the "victory of Satan").
- 22 In Qaradawi's speech, the reference to Satan is in no way surprising and is in line with certain continuity. In fact, since the beginning of the war in Iraq, there was a tendency amongst the *Salafi-Jihadis* movements to lash out against Hezbollah and, in general, against the Twelver Shiiism (Paz, 2004). Hassan Nasrallah has moreover, for several years now, been one of the priority targets of jihadist forums, probably due to his growing popularity amongst the Sunni population, especially since the "victory" of 2006<sup>19</sup>. The Hezbollah leader is in turn called "traitor" (*khâ'in*) or "Jew" (*yahûd*), depending on the degree of antipathy expressed. Therefore, qualifying Hezbollah as "Shaytan" is not

original and is still rooted in the readings and discursive practices of jihadists. The novelty of the Syrian conflict resides in the fact that, henceforth, this criticism with very strong religious undertones is shared by a majority of people who do not have any links with the Salafi movement.

- 23 For example, an insurgent confessed to the author that it was mere a play on words, a linguistic transformation that was "logically imposed" in response to the participation of party activists in the atrocities committed by the regime. According to him, these atrocities can be termed as "eerie". As such, the Shiite party or the Syrian military were no longer simple fighters but structures "personifying evil and dedicated to evil" (Messadié, 1994). In the face of a spiral of barbarism, Syrians were then seeking for a religious explanation, transforming the revolution into a struggle between Good (*khayr*) and Evil (*shir*).

### **"The camp of freedom and the camp of death": dissemination and politicization of popular anti-Shiite rhetoric**

- 24 Since 2013, Syrian popular discourse on Hezbollah has gradually shifted to the articulation of essentialist violent indictments against the Twelver and Alawite Shiisms, generally supported by elements of a shared history.
- 25 For example, refugees are a constant reminder of the memory of 2006. During the "33 days"<sup>20</sup> war, several tens of thousands of Lebanese were "welcomed" in Syria, most of the time in private homes. Moreover, the Syrian Government provided supplies and logistics to the military wing of Hezbollah; without the unwavering support of Damascus, it is likely that the outcome of the war would not have been the same. And yet, Hezbollah's entry into the war in Syria led many Syrians to lump together the Shiite political movement and its supporters, thereby recalling the events of 2006:
- In 2006, the Shiites came to our country. We welcomed them; my aunt housed an entire family all through the war. They got along well, there were no problems. And now, this is how they thank us: by killing us?
- 26 In Shaheen's approach, the Lebanese Shiites accommodated by his aunt were invariably the same people, currently supporting Hezbollah's military action in Syria or directly involved in it whereas they should be grateful for the kindness received during the summer of 2006. Here, it is not a matter of denouncing the participation of the Shiite party in the fightings with the FSA or Islamist militias, but how Syrian refugees were received across the border and comparing with the summer of 2006.
- 27 In addition, videos of inhumane and degrading acts were regularly seen and heard by Syrians, fuelling the idea of a natural "cruelty" of the Lebanese Shiites vis-à-vis refugees settled in the southern suburbs of Beirut. For example, the video of a forced tattooing of a young Syrian by *qabadayat*<sup>21</sup> of the Dahiyeh<sup>22</sup> really created a lasting impression on people's minds<sup>23</sup>. Similarly, refugees were often attacked by the Lebanese, heightening the feeling of insecurity at the border and the perception of a Lebanese hostility vis-à-vis Syrian presence.
- 28 The speeches of political or military elites of the so-called 'moderate' opposition were fuelled by some form of ambiguity on Hezbollah. Live on *Al Jazirah*, the colonel-doctor Abdel Hamid Zakarayah, then spokesman of the chief of staff of the FSA, was asked to

react to an opinion poll revealing that for 72.9% of persons interviewed<sup>24</sup>, "Hezbollah had become an enemy in the eyes of the majority of Arabs and Muslims"<sup>25</sup>:

The party of Satan is lost. First and foremost, I do not want anyone to understand my words as a sectarian or ideological war. My words here are only intended to rally [yuhashidu] people against the killings [qatala], they are directed to the Sunnis, the Shiites or the Alawis. Iran and Hezbollah do not represent the Shiites, but they represent the killings. [...] We do not know anything about faiths in Syria. There are only two camps in Syria: those who want freedom and dignity, and those in the death camp<sup>26</sup>.

- 29 Apparently, colonel Zakaryah seems to ward off the temptation of falling into the sectarian trap set by the regime. In downplaying the "ideological" stake of the clashes and denying to lump together Hezbollah, Iran and Shiism, this FSA spokesman seemed to be looking for ways to debunk the popular myth of a "Shiite" oppression. However, his introductory remarks actually refer to the djinn (*Hizb Al Shaytan*). Although apparently rhetorical, this reasoning however has strong religious undertone on the opposition, widely conveyed by the popular imagination, between "Good" and "Evil". Broadly speaking, it plays on the widespread representation of a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites.
- 30 Finally, the distinction between the camps of freedom and death is presented as a policy, opposing two categories of actors. In reality, it is highly symbolic but particularly ambiguous. By borrowing from the sectarian (*Tâ'ifi*) vocabulary, the spokesman makes allusion here to something very serious, implicitly echoing the religious affiliation of the actors accused.

## Beyond the Lebanese Hezbollah: the denunciation of a transnational Shiite "conspiracy"

- 31 In the rhetoric of the Syrian opposition, the deployment of foreign Shiite fighters also fuelled the theory of a "conspiracy" (*mu'amarah*), with the aim of controlling Syria and depriving it of its religious identity. Faced with the sectarian homogeneity of their new occupants, Syrians thus evoked the "Shiite Crescent" as a theoretical framework of the conflict. According to Ibrahim:

The conflict in Syria is a revolution that is linked to a Shiite conspiracy. Look at what is happening: Syria is no longer only for Syrians, it hosts all the armies of the region. You have the Lebanese of Hezbollah, Iranians, and Iraqi militias. And all are Shiites. They do not want to lose Syria, and for them this is important. Behind it, is a large Persian project designed by [Nouri Al] Maliki, Ayatollah [Khomeini], and Nasrallah, who is the worst of all.

- 32 The "Persian Project" (*al-mashrû' al-fârsî*)<sup>27</sup> refers to, as Legrain (2009) mentions, "the dynasty at the beginning of 16<sup>th</sup> century, forcefully imposed by the Twelver Shiism in Iran hitherto Sunni"<sup>28</sup>. By mentioning this project, Ibrahim's imagination implicitly denounces a project to convert (*tadâkhul*) Syria to Shiism.
- 33 However, if the religious aspect does offer a secondary frame of reference, his remarks should primarily be analysed in his political representation. Moments after this assertion on the "Persian project", one of the Ibrahim's friends noted that "Hezbollah, Iran and Russia" were taking control (*akhada al saytarah*) of the Syrian State apparatus:  
It is known [*maarouf*] that the Syrian army no longer controls anything. May be even [Bashar al-] Assad himself no longer gives orders to anyone. Everywhere,



Iranians, Russians and *Hezbollahis* have taken over control of the administration. Each Alawite political leader has an adviser who tells him what to do exactly. As for the Army, it no longer does anything, it obeys the orders of Hezbollah and the Revolutionary Guards, but that's all. Syria has been completely bled dry.

- 34 Therefore, the Syrian Army "is no longer controlling anything" while the country is being "bled dry" to satisfy an Iranian plot to eventually take over the entire Syrian political apparatus.
- 35 Here, the conspiracy theory provides a rational framework to a situation perceived as "unimaginable" (*mish maaqûl*), that of a drained Syria, torn by horror and barbarism<sup>29</sup>, from all angles. Hundreds of thousands of deaths thus sanctioned a predefined project, that of an Iran seeking to expand the territorial scope of its *empire*. The Syrian civil war was ultimately not the result of a horrible uncontrollable vicious circle, but a strong desire to serve the interests of global Shiism by establishing a geographical and sectarian connection between Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran. In the background appears the theory of the Shiite "crescent", this "collective anxiety" (Thual, 2004) adopted as regional frame of reference by many Sunni political actors.
- 36 Beyond the conspiracy fantasies, Syrian fears were eminently political. During a joint interview conducted in Lebanon, one of the respondents (Lebanese Sunni) did not fail to remind – in a humorous but somewhat serious tone – his Syrian comrade that, "like them, they would sooner or later face the Shiitisation [*tashayyu'*]" of Syria<sup>30</sup>, before being refuted by his spokesperson. Indeed, unlike in neighbouring Lebanon where the Shiism can be seen by other faiths as expansionist, Syrians interviewed do not fear to be overwhelmed demographically, given that they are acutely aware of their overwhelming numerical superiority. Rather, they especially fear that a foreign power (Lebanese, Iranian or Russian) can swallow up the Syrian political apparatus.
- 37 Finally, this perception is in line with a prospective logic, that of a post-Bashar era. "If"<sup>31</sup> the power in place were able to win the battle in the field, it would be for the Syrian people some sort of double punishment: that of a resilient Ba'thist regime, but now drained of its decision-making power and controlled by the "the Persians" (*farsîyyin*).

## "The intimate enemy", a discourse on the revolutionary *alter eg*

### '*Tashbih*': the revolution against "traitors" and war profiteers

- 38 In the speech of the Syrian opposition, violent denunciation of the "conspiracy" was not only directed abroad, to a *fortiori* Shiite, but also to the *intimate enemy* (*al-'udû al-hamîm*), that is, one who claims to defend the same cause but the means or purpose differ. For example, this is particularly true of the term "tashbih" that is "shabihisation" or, if literally translated, "becoming a ghost".
- 39 The word here refers to Chabihas, notorious since the beginning of the revolution. Strong men injected with testosterone and anabolic agents<sup>32</sup>, the Chabihas are the henchmen of the "mafia" regime of Bashar al-Assad, according to Filiu's analogy (2012). *Qabadayat* of modern times, their loyalty to the Assad family cannot be doubted. As such, as perpetrators of civil rights abuses, they are very much hated by the Syrian people:
- They have been around for decades. They began their massacres under Hafez, and continued with Bashar. They were there at the beginning of the revolution; in



Damascus, their job was to deter crowds from coming together by beating them up. They are still there now; they are being referred to, all the time, everywhere. They rape, kill and massacre. They are worse than the [foreign] militias, who answer for their actions [to their hierarchy], worse than the popular committees which are just lost children, worse than everybody because they are answerable to nobody, absolutely nobody.

So, they kill, rape, beat children on behalf of Bashar al-Assad.

- 40 In the Syrian national imagination, the Chabiha is still the most abject incarnation of the regime. The symbolic connotation of the term "tashbih", derived from 'shabiha', is particularly strong. In this case, for many spokespersons, the term does not denote supporters of Bashar al-Assad but actors from the ranks of the opposition. The "Tashbih" is then the war profiteer or, more generally, the individual using the revolution for their personal interests, be they political or economic.
- 41 This is for example the case of Colonel Ahmed Fahd Naameh, in the region of Daraa. Killed in the fightings in November 2013, Naameh was considered by many members of the Syrian opposition as directly responsible for the loss of the city of Khirbet Al Ghazaleh, recaptured by the Syrian army in May 2013. In a video<sup>33</sup> broadcast on Youtube on 7 July 2013, several officers of the "southern front" of the FSA called for his trial in court, blaming him for all the ills "abroad", from where he received his orders. The colonel voluntarily cut off Khirbet Al Ghazaleh from the supply route used by the revolutionaries and "abandoned the city, [...] resulting in the death of dozens of fighters". Although these accusations primarily reflect interpersonal tensions, they are indicative of the discursive process to identify, within the revolution, its enemies.
- 42 Moreover, the speech of the Syrian opposition also refers to the "traitors" (*khâ'in*) of the revolution. "*Khâ'in*", whose meaning is quite similar to "*tashbih*" when it comes to denunciation, helps understanding the violence of this latter concept: while traitor, in the broad sense of the word, means soldiers who have diverted their attention from the revolution (especially "senior officers of the Syrian army who promised to desert but finally did not leave office [or] western countries which did not provide assistance despite their declarations"<sup>34</sup>), the "*tashbih*" is rather inclusive and pinpoints Syrians who actively participated in the revolution, but used it to serve their interests (war profiteers). This is the case of Naameh who blocked supplies from entering the town of Khirbet Al Ghazaleh or self-proclaimed revolutionary actors, using their political or family legitimacy to divert humanitarian funds.
- 43 Finally, it is interesting to note that when the danger or threat comes from the *intimate*, that is to say, the opposition themselves, the term refers almost automatically to the oppressor: the one who betrays the revolution or uses it for personal gains becomes a *Shabiha* and symbolically joins the ranks of the regime. By hijacking the revolution, they transform themselves into the 'ghosts' of the revolution.

### "The fighters of the regime": between Abû Al Qa'qa' and Al Qaeda, the bugbear of the foreign Jihadists

- 44 From 2012, the Syrian opposition, under-equipped and facing considerable financial difficulties, helped jihadist groups affiliated to Al Qaeda to rise to power. In a few months, several thousands<sup>35</sup> of *takfiri* foreign fighters crossed the borders of *Bilâd Ash Shâm*<sup>36</sup> to wage the *Jihad* alongside groups like the *Al Nosrah Front* or the *Islamic State of Iraq and Sham*

(ISIS), both directly or indirectly linked to Al Qaeda. These fundamentalist groups rapidly occupied a major place in the representations of the Syrian opposition.

45 For Adel, 28 years old:

The Nosrah or Al Qaeda are not Syrian fighters, they are foreigners [*ghurabâ*]. Most of them were released from prison at the beginning of the crisis, and they were veterans of the jihad in Iraq. They were controlled by the Syrian secret services. In any case, all the *Dawlah* [Al Qaeda] guys you can see, are linked to the regime. As you can clearly see, they pursue the same interests, explode bombs in places where the regime has sovereignty [*saytarah*], and kill Christians to destroy Syria, as in Jaramana and Maaloula! They do not fight Bashar, they help Bashar! Look at Deir Ez Zor, they even sell him the oil they control.

46 Since the beginning of the revolution, the Syrian regime has likened civilian protests to a project of Islamist demolition of the society. The March 2011 unrests were thus transformed into a "conspiracy" of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists or the American-Israeli-Saudi axis to destabilize the Syrian nation. Meanwhile, it seems the Syrian regime had largely contributed to this self-fulfilling prophecy by releasing dozens of Syrian and foreign jihadists, veterans of the Iraq war, by then imprisoned in Syria. Bernard Rougier, quoted by Romain Caillet (2013), cited the example of Abu Al Qa'qa, jihadist trained and controlled by the Syrian secret services, murdered in 2007 in Aleppo. Other precedents abound in this light and suggest that in the first months of the revolution, the Syrian secret services encouraged the growth of the jihadist phenomenon, before it escaped them completely.

47 Adel further mentions Jaramana, a city in the Damascus suburbs, located about ten kilometres from the district of Umayyads. Inhabited by a majority of Druze and Christians, the small town is a strategic point as it provides access to the nearby Bab Sharqi, in the heart of the historic district of Damascus<sup>37</sup>. Since the conflict began, Jaramana was firmly held by the elite forces of the regime, backed by the "volunteer" corps of the Popular Committees<sup>38</sup>, present in their thousands. The FSA had so far, never managed to penetrate this town despite repeated attempts. Whereas, on several occasions in 2012 and 2013, the city was hit by violent attacks especially on 28 November 2012: on this day, four simultaneous explosions killed dozens of people, wounding hundreds more. Car bombs regularly explode in this neighbourhood, killing Druze or Christian people. The analysis of these terrorist acts by Leverrier (2012) suggests that despite the regime's accusations against the sponsors "takfiris" the "services" themselves were responsible for these explosions<sup>39</sup>.

48 The other city mentioned is Maaloula: a Christian historical city, classified as a world heritage site by UNESCO, home to the last speakers of the Aramaic language. Located 55 kilometres from the Syrian capital, it has since the summer of 2013 been the scene of violent clashes between militia groups identified as belonging to Al Qaeda and the Syrian army. The two warring parties in turn won and then lost grounds gained the previous day. At present, 2,000 Christians have fled the city, while the church of Mar Takla has been destroyed by the jihadists. These jihadists also took 18 nuns hostage, in December 2013<sup>40</sup>.

49 Although the situations of the two cities cannot be compared (Jaramana is in the hands of the regime while they are losing ground<sup>41</sup> in Maaloula), Adel makes a comparison between two dynamics perceived as harmful to the Syrian opposition: in Jaramana, attacks explicitly aimed at Christian and Druze communities contributed to the

sectarianisation of the conflict, turning the town away from the revolutionary path. As for Maaloula, although the jihadists fought the Syrian army there, they aimed at the wrong target, lumping together the local population (Christians) and the regime, thus reinforcing the siege mentality of the inhabitants of Maaloula, considered *a priori* to be "favourable" to Bashar al-Assad.

- 50 However, there was actually a formal collusion or a direct link between the regime and jihadist groups hiding behind these two movements. These groups (JAN or Al Qaeda) are indeed those who organised attacks as *proxies* of the government to maintain the self-fulfilling rhetoric of the Baath Party that of an Islamist project to promote and sectarianize a civil conflict. Furthermore, empirical evidence would support these theories: how could Al Qaeda cross the blockade imposed by the popular committees in the city of Jaramana, without the assistance of the regime? But Ibrahim puts it thus:

I'll tell you why Maaloula was attacked by the ISIS, but more importantly why the regime was behind all this. This city is of no strategic interest, just symbolic, there are Christians living there and it is true that they are close to the regime. Attacking this city, is a double victory for the Assadist army: it helped fuel the idea that the revolution is a Salafi one, in the eyes of the West [*gharb*], terrorising Christians who are now afraid of Sunnis. Even if the city is captured, it does not mean anything to the regime. They are attacking a position which in reality has no interest. I think the ISIS is really silly; the regime is behind all this. There is no doubt [*ma fî shukûk*].

- 51 Therefore, rational military reasons would explain the links between the jihadists and the Syrian regime: while the FSA "works" (*ishteghal*) on strategic objectives expected to ensure the victory of the opposition on the ground in the long run, movements like the ISIS concentrate their efforts on symbolic points, like the Christian city of Maaloula, isolated and far from the capital. This perception of 'field work' (*aamal maydani*) supported the theory of a hidden link between the JAN, Al Qaeda and the Syrian regime. In fact, by attacking cities like Maaloula, the jihadists somehow killed two birds with one stone in favour of Bashar al-Assad: on the one hand, their assaults did not put the "occupation" army in any danger and, on the other hand, it would tarnish the domestic and international image of the armed opposition, reduced by observers to the violence of fundamentalist movements and their symbolic acts.

- 52 For some, the jihadists were even the "collaborators" (*'umâla'*) of the regime. The use of the term "amîl" here carries a strong symbolic connotation because it is an implicit reference to "umalâ 'Isrâ'îl", collaborators and auxiliaries from Israel during the occupation of Southern Lebanon<sup>42</sup>. Since then, the term has probably taken root in the regional imagination and it is being recycled by the opposition to describe the jihadists based in Syria and is used to measure the deep enmity of the "historic" opposition for "foreigners" and other fighters detracting from the revolutionary message.

- 53 However, this deep antipathy finds its limits in the evaluation of the purely tactical potential of jihadists. Adel summarises it in a few words: "they are really good". In the eyes of the revolutionaries, the structural efficiency of "fundamentalists" (*mutaasibîn*) could not be questioned, as Ahmed recalls:

This is the dilemma. For me, they serve only the interests of Bashar but they are indeed very good. They are not afraid to die, and this produces incredible scenes where they are willing to sacrifice several fighters for an operation to succeed. And if it fails, they start all over again. Really, they are not afraid.

- 54 On the purely operational aspect, all persons interviewed shared the same approach and emphasized the "effective" nature of *tafkiri* jihadist movements. If the FSA regularly has a

hard time against the regime's army or against its foreign auxiliaries<sup>43</sup>, Al Qaeda and JAN have left a lasting impression on people's minds with their spectacular operations, particularly given the *modus operandi* characteristic of jihadists, i.e. suicide bombings (Lund, 2012).

- 55 However, this efficiency naturally induces a frustration of the FSA fighters, who see themselves as "losers" within an implicit competition for military legitimacy on the ground. Yet, the failures of the historic military opposition and the spiral of violence contributed in swelling the ranks of jihadist movements<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, their *modus operandi* characterized by suicide operations (*aamaliyat intihariyah*) undermining the efforts of the FSA to build a "moderate" guerrilla image is strongly denounced.
- 56 In conclusion, it may be noted that according to a mechanism borrowing from Hezbollah and *Tashbih* representation, the enemy within, even if he fights in the same direction, is likened to the oppressor and denounced by the Syrian opposition as an element of the conspiracy theory. Supposed emanations of the Syrian regime, Al Qaeda or the JAN were therefore fighting directly or indirectly for Bashar al-Assad and therefore, implicitly for Shiites and Iranian interests.

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International Crisis Group, "A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian conflict", *Middle East Report* n° 132, 22 November 2012.

## NOTES

1. L'ORIENT-LE JOUR, "#Halech : une campagne sur Twitter contre Daech et le Hezbollah" (*#Halech: a campaign on Twitter against Daech and Hezbollah*), 20 February 2014.
2. "Opposition" here means political or armed actors claiming to be representatives of the Syrian National Council (SNC) or, more generally, fighters and civilians clamouring for the departure of Bashar Al-Assad.
3. For security reasons and conciseness purposes, names and dates are not given.
4. The Local Coordination Committees (LCC), "[leaders of the] protest on a local and decentralized basis" (Filiu, 2012), published hundreds of videos shot on Syrian territory daily, on social networks.
5. "Occupied Syria".
6. PRESS TV IRAN, "Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah (HA) -Speech- Saturday, May 25, 2013", *Youtube*, online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHHnYwr2044>.
7. Hassan Nasrallah is since 1992, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah.
8. Al Qussayr, which has several thousand inhabitants, is located in the countryside (*rîf*) of Homs and is a "regional continuum" (Leroy, 2013) with the Lebanese region of Hermel. Socio-economic and agro-pastoral hub between Syria and Lebanon, the small town connects Damascus to the Mediterranean coast and as such is a key supply route for Hezbollah and the regime, and thus a priority for the Syrian opposition.
9. The town was then held by the FSA (Free Syrian army) as well as elements of the *Jubhat Al Nuṣrah* (hereinafter, the JAN) and other Islamist groups.
10. AL JAZEERA, "Liqa' Al Yûm – Hâdî Al 'Abd Âllah... Ma'arakat Quṣaîr", *Youtube*, 6 juillet 2013, en ligne sur <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTIBH2nTlos>.
11. That is to say, probably, Moscow, Tehran and Hezbollah's leadership.
12. Ahmed Mohamid, "Fîdîyû khaṭîr min khilâlihi Ḥizb 'âllah ya'lanu 'ân Madînatu Quṣayr Madînat Shi'iah", *Youtube*, 9 June 2013, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ATVb\\_sfAdg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ATVb_sfAdg)
13. Imam Hussein was the grandson of Muhammad. Third imam of the Shiite dynasty (after Ali and Hassan), he was killed in Karbala on 10 October 680 by Ibn Ziyâd troops. Each year, during the Ashura ceremony, Shiites commemorate his martyrdom.
14. See <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/hezbollah%E2%80%99s-role-syria>.
15. The "Al Quds" force is the "service action" (Rodier, 2013) of the guardians of the Revolution.
16. AKHBÂR AL 'ÂN, "Ṣûr ḥasala 'alîhâ 'âl 'ân min Liwâ' Dawûd taḥzuru ḍubâtân 'îrâniyyîn yudaîrûna 'amaliyât bi-'îdlib", online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AB2CXDIgRg>.
17. NGC BLOG, "Shiite Foreign Fighters in Syria: Facts, Narratives and Regional Impact", 24 January 2014.
18. *Youtube*, "Al-Muqṭa Al-A'nîf fî khiṭbati Al-Jam'ah lilShaykh Al Qaradawi yuṣifu Ḥizb Allah bi Ḥ izbi Al-Shaytan", May 31, 2013, online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-npCduuHNw>.
19. This popularity dwindled down consecutively at the beginning of the Syrian civil war.
20. On the 2006 war, see Franck Mermier, Elizabeth Picard, *Liban, une guerre de 33 jours (Lebanon, a 33-day war)*, Paris, La Découverte, Cahiers libres, 2007, 264 pages.
21. The term refers to small thugs or henchmen.
22. The "*Dahiyeh*" ("suburb") is an area south of Beirut, predominately inhabited by the Shia community.

23. INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, "A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian conflict", *Middle East Report* n° 132, 22 November 2012, p. 27.
24. The channel held that 627, 921 visitors responded to this poll on the Internet.
25. AL-ÎTIJÂH AL-MA'ÂKIS, "Tadkhul Hizb 'Allah fî Suriyâ", *Youtube*, en ligne sur <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWL87OUWRmA>.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Several persons interviewed also mentioned the "Safavid project" (*Al-Mashrû' al-safawî*) and called the Iranian advisers as "Persia's" Pasdarans.
28. Jean-François Legrain, "La menace chiite en Palestine, entre phobies et propagandes" (*The Shiite threat in Palestine, between phobia and propaganda*), *Ism-France.org*, <http://www.ism-france.org/analyses/La-menace-chiite-en-Palestine-entre-phobies-et-propagandes-article-12832>, 12 octobre 2009.
29. The title of Michel Seurat book (1989) finds here once again its deeper meaning.
30. The remark refers to the accusations of Shia "evangelisation" (*tabshîr*) of Lebanon against Hezbollah. Hassan Nasrallah himself had to refute these claims several times; see this on *Youtube*, "Nasrallah on Interfaith Conversions", 28 September 2007, online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSGqkFv5JZO>.
31. "Iza !", repeats several times the person interviewed.
32. Their pictures posted on the Internet, trigger torrents of insults and mocking remarks on Syrian social networks.
33. ORIENT-NEWS, "Qarâr bi'azli wa Maḥâkamah Al-'Aqîd 'Âḥmad Fahd Al-Na'mah", *Youtube*, en ligne sur <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGgn4yvEXoQ>.
34. Luc Mathieu, "Syria: We should not have believed in this revolution", *Libération*, 13 December, 2013.
35. Probably between 6,000 and 10,000.
36. "Country of Sham", that is to say, a geographical area comprising Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine.
37. François d'Alançon, "À Jaramana, en Syrie, l'esprit civique résiste à la guerre" (*In Jaramana, Syria, civic spirit resists war*), *La Croix*, 13 June 2013.
38. Popular committees are militias of the regime, recruited from the most disadvantaged sections of Syria.
39. Ignace Leverrier, "Syria. Who wants to 'terrorize' the inhabitants of Jaramana? (1/2) ", *Le Monde.fr, Blog*, 10 December 2012.
40. Georges Malbrunot, "Syrie: les islamistes reprennent Maaloula" (*Syria, the Islamists recapture Maaloula*), *Le Figaro*, 3 December 2013.
41. When this article was written, that is in January 2014.
42. Between 1976 and 2000, Israel relied on the SLA (South Lebanon Army), composed mainly of Christians and Shiite militia.
43. In general, these difficulties are due to the lack of funding, and the total lack of heavy weapons.
44. Mona Mahmood, Ian Black, "Free Syrian Army rebels defect to Islamist group Jabhat al-Nusra", *The Guardian*, 8 May 2013.

## ABSTRACTS

Since the end of 2012, the Syrian revolution faces an influx of Shiite fighters sent from Iraq, Iran and Lebanon to fight alongside the military regime of Bashar al-Assad. Among the Syrian opposition, the involvement of foreign mercenaries in the conflict led to the construction of a sectarian rhetoric, denouncing the "Shiite threat" now weighing on the country.

By analysing popular and political discourses, this paper aims to examine some collective representations of these *Hizballah* or *Pasdarans* soldiers but also to understand the awakening of sectarian dynamics and Sunni-Shia tensions in contemporary Syria.

Depuis la fin de l'année 2012, la révolution syrienne est confrontée à l'arrivée massive de combattants chiites, projetés d'Irak, d'Iran ou du Liban afin de soutenir militairement le régime de Bachar al-Assad. Au sein de l'opposition, cet afflux de mercenaires étrangers s'est traduit par la construction populaire d'une rhétorique confessionnelle, dénonçant la « menace » ou le « danger » chiite pesant désormais sur le pays.

En s'appuyant sur les méthodes d'analyse discursive, l'objectif de cet article est d'examiner les représentations collectives de ces soldats issus des rangs du Hezbollah ou des *Pasdarans* iraniens, mais également de comprendre le réveil des dynamiques identitaires et confessionnelles désormais à l'œuvre en Syrie.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Hizballah, Al Qaeda, Civil War, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Nasrallah (Hassan), Jihadism, Terrorism, Shia, Refugees, ISIS

**Mots-clés:** Hezbollah, Al Qaïda, Guerre civile, Syrie, Liban, Iran, Israël, Nasrallah (Hassan), Jihadisme, Terrorisme, Chiisme, Réfugiés, EIII

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