

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Hezbollah's Disinformation Campaign During the Syrian Civil War

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In 2012, Hezbollah intervened on behalf of the Assad regime in the Syrian Civil War. The Assad regime has been responsible for several human rights violations during the war, including the use of chemical weapons against civilians. Unsurprisingly, Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime has been met with criticism by people in Lebanon, the Middle East, and the international community. This thesis project asks: what are the tools, stories, and images that Hezbollah-affiliated media used during the Syrian Civil War to establish credibility amongst the international community? I argue Hezbollah-affiliated media justifies its support of the Assad regime and maintains its legitimacy through imagery of victimhood. Through a close study of anglophone online news stories published by Hezbollah media outlets Al-Manar and Al-Ahed, my analysis demonstrates how Hezbollah relies on disinformation to represent itself and its allies as victims of an international conspiracy aimed at colonizing the Middle East.

Hezbollah's Disinformation Campaign During the Syrian Civil War

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
I. Introduction of Hezbollah	
II. History of Al-Ahed and Al-Manar	
III. Literature Review	
IV. Methods Section	
V. Note on the Al-Ahed Authors and Hezbollah’s Target Audience	
VI. Roadmap	
Chapter 2 – The Syrian Civil War: A US and Zionist Conspiracy?	14
I. History of the Syrian Civil War and the Rise of Al-Qaeda and ISIS	
II. The Historical Context Provided by Hezbollah Media	
III. Hezbollah Media’s Portrayal of Zionist Support for Extremist Rebels	
IV. Hezbollah Media’s Portrayal of The Syrian Civil War a US Plot for Colonizing the Middle East	
V. Discrediting the US Coalition Against ISIS	
VI. Weaponizing Western Disinformation	
Chapter 3 – Chemical Weapons Use: A Globalist Plot Against Syria	32
I. Historical Background	
II. Hezbollah Media as a Platform for Syria Figureheads	
III. Theories Spread by Hezbollah Affiliated Media	
IV. The White Helmets	
V. Weaponizing Western Disinformation	
Chapter 4 – Conspiracies and Solidarity: Hezbollah and the Yemeni Civil War	46
I. Historical Background	
II. Hezbollah Depiction of the Saudi-Israeli Connection	
III. Use of Western Disinformation	
Chapter 5 – Conclusion	58
Works Cited	63

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Chapter 1- Introduction

In 2013, Hezbollah made the controversial decision to intervene in the Syrian Civil War on Syria's president Bashar al-Assad's behalf (Kizilkaya, 211). Throughout the Syrian Civil War, the Assad regime violently cracked down on its opposition. This included the use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians (Schneider and Luetkefend, 12). Despite the atrocities carried out by Assad's regime, Hezbollah has stood firmly in its support, and has embarked on a mission to maintain and expand support for the current Syrian leadership in Lebanon and abroad.

This thesis project will ask the following question: What are the narratives Hezbollah affiliated media used to garner support for itself and the Assad regime in Syria? What tools, stories, and images does the Hezbollah affiliated media use to establish credibility and legitimacy amongst the international community? Through a reading of Hezbollah's Anglophone online news outlets, I aim to draw out the various strategies that Hezbollah affiliated media uses to forge broad support from an international audience. My research shows that Hezbollah justifies its support for Assad's regime and maintains its legitimacy through victimhood. My analysis demonstrates how Hezbollah relies on disinformation to represent itself and its allies as victims of an international conspiracy aimed at overthrowing the Assad regime in an effort to colonize the Middle East. Further, Hezbollah media reports on Western disinformation about Syria's civil war to support its backing of the Assad regime.

In this chapter, I will provide a brief introduction of the political party Hezbollah and its two most important media outlets: Al-Manar and Al-Ahed. Al-Manar is a television station and Al-Ahed is a newspaper and editorial journal. I will then provide a literature review evaluating the current scholarship pertaining to Hezbollah's media apparatus and its use of disinformation. Next, I will provide a brief discussion of my methodology, explaining how I conducted my

research and analysis for this project. I will also briefly discuss the background of some of Al-Ahed's contributors, as well as Hezbollah's potential target audience. Lastly, I will provide an outline for the rest of the project, summarizing what I will be doing in each chapter.

I: Introduction of Hezbollah

Hezbollah is a Shii Islamist militant group and political party based in Southern Lebanon (CSIAC)¹. The group's origins trace back to the Lebanese Civil War. After the Lebanese Civil War broke out in 1975, the Amal movement became the most prominent Shii militia, and was founded as a secular organization dedicated to representing the interests of Lebanon's Shii population. After Israel invaded Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War in 1982, anti-Israel resentment intensified among Shiites in the south following Israeli transgressions against civilians (Norton, 33, CSIAC). As a consequence, several leaders of Lebanon's Shiite Amal movement broke off from the secular party, and soon formed the Islamic Amal (Saade, 90 CSIAC). The group was directly funded by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (CSIAC). While Hezbollah claims it was founded in 1982, there is debate about when Hezbollah was officially established, and whether Islamic Amal became Hezbollah or members of Islamic Amal broke off from the group to create Hezbollah (CSIAC, Norton, 34). However, there is evidence showing Hezbollah acted as a coherent organization in 1984, and it published a manifesto in 1985 that established its presence in the Middle East (Saade, 30, CSIAC).

Hezbollah's 1985 manifesto outlined the objectives of the group, including: the destruction of Israel, the destruction of its Lebanese enemies such as the Phalanges Party, and the end of Western influence in Lebanon and the greater Middle East (CSIAC). As Muslims came under attack by Israel and Christian militias in Lebanon, Hezbollah argued that Muslims must

¹ Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University

unify against the corrupt Lebanese government and global superpowers that would continue to suppress them if they did not turn to self-help and hardline resistance (Norton, 38). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Hezbollah became the primary organization leading the resistance against the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon (CSIAC). The group carried out attacks against IDF outposts in Lebanon. Hezbollah was also responsible for bomb attacks against the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, a Jewish community center in Argentina, and the American Khobar towers in Saudi Arabia (CSIAC).

The 1990s also saw Hezbollah become a key player in Lebanese politics, as it first participated in elections in 1992 and has continued to participate in Lebanese elections dating to 2018 (Norton, 101, CSIAC). By participating in elections, Hezbollah shifted from an organization unwilling to accept the Lebanese government to a respected political party in Lebanon, working within the country's governmental system (Norton, 101). By entering Lebanon's political system, Hezbollah gained a podium to advocate for its Islamic resistance against Israel and the West. The move also gave Lebanon's Shiite community long-desired representation in the government after decades of political disenfranchisement (Norton, 101).

Hezbollah received large support from the Lebanese public following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. However, Hezbollah soon became an increasingly polarizing organization in Lebanon, one reflective of growing sectarian tensions (CSIAC). Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri was assassinated in 2005, and a UN special tribunal later found four Hezbollah officials responsible for the assassination (Geukjian, 525, 543). Hariri's assassination divided the Lebanese populace between supporters of Hezbollah and Syria on the one hand, and anti-Syrian protestors on the other (Geukjian, 525-526). This split maps onto sectarian

affiliations, with Sunnis supporting the anti-Syria movement and Shiites supporting Hezbollah and Syria (Geukjian, 535).

In 2006, Israel and Hezbollah fought another war after Hezbollah operatives kidnapped two Israeli soldiers and killed eight others (CSIAC). Israel responded to Hezbollah's provocation by invading Lebanon yet again. Over 1,000 Lebanese died in the war, mostly civilians (CSIAC). Israeli forces destroyed roughly fifteen thousand homes in Hezbollah administered areas, but Hezbollah's prompt response to rebuild war-torn areas and provide aid to affected families helped maintain strong support for the party amongst the Shii community (Norton, 111). In 2011, the Syrian Civil War broke out, and Hezbollah officially entered the war on the side of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in 2013 (CSIAC). The Syrian Civil War continues to drive sectarian tension in Lebanon, with the majority of Lebanese Shiites supporting Hezbollah's intervention while many Lebanese Sunnis became outraged by Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime (Geukjian, 543).

II: History of Al-Ahed and Al-Manar

Members of Hezbollah founded the newspaper, Al-Ahed, in 1984, during the infant stages of Hezbollah's existence as an organization (Al-Ahed, Saade 30-31). In its early days and throughout the 1990s, Al-Ahed would publish the stories of Hezbollah martyrs who had battled the Israeli army, honoring their legacy and interviewing family members they had left behind (Saade, 46-47). Al-Ahed soon after became a forum for Hezbollah to publish histories of the "Islamic Resistance," highlighting the Iranian revolution in Iran and Hezbollah's presence in Lebanon (Saade, 53). Hezbollah also used Al-Ahed to demonize its enemies, including Israel, Maronite militias, and the West at large (Saade, 69-70). According to Al-Ahed's website, it first launched its internet presence in 1999. Al-Ahed now offers websites in Arabic, English, French,

and Spanish, all providing news stories, opinion pieces, Hezbollah official statements, and speeches from Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah (Al-Ahed).

Al-Manar, Hezbollah's news broadcast network, was founded in 1991, and was originally a small television station (Jorisch, 20). However, in 2000, Al-Manar launched its twenty-four-hour satellite station, where they could reach large audiences across the Arab world and beyond (Jorisch, Xiii). While Al-Manar is stationed in Beirut, it has bureaus throughout Europe and the Middle East (Jorisch, 22). In 2002, Al-Manar was estimated to have approximately 10 million viewers daily in Lebanon and abroad (Jorisch, 31). Similar to Al-Ahed, Al-Manar broadcasts have focused on demonizing Israel and the US, while spreading pro-Hezbollah propaganda (Jorisch, 39-40).

Al-Manar currently has a website offered in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish (Al-Manar). On its website, it publishes news articles, opinion pieces, statements from Hassan Nasrallah, and a live stream of Al-Manar's satellite broadcast (Al-Manar). In 2004, the US Department of State banned the network, prompting other Western states to ban the network as well (Mintz, Carvajal, Reuters).

III: Literature Review

I. Hezbollah media

The current literature on Hezbollah media and communications efforts highlights Hezbollah's strategy in appealing to the Lebanese and global base. University of Stirling Professor Bashir Saade demonstrates how Hezbollah-affiliated media utilize a politics of remembrance in order to legitimize its present actions (Saade, 211). Hezbollah media does this by honoring fallen martyrs, supporting Palestinian statehood and demonizing Christian militias, Israel, and other political rivals (Saade, 42, 98, 69, 107). By supporting this particular historical

narrative, Hezbollah-affiliated media justifies its existence as a legitimate resistance group to Israel (Saade, 211). Alternatively, Lebanese journalist and academic Zahera Harb focuses on Hezbollah affiliated media's reporting of the present. She argues that Al-Manar reporting used "honest propaganda" to unify the Lebanese people behind Hezbollah's struggle against the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon (Harb, 227). Thus, Al-Manar reporting relied on legitimate information that was used to solidify Hezbollah's support (Harb, 227).

Avi Jorich, an American Middle East analyst, differs from Saade and Harb, as he focuses less on how Hezbollah media crafts its message to collect support for its cause, but rather how its message is in direct conflict with American interests (Jorisch xvi). His work focuses on Al-Manar in the early 2000s, notably during the Second Intifada and the beginning of the Iraq war. He argues Al-Manar media's purpose is to perpetuate incitement and violence against Israel and the United States for as long as possible, in turn legitimizing the need for Hezbollah's existence as an organization (Jorich, 75-76). Al-Manar explains its demonization of Israel and the US by claiming Israel is simply a US instrument for their colonial project in the region, prompting them to use conspiracies falsely tying Israel to 9/11 (Jorich, 39, 57).

While scholars like Saade, Harb, and Jorich discussed earlier Hezbollah communications efforts, Gabriel Weisman, a professor at the University of Haifa, marks the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel as a pivotal point in the evolution of Al-Manar and Hezbollah's communication strategy. Weisman explains how Hezbollah shifted its media efforts towards the internet during the 2006 Lebanon War (Weiman, 2). 2007 statistics from Nielson/NetRatings and the International Telecommunication Union indicated a significant increase in internet users in the Middle East, giving Hezbollah a new avenue to reach a broader Middle Eastern and Western audience (Weiman, 10). Thus, Hezbollah used its expanded online presence, through websites

like Al-Manar, to counter Western narratives of the Lebanon war and other Middle Eastern conflicts, urging the need for continued resistance against Israel and the United States (Weiman, 4,6,18-19)

As Hezbollah became an increasingly controversial player in the Middle East, Hezbollah media soon adopted a narrative in which Hezbollah portrays itself as a victim. Lina Khatib, the former director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, argues Hezbollah uses its communication strategy as a means to mobilize support, in an effort to assure its political survival (Khatib, 6-7, 12). Khatib stresses how Hezbollah media oscillates its narrative between one of power and one of victimhood. The latter narrative emphasizes the party's status as a victim of a global and western conspiracy against them and the Arab world in the wake of controversial moments for the party (Khatib, 116-118). Similar to Khatib's analysis, Vesalius College Professor Zafer Kizilkaya notes that Hezbollah justified its support for Assad as "preemptive action" against American backed apostates, and that supporting the Assad regime is an effort to prevent another Israeli invasion into Lebanon (Kizilkaya, 218). Hezbollah seeks legitimacy by stressing its actions aren't based on sectarian differences or outside influencers, but rather it is acting to defend all the oppressed people of Lebanon from a Western threat (Kizilkaya, 219).

The current literature provides key insights to understanding Hezbollah communication's strategy and how it has progressed over the past two decades given political realities on the ground. However, my project focuses on how Hezbollah media has used particular conspiracies when both recollecting the past and reporting on the present, in an effort to maintain their legitimacy as a resistance group. I have decided to focus on the time period between 2013 and

2018, as it reflects the height of the Syrian Civil War, and there has been less analysis of Hezbollah's media strategy during this time period.

II: Conspiracies in the Middle East

In 1996, historian Daniel Pipes' conducted a study in which he argued that conspiracies in the Middle East have spread because of the "worldly decline" of Muslims, the impact of European thought, the high number of conspiracies being discussed, and the autocratic and pan-movement politics of the region (Pipes, 5). Australian National University professor Mathew Gray rejects Pipes' assessment, claiming Pipes merely blames pathological cognition and anti-Semitism for the presence of conspiratorial beliefs in the Middle East, and fails to recognize the complex political dynamics that have bred conspiracies in the region. Gray asserts that Middle Eastern states have adopted conspiracies as a response to their own failures as a state and lack of legitimacy amongst its citizens. Gray explains that Arab political actors use conspiracies as a tool to reclaim legitimacy and remain in power (Gray, 12).

Scholarship has highlighted how Russia and Syria increased disinformation efforts following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. Donald N. Jenson, Editor in Chief and a Senior Fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis, argues that Russia's disinformation campaign in the Middle East has helped Russia consolidate power in the region, especially in Syria (Nelson). Anna Borshchevskaya and Catherine Cleveland, senior fellows at the Washington Institute, detail how Russia uses its "RT Arabic" news outlet to spread positive images of Russia and Syria and conspiratorial anti-US theories in the Middle East (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2). These stories falsely portray Syria and Russia as the victims of an American-led globalist agenda (Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 6-7,10). Independent researcher Gabrielle Cosentino and Sciences Po Paris Professor Berke Alikasifoglu show how Russian propaganda

used conspiracies to incriminate the White Helmets, a popular search and rescue humanitarian organization, of being terrorists (Cosentino and Alikasifoglu, 6). Cosentino and Alikasifoglu assert Russia effectively distorted the facts regarding the White Helmets' true motives and confuse the public of reality in an effort to protect Russia from accusations of war crimes in Syria (Cosentino and Alikasifoglu, 6).

In this project, I want to expand on Mathew Gray's argument that vulnerable political actors use conspiracies to consolidate power and reclaim legitimacy. I use a specific political actor as a case study, and I analyze the conspiracies propagated by Hezbollah's media apparatus for this specific paper because of its support for the Assad regime. Hezbollah's use of conspiracies to deliver its messages to their audience during the Syrian Civil War has received little attention from scholarship, and I believe this project will give insights as to how Hezbollah has sought to consolidate power domestically and abroad through the use of conspiracies. In this thesis, I will demonstrate how Hezbollah media outlets, specifically Al-Manar and Al-Ahed, use their Anglophone websites to disseminate Western based disinformation. In doing so, Hezbollah demonizes the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other enemies to undermine their image and efforts in the region.

IV: Methods Section

To answer the questions posed in this thesis, I have gathered evidence from two Hezbollah-affiliated media outlets: Al-Manar and Al-Ahed. I have gone through the archives of both Al Manar and Al-Ahed websites from 2013-2018, and explored the conspiracy theories both websites have supported. The three main conspiracies I focus on are: the West's role in supporting Al-Qaeda and ISIS in an effort to start the Syrian civil war, the belief that the West, the rebels, Turkey, the Gulf States, or humanitarian groups on the ground carried out or staged

chemical weapon attacks, and conspiracies related to the Yemeni civil war (including Israel helping Saudi Arabia drop a nuclear bomb on Yemen and the US use of biological warfare to start the cholera epidemic in Yemen).

I chose these specific conspiracies for a couple reasons. First, I found these conspiracies to be the most interesting and radical among the ones that I examined. Secondly, I believe Hezbollah uses these conspiracies in particular to justify its actions and gain support for its continued resistance against its enemies.

I explore the time period of 2013-2018 as 2013 marks the year when Hezbollah officially acknowledged their military support for the Assad regime. Ending my research with the year 2018 helps control for new developments that may arise. My research has a number of limitations that have shaped my analysis. Firstly, I have almost exclusively been using the English websites for Al-Manar and Al-Ahed. There may be different news stories published on the Arabic versions of the websites than that of the English versions. However, I have specifically chosen the anglophone websites in order to investigate the spread of information beyond the locally Arabic speaking audience and the move to spread information internationally to gather support way beyond the local Lebanese context. This thesis, hence, does not seek to compare the English and Arabic versions of both websites. Also, Al-Manar does not list the names of the authors of their news stories, so I could not explore the motives of individual authors and patterns that arise. While Al-Ahed does list the authors, it does not give a specific date as to when the articles were released. Instead, they give an approximation (e.g.: “Two years ago).

In my thesis, I also provide a historical account of the Syrian Civil War, the use of chemical weapons in the war, American intervention in the Middle East, the Yemeni Civil War,

and the relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia. I provide this widely accepted historical account as context to underline the fallacies in the conspiracies supported by the Hezbollah media apparatus. In doing so, I primarily use scholarly work and NGO reports, but also occasionally use news reports.

Scholarly works are the most reliable secondary literature sources I use, but they often take extensive time to publish and do not always give a full historical account. The NGO reports I use, such as Human Rights Watch and Arms Control, are widely respected and reliable, but may also lack some information. News reports help provide real time information crucial to understanding the different conflicts, but their reactions are not always complete and some bias may be present in their articles. I also use US State Department Reports sparingly, and acknowledge the government biases that may be present in their reports. By using a combination of these sources, I believe I provide a thorough, yet imperfect, historical account.

V: Note on the Al-Ahed Authors and Hezbollah's Target Audience

While I was not able to find all of the authors of the Al-Ahed articles, I was able to track down a few. Catherine Shakdam, a contributor to Al-Ahed, is a commentator on the Middle East and director of programs at the Shafaqna Institute for Middle Eastern Studies in the UK (HuffingtonPost). The Shafaqna Institute for Middle Eastern Studies describes itself as “the fastest growing Shia News Association in the United Kingdom, Shafaqna English has worked to represent the interests of Shia Muslims across the world” (Shafaqna).

The other Al-Ahed contributors I was able to find on the internet were Hussein Mortada and Hamza Khansa. Mortada is an Arab journalist, who has his own Arabic language website of news articles and editorials. On twitter, he has three hundred thirty nine thousand followers, and has a pinned tweet of a picture of him smiling next to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. His

twitter profile is in Arabic, and indicates he is based out of Syria and Lebanon (Twitter/HoseinMortada). Hamza Khansa is a Lebanese journalist who has seventeen thousand followers on twitter (Twitter/Hamzakhansa). Khansa posts in Arabic, and has reshared various Al-Manar and pro-Assad videos and posts on his account (Twitter/Hamzakhansa) Khansa also has a separate Arabic language website with news articles and editorials (hamzakhansa.wordpress).

While it is impossible to say for certain who Hezbollah's audience is on their anglophone versions of Al-Manar and Al-Ahed, I would like to speculate. First, perhaps the Hezbollah-media apparatus is targeting Arabs living in English speaking countries. The American Arab institute estimates there are roughly 3,665,789 Arab Americans, and out of those an estimated 25% are Lebanese, 8% are Syrian, and 6% are Palestinian (American Arab Institute). Canada also has a large Arab population, as the 2016 Canadian census indicated there were 523,235 Arabs from the Levant and the Arab Gulf States. Of those, 219,555 were of Lebanese descent, 77,045 were of Syrian descent, and 44,820 were of Palestinian descent (Census Profile, 2016 Census). There are also notable Arab populations in the UK and Australia, each with roughly 258,400 and 248,807 residents of Arab descent (Institute of Race Relations, Humanrights.gov). The Hezbollah media-apparatus may be aiming to appeal to these audiences as they believe they could be sympathetic to their message.

I can infer some information on the narratives Hezbollah media displays to its domestic audience. While this thesis does not examine the Arabic versions of the Al-Manar and Al-Ahed websites, Al-Ahed contributors Mortada and Khansa primarily publish their work in Arabic. It may be possible that Hezbollah media translated its work to English from its original Arabic versions to put on the English version of the Al-Ahed website. While we cannot make this

assumption, I think it is something to note as a possibility.

Lastly, the Hezbollah media apparatus might be targeting conspiracy enthusiasts in the West. As highlighted by this thesis, Hezbollah media uses several Western-based conspiracy websites as references in its work. Fake news websites such as WorldnetDaily, Global Research, and Veterans Today are frequently referenced in Al-Manar and Al-Ahed articles. Perhaps Hezbollah media aims to target the audiences of these disinformation websites and add their voice and perspective to the growing disinformation presence online.

VI: Roadmap

In chapter two, I will examine how Hezbollah affiliated media have used conspiracies to falsely incriminate the US and Israel for directly starting the Syrian Civil War in an effort to colonize the Middle East. In chapter three, I will focus on how Hezbollah's media apparatus adopted a conspiratorial narrative blaming Assad's enemies for carrying out chemical weapons attacks and absolving the Assad regime of any guilt in the attack. In chapter four I will highlight Hezbollah affiliated media's conspiracies related to the Yemeni Civil War, and how they further accuse their enemies Israel, Saudi Arabia, and America of launching nuclear attacks and biological warfare. In my final chapter, I will summarize the findings of my project and briefly discuss other areas of potential research regarding Hezbollah and the greater disinformation campaign.

Chapter 2 – The Syrian Civil War: A US and Zionist Conspiracy?

Introduction

In 2012, Hezbollah entered the Syrian Civil War on behalf of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and officially announced its involvement in 2013 (Kizilkaya, 211). As the international community condemned the Assad regime's actions, Hezbollah media outlets found it vital to become conspirators and defend their actions to their audience. Most importantly, Hezbollah maintained its status as the “defenders of the oppressed,” blaming America and Israel for starting the Syrian Civil War as part of a globalist agenda to colonize the Middle East.

In this chapter, I will explore how Hezbollah formulated and propagated this particular conspiracy in its media. First, I will provide a brief history of the Syrian Civil War, the rise of Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and American-Israeli involvement in the War. I will then outline how Hezbollah's media uses conspiracies to tie “Zionists” and Americans to the Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, aiming at discrediting the US coalition against ISIS as merely a tool to support the group. I will highlight how Hezbollah media has used conspiracy theories from Western disinformation websites to support its narrative. I will argue that Hezbollah media uses conspiracies blaming the US and Israel for plotting to overthrow Assad as a mechanism for political survival, as it helps the organization to garner popular support in its decision to back the Syrian government.

I: History of the Syrian Civil War and the Rise of Al-Qaeda and ISIS

Al-Qaeda

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, which prompted resistance from Afghans and *Mujahideen* freedom fighters from around the globe. One of those Mujahideen was Osama Bin-Laden, a Saudi who founded Al-Qaeda in 1988 (CISAC, Vox, Council on Foreign

Relations). Upset with perceived injustices against the Muslim world, Bin Laden established a network of former *Mujahideen*, freedom fighters who had fought in the war (some of whom had been recruited from Arab countries), and other recruits to carry out attacks against the US and its allies (Byman, Council on Foreign Relations). Bin Laden ultimately orchestrated the September Eleventh attacks in the United States in 2001. The ensuing American invasion of Afghanistan drove Bin Laden to find refuge in Pakistan (Byman, Council on Foreign Relations).

American Intervention in Iraq

The United States invaded Iraq on March 30, 2003 kicking off a US presence in Iraq that would last until 2011. The Bush Administration's chief justifications for the war was that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and provided support to terrorist networks that threatened US interests. However, the Bush administration failed to prove either of these claims after the US invasion and was panned heavily by critics for its miscalculation. Regardless, the Bush Administration remained hopeful invading Iraq would help the country develop a liberal democracy and would set off a domino effect that would spread US-friendly democracies throughout the region (Rayburn et. al 615, Migdal, 239).

Despite the Bush Administration's optimism, the US failed to adequately integrate Iraq's Sunnis into the newly formed Shi'i-dominated government. After the US invaded Iraq, it created a power vacuum that pitted three Iraqi ethnic groups against each other: Iraqi Kurds, Sunnis and Shi'is (Johnston, et al. 12-13). While Sunnis enjoyed decades of political control of Iraq, they found themselves disenfranchised under the newly established government. Their disenfranchisement came following US De-Baathification policies, which disbanded the entire Iraqi military and barred anyone who had been associated with the Baath Party from serving in the government or the military. These policies led to the suppression of Sunnis and created fertile

ground for extremist organizations to mobilize in Iraq (Johnston, et al. 13). Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki also contributed to the suppression of Iraq's Sunni population during his tenure (Ryan, 20, Martin 106). This suppression set the stage for further Sunni insurgency against the Iraqi government and the West.

While Osama Bin Laden would remain in Pakistan, Al-Qaeda sought to expand its influence in the Arab world, and seized an opportunity after the US invaded Iraq. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an Al-Qaeda affiliate, fled to a remote area in Iraq following the US invasion of Afghanistan (Johnston, et al. 14). After the 2003 US invasion of Iraq toppled Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, Zarqawi established an insurgency in 2004 that became known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Johnston, et al. 11). Zarqawi's group became known for its vicious attacks against Shiites and US armed forces (Johnston, et al. 15). This includes an AQI attack on the al-Askari Shrine in Sammara, which is considered the third holiest site according to Shii Muslims. The attack contributed to a full on sectarian civil war in Iraq (Johnston, et al. 16). However, many Sunnis in Iraq turned on Zarqawi because of his perceived brutality. The US killed him in an airstrike in 2006. Al-Qaeda in Iraq remained quiet for a few years but resurfaced after the onset of the Syrian Civil War (Johnston, et al. 23).

The Syrian Civil War and the Rise of ISIS

In March 2011, peaceful Arab Spring protests erupted in Syria. Forces of Syrian President, Bashar Al-Assad, responded by attacking demonstrators, killing hundreds and imprisoning scores more (Baczko et al. 91). In July 2011, the uprising became a civil war after demonstrators began organizing rebel factions to counter Assad's attacks; members of the Syrian army defected from the regime's forces to create the Free Syrian Army (Baczko et al. 96, 103). Jordan and the Gulf states responded by providing military aid to the rebels, including Jihadists,

to counter the Shii presence in Syria (Martin 101-102). In turn, the US began supporting a covert CIA program to train rebels in the Free Syrian Army in 2013 (Vox). A multitude of opposition groups, militias, and state actors rushed to join the Syrian Civil War, destabilizing Syria and providing a fertile breeding ground for ISIS.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which became known in 2011 as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), took advantage of the unrest in Syria (Martin, 99). Under the guidance of Abu Bakr al- Baghdadi, ISI sent a delegation to Syria to fight against the Assad regime, which would become known as Jabhat al-Nusra in 2012 (Martin, 99). Jabhat al-Nusra became a powerful player in Syria, but was listed as a terrorist organization by the US State Department on December 11, 2012 (Baczko et al. 188). US intelligence accused Jabhat al-Nusra of aiding the “Khorasan” network to attack the US and other Western countries, accusations which Jabhat al-Nusra denied in 2016 (Baczko et al. 190).

However, in 2013, Baghdadi announced ISI would move into Syria. He then renamed his militia the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS was denounced by Al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra (Baczko et al. 187, 190-191). As ISIS gained ground in Syria, Assad initially tolerated the group’s rise (Ryan, 20). The rise of ISIS divided rebel factions against each other and turned foreign attention toward defeating the group as opposed to removing the Assad regime from power (Baczko et al. 198, Vox).

ISIS would capture the Syrian city of Raqqa in January of 2014, marking its first siege of a major Syrian city (Wilson Center, Baczko et al. 195). In the summer of 2014, ISIS carried out an offensive into Iraq that was met with little pushback, as they took the stronghold of Mosul, the strategic border crossing between Iraq and Syria’s Deir Ezzor province, as well as other key cities and towns. (Wilson Center). ISIS soon found itself controlling considerable portions of

Syria and Iraq (Wilson Center). In August 2014, ISIS continued its offensive by invading Kurdish controlled areas in Syria and Iraq, committing genocide against Iraqi Yazidis, and perpetrating other heinous war crimes (Byman).

The American Coalition Against ISIS

In 2014, the US began launching airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq, and in 2015 expanded its efforts to Syria (Council on Foreign Relations). The US led coalition also supported the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in ground operations against ISIS despite Turkish disdain for the SDF (Council on Foreign Relations). The US also deployed several hundred troops to Syria, including special forces (France 24). The SDF drove ISIS from their capital in Raqqa, Syria in October 2017, and launched successful assaults against the organization in Deir ez-Zor (France 24). Eventually, ISIS was outmatched by the US coalition and pro-Syrian coalition. These forces reclaimed 98 percent of the territory ISIS once held (Council on Foreign Relations).

E: Israeli Involvement in the Syrian Civil War

While Israel maintained neutrality in the Syrian Civil War, it has given varying levels of support to rebels in Southern Syria and has conducted airstrikes against Iranian and Hezbollah targets. At the same time, media reports have documented that Israel has provided medical treatment to wounded Syrians, including rebels, in field hospitals (Gross, Vice). In 2016, the Israeli Army launched “Operation Good Neighbor,” an effort that combated starvation faced by Syrians living along the border and provided basic medical treatment (Gross).

Besides humanitarian aid, reports also surfaced that the Israeli government has supplied modest military aid to militant groups fighting the Assad regime in Southern Syria. Eventually in 2019, the former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, admitted to this support (Gross). Israel contributed aid to twelve secular factions within the Free Syrian Army, including Foursan Al-

Joulan. They wanted to encourage rebel forces to launch attacks on Iranian militias and Hezbollah strongholds in southern Syria to shore up Israel's northern border (Bernard). Elizabeth Tsurkov, who wrote about Israel's aid to the rebel groups, asserted that the rebels denied receiving any training from Israel (Tsurkov). While some members of Al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat Al-Nusra received treatment in Israeli hospitals, Israel and Jabhat Al-Nusra emphatically deny any collaboration between the two groups (Vice, JPost, BBC.) In fact, Tsurkov reported that Jabhat Al-Nusra kidnapped and killed people suspected of collaborating with Israel (Tsurkov).

IDF military operations, generally, targeted the Iranian presence in Syria. Eisenkot acknowledged an IDF role in carrying out hundreds of raids in Syria and dropping thousands of bombs on Iranian targets (Martin 102, Gross). Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu no longer denies responsibility for the attacks, and unlike the previous government, openly discusses offensives against Iranian positions in Syria (Gross).

II: The Historical Context Provided by Hezbollah Media

Throughout the Syrian Civil War, Hezbollah media propagated a historical narrative of a US and Israeli partnership with Al-Qaeda Wahhabi extremists. Thus, Hezbollah media outlets argue that the US and Israel are responsible for founding Al-Qaeda and have not ceased to support Al-Qaeda and ISIS as these groups gained a significant presence in Syria.

Hussein Samawarchi, a contributor to Hezbollah's news outlet *Al-Ahed*, explains how Zionists and Al Qaeda collaborated to carry out the attacks on 9/11 in his article "New York's Attackers." Samawarchi forges several conspiracies, including how the Boeing aircraft, hijacked and used in the attacks, was owned by "Zionist Jews". He also posits that a group of Israelis who were detained by US authorities held prior knowledge of the attacks and were tasked by the

Israeli government to document the attacks on the World Trade Center (Samawarchi). These false statements “provide evidence” of Zionist involvement in the 9/11 attacks.

However, what may be the most relevant conspiratorial evidence Samawarchi provides relates to the Zionist-Wahhabi connection. Samawarchi argues Osama Bin Laden collaborated with the Zionists in the 9/11 attacks. He states, “Osama Bin Laden, the man who assumed responsibility for the terror attacks was a Wahhabi who implicated Arabs and Muslims. The two groups are the historical prime targets of Zionists; he gave them a gift,” (Samawarchi). Samawarchi asserts Osama Bin Laden launched the attacks in coordination with the Zionists, so the Zionists could pursue their aspirations against Arabs and Muslims in the Middle East.

Samawarchi continues by providing more evidence into the US and Zionist connection to Al-Qaeda. To outline this connection, he states, “Wahhabis have proved to be “Israel’s” biggest regional supporters in the past decade and Bin Laden was the receiver of US financial and military aid for many years during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan,” (Samawarchi). The US funded the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, and Israel and Saudi Arabia have similar aspirations against Iran. However, assertions that the US and Israel directly support Al-Qaeda, maintaining that the US and Israel have directly and purposefully funded and supported Al-Qaeda, are false. Despite this, Samawarchi argues US and Zionist support for Al-Qaeda, which later bred ISIS, started at the group’s inception and never ceased.

Hezbollah media provides this historical narrative to buttress its existence as a political entity and militant organization, which relies on the party’s record as the “defenders of the oppressed.” Hezbollah media portrays the intervention in Syria as justified in defense against radical “takfiri terrorist” groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, who are a part of a larger US and Zionist plot to undermine Islam and destroy the Arab World. Hezbollah media largely ignores

any presence of moderate rebel groups or political opponents and claims the rebellion is entirely fueled by religious extremists (Lazar). Therefore, the Hezbollah media stresses the past collaboration between the West and Wahhabi extremists in carrying out attacks, such as 9/11, and how support for those atrocities continued to the present day in Syria. I will now outline how Hezbollah's narrative on Zionist and American support for extremists continued during the Syrian Civil War, making it vital for Hezbollah to intervene to defend the Arab world against Western globalism.

III: Hezbollah Media's Portrayal of Zionist Support for Extremist Rebels

To legitimize Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, Hezbollah's media outlets *Al-Manar* and *Al-Ahed* linked Israel and the Zionists, who are loathed in Lebanon and the greater Arab world for their role in the Palestinian refugee crisis and repeated invasions of Lebanon, and attacks against civilians, to the "Wahhabi extremist" rebels in Syria. In an *Al-Manar* exclusive article titled, "Syrian Army Victories Are Declared by Zionist Blatant Violations," the author covers an alleged Israeli air attack on a Syrian military air base and declares that the Zionists were behind the Syrian Civil War. The author quotes a Syrian "political analyst," Dr. Nabil Kaana, who states, "Takfiris who are fighting the Syrian government on the ground are just tools of the Zionist enemy in the Syrian territory," (Al-Manar).

By tying the Zionists to the Wahhabi rebels, the author of the *Al-Manar* article justifies the actions of Hezbollah militias entering the Syrian Civil War. He establishes that Israel and the Zionists started the war to undermine Syrian and Lebanese autonomy, commit genocide against Arabs, and recreate the Middle East in their vision. This narrative ignores the Arab Spring protests against the Assad regime and his violent response to counter the opposition. Nevertheless, Israel was as an easy scapegoat for Hezbollah media to utilize as Israel's

intervention, asymmetric use of force, attacks committed against civilian population centers and infrastructure in Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War, ensuing Israeli occupation in South Lebanon, and the 2006 Lebanon War left Israel to be heavily criticized.

Hezbollah media accuses Israel of using Al-Qaeda affiliated militants as instruments of regime change in Syria, providing specific instances “demonstrating” this connection during the Syrian Civil War. In *Al-Ahed's* article, “Israeli’ Training Camps for Militants in Southern Syria,” Hussein Mortada provides “concrete evidence” into the Israeli collaboration with Al-Qaeda affiliated Syrian rebels. Mortada claims to have received information that Israel directly trains and arms militants stating, “the ‘Israeli’ entity started welcoming militants in several camps that they established for training, planning, assembly, and arming.” Mortada also claims that the Israeli military intelligence, “Aman,” works with Jordanian intelligence officers in a camp “near the Golany Brigade's outpost in Namroud Fortress in Banyas Village” in the occupied Golan Heights. Mortada asserts the Israelis and Jordanians collaborate with high ranking Al-Nusra Front members in the operation room in this military camp (Mortada).

While identifying that Israel treated wounded Syrian soldiers and civilians as well as provided modest military and medical aid to secular rebel groups is factual, claiming they set up training camps for militants, especially Al-Nusra Front militants, is likely disinformation disseminated by Hezbollah media (JPost, BBC, Tsurkov). Mortada fails to specify his source, however his reporting plays into the larger narrative of the Syrian Civil War being a Zionist plot. Importantly, his media claims Israel was training the “Jihadist” rebels in the Golan Heights and helped them orchestrate attacks against the “legitimate” Syrian government (Mortada).

Mortada simultaneously implicates Jordan in training extremist rebels with the Israelis, who gave aid to the Free Syrian Army (Nour Malas And Margaret Coker, Jordan Said to Help

Arm Syria Rebels). In doing so, *Al-Ahed* illustrates how Israel and Jordan, who already enjoy a peace treaty unpopular in the Levant, are directly responsible for the “extremist” Syrian militants (Safi and Holmes). Thus, Hezbollah justifies their intervention in Syria as they are fighting extremists supported by Israel that threaten Syrian and Lebanese sovereignty and commit atrocities against civilians.

Hezbollah media further indicts Israel with conspiracies exemplifying their support for ISIL. In an *Al-Manar* article, “Israel Endangered by Hezbollah, Worried about ISIL Defeat in Syria,” the author stresses Israeli sentiments regarding Hezbollah’s military threat and their support for Syrian opposition groups during the Syrian Civil War. The author bluntly describes Israel’s “partnership” with ISIS and other militant groups, stating, “the Zionist Army considered that the possible defeat of ISIL in Syria requires that the Zionist entity cooperate with a number of ‘moderate’ Arab country to support all the terrorist groups,” (Al-Manar). By aligning Israel with ISIS, Arab states that oppose the Syrian regime, and all extremist groups that took arms against Assad, *Al-Manar* further ties Israel to the atrocities carried out by ISIS and other extremist groups and legitimizes Hezbollah’s presence in Syria.

IV: Hezbollah Media’s Portrayal of The Syrian Civil War a US Plot for Colonizing the Middle East

Al-Manar and *Al-Ahed* incriminate the US as the culprit of the war and the chief supporter/financier of the “extremist” rebels as well as ISIS to justify Hezbollah involvement. One *Al-Manar* article, celebrating a Lebanese liberation from the extremists in Syria, emphasizes the connection between the US and extremist rebels, stating,

"It is very important at this point to remind that ISIL is a US-made tool, it was invented to cause all the disturbances in the Arab and Islamic world and to distort the image of

Islam and Muslims not only in the eyes and minds of the Westerners, but also to affect the Muslim young generations and make them detest Islam as a religion that preaches hatred and violence" (Al-Manar).

By adopting this narrative, *Al-Manar* declares ISIS as a mechanism for America's continued colonization project of the Middle East and their attempts to delegitimize Islam. Therefore, Hezbollah defends their intervention in Syria, as they are fighting the globalists that seek to strip them of their land and invalidate their faith. Valid arguments can be made contending that the Bush administration launched the US invasion of Iraq to expand US influence in the region, and that the invasion was responsible for creating a power vacuum and circumstances that were conducive to ISIS's rise in Iraq and Syria (Migdal, 239, Johnston et al. 13). However, Hezbollah media outlets argue that the United States directly aids ISIS financially and in the battle field, which is disinformation.

Hezbollah media provides extensive details explaining US support for ISIS. In a 2016 *Al-Manar* article covering a speech given by Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, the author supports Nasrallah's outlook regarding America's support for ISIS:

His eminence revealed that the US administration's plan in [sic] to "concentrate" the militants of the so-called 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' (ISIL) terrorist group in eastern Syria, i.e. in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, and along the Iraqi territories, adding that the US war jets helped ISIL militants during the Falluja and Anbar battles and helped them to flee away to Syria after defeat in Iraq instead of bombing them. (Sayyed Nasrallah: US Wants Fighting in Syria to Continue)

In this quote, Nasrallah defines specific instances of US support for ISIS. Nasrallah reconstructs a history where, instead of battling ISIS as the US claimed, they were responsible

for directly bringing ISIS into the region as their air support saved ISIS militants from losses in Iraq. While the US invasion of Iraq helped pave the way for ISIS's rise in Iraq and Syria, Nasrallah supports a more radical understanding of the US connection to ISIS and asserts that the US actively provides defense planning and support to ISIS and uses them as a direct proxy. Nasrallah rejected the accepted fact that the SDF, with US help, drove ISIS from their capital in Raqqa and the Deir Ezzor region. Instead, Nasrallah provides an alternative conspirator narrative in which the US concentrated ISIS militants in Eastern Syria to pursue a Western imperialist agenda and later facilitated ISIS's retreat from the region to bring them back to Iraq in safety. By rejecting the accepted historical narrative, Nasrallah builds on a narrative of America directly aiding ISIS for their colonization efforts in the Middle East. This, in turn, implicates America as being responsible for the massacre of civilians in pursuit of domination in the Middle East, further painting Hezbollah and Syria as victims of American colonialism. Importantly, Nasrallah's statements are then covered by Hezbollah media and regarded as doctrine.

Hussein Samawarchi's *Al-Ahed* article, "New York's Attackers," expands further on US support for ISIS and Al-Nusra during the Syrian Civil War, linking the CIA with the terrorist groups. Samawarchi states,

"The second generation of Al Qaida, "ISIS" and Al Nusra, have had their top operatives in Syria airlifted to safety onboard US military helicopters as per CIA orders. These mercenary Wahhabi terrorists are the people who have allegedly executed 9/11."

(Samawarchi)

Samawarchi does not provide any evidence beyond stating the above as a "fact" (Samawarchi).

Despite this, the information is believable to anyone suspicious of America's use of the CIA to

entangle themselves into the affairs of other countries and seek regime change. The CIA was involved in a 1953 coup that overthrew Iranian Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh (Ebrahimiyan). Rumors and conspiracies have also been rampant in connecting the agency in attempted regime change in other places, such as Venezuela (Shakdam). By highlighting CIA aid to ISIS and Al-Nusra, Samawarchi expands on a narrative of the CIA as an instrument of American designed regime change, and that the US is using the CIA in Syria to similarly overthrow the legitimate President from power.

V: Discrediting the US Coalition Against ISIS

After the US built an international coalition to defeat ISIS in 2014, Hezbollah affiliated media discredited American intervention against ISIS as a facade to mask colonial ambitions. Hezbollah media maintained these assertions as they supported its narrative that ISIS was the beneficiary of the US, legitimizing Hezbollah, Syria and Russia as the sole defenders of the Arab people. In Darko Lazar's *Al-Ahed* article, "The Battle in the Shadow of the War Against Daesh," Lazar takes aim at the US-Kurdish partnership, stating, "Washington threw its weight behind the Kurds and other militant formations, aiming to sever Damascus' link with Europe in the north, and its allies - Iraq, Iran - in the east," (Lazar). By providing a "strategic" explanation to why the US supported Kurdish militias, Lazar provides readers with an alternative account to the US's fight against ISIS. Lazar portrays a reality in which the US actively supports ISIS to undermine the Syrian government and colonize the Middle East, thus legitimizing the Syrian government and Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime.

Lazar continues with "evidence" that the coalition has not been fighting ISIS, but facilitated their success. In his article, Lazar exhibits how the US used the Kurdish militia, the

SDF, to support ISIS, stating, “Recent reports from the ground have shown that the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces [SDF] are allowing Daesh fighters to flee the ‘encircled’ city of Raqqa towards Deir ez-Zor in the east,” (Lazar). Lazar claims the US motivation for using the Kurds to aid ISIS is clear: to “partition” Syria in an effort to overthrow Bashar Al-Assad’s administration and colonize the region (Lazar). Another *Al-Ahed* article, “Saudi Arabia and Israel: An Alliance of Convenience,” by Hamza Khansa, declares the US-led coalition against ISIS is merely a “theatre of operations” disguising the US’s true support for the group (Khansa). Khansa provides evidence of their support for ISIS, stating, “the coalition would begin the practical implementation of its response by facilitating the return of Daesh to Palmyra through Mosul via Deir Ezzour and Raqqa,” (Khansa).

Lazar and Khansa’s false assertions claiming the coalition supported ISIS in the battlefield helps build the Hezbollah supported rhetoric that the US only supports the Kurds to assist their aid for ISIS, not to combat the militant group. Hezbollah media insists that the US coalition is merely a ploy to cover up their support for terrorists and maintain international support for their actions. As seen in Nasrallah’s comments in the previous section, this narrative ignores the US coalition’s role in driving ISIS out of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, instead claiming they facilitated their retreat from these areas and helped them find refuge in Iraq. In this narrative, the US uses the coalition as a disguise to maintain support from the international community to continue their colonialist project. Thus, the story establishes that the Syrian army, Hezbollah, and Iraqi militias are the only true defenders of the Arab people against ISIS.

VI: Weaponizing Western Disinformation

One crucial tactic Hezbollah media uses to legitimize their information is portraying Western born disinformation as fact. In an *Al-Manar* article celebrating Lebanon’s “second

liberation”, the author discusses ISIS’s founding, stating, “Many evidences and testimonies have been presented by scores of Western persons; intellectuals and officials that the group was founded and funded by the CIA...” (Lebanon’s Second Liberation). While the article fails to list any “sources”, it serves as a benchmark for what is considered valid information in the eyes of Hezbollah media. Hezbollah media stress the validity of Western sources whose beliefs match their narrative and use their opinions as evidence of the US’s ambitions in Syria. Hezbollah media likely believes that by using these Western sources, whether they be quotes from former officials, academics, or fake news websites, they will convince their audience of the West’s imperialist agenda for the region.

In Catherine Shakdam’s *Al-Ahed* article, “Neo-Imperialism-America’s Dual Policy on Terror,” Shakdam uses western sources to legitimize claims of American support for ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria. Shakdam quotes Canadian Professor Michel Chossudovsky, stating, “The Western military alliance has covertly supported terrorists with a view of destabilizing Syria as a nation state. There's ample evidence to the fact that the United States, NATO and ‘Israel’ are behind the rebels...” (Shakdam). At first glance, some readers may take the perspective provided as a fact. Its credibility is solidified as the source is a respected Western professor unafraid to uncover the West’s colonialist policies in the Middle East.

Despite *Al-Ahed*’s attempts to portray Chossudovsky as a credible source of unbiased information, Chossudovsky has long been considered a conspiracy theorist and mouthpiece of Russian propaganda. In 2001, Chossudovsky founded the “Global Research Website,” which claims to counter the disinformation spread by the mainstream media and provide the world the “unspoken truth” (About Global Research). However, Cambell Clark and Mark Mackinnon highlight how Global Research actually aided Russian and Syrian disinformation efforts, stating,

“Global Research is viewed by NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence... as playing a key accelerant role in helping popularize articles with little basis in fact that also happen to fit the narratives being pushed by the Kremlin, in particular, and the Assad regime,” (Clark and Mackinnon).

While readers may be inclined to believe this news as supporting their worldview, Chossudovsky is really a perpetrator in spreading disinformation supported by Russia and Syria. Nevertheless, this propaganda provides Hezbollah media material to present to its audience as indisputable fact in an effort to bolster its own agenda. Hezbollah media routinely refer to Chossudovsky's website as evidence in their stories.

Another source Hezbollah media regards as a credible Western news source is WorldNet Daily, a far-right conspiracy site. In Darko Lazar's *Al-Ahed* article, “The US War of Terror in Iraq and Syria,” Lazar uses WorldNet Daily's findings as evidence for America's connection to ISIS, stating, “The US-based WorldNetDaily cited Jordanian officials, reporting that US instructors at a secret base in Jordan had trained members of Daesh in 2012,” (Lazar). Although Lazar declares the use of US-run training camps for ISIS by using a “US-based” news agency, WorldNetDaily is notorious for spreading disinformation, including a conspiracy linking the Clintons to the killing of Vince Foster, a White House attorney during the Clinton Administration (Borchers). While Hezbollah media depict WorldNetDaily as a credible Western news source, it is merely another resource of disinformation for Hezbollah to hijack and use to present the US as a global oppressor and direct supporter of ISIS.

Another article from *Al-Ahed* highlights financial links between the American political establishment and ISIS, a trope supported by fake news websites in the lead up to the 2016 American presidential election (InfoWars). In an article covering Donald Trump's presidential

victory, Darko Lazar defines the “connection” between the Clinton Foundation and ISIS, stating, “The WikiLeaks series on deals involving Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta revealed a disturbing pattern of criminal activity involving the Clinton Foundation, which also served as a front for financing the Daesh terror group through Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Lazar).” Lazar draws on false assessments of leaked emails to prove a financial connection between former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and ISIS, suggesting that the US political establishment and government aided ISIS’s rise.

What makes Lazar’s conspiracy fascinating is that it follows a trend set by right-wing disinformation websites regarding Clinton’s ties to ISIS. In the lead up to the 2016 election, Wikileaks released thousands of pages of Clinton’s emails (Stein). These emails, in turn, were used as a springboard for disinformation. Zheping Huang notes that the emails were falsely used as “evidence” Clinton directly founded and supported ISIS in articles that went viral in China (Huang). Additionally, Western conspiracy networks, such as Infowars, were adamant about Clinton’s connections and support for the Islamic State before the election (Infowars, Infowars).

In his *Al-Ahed* article, Lazar employs the same strategy used by other disinformation sources seeking to undermine Hillary Clinton and the American political establishment, accusing them of founding ISIS to advance their globalist agendas. The tactic could be effective, as the Clinton email scandal was widely controversial in the US and lent disinformation sources the opportunity to take advantage of readers skeptical of Clinton (Prier).

Conclusion

This chapter outlined how Hezbollah media crafted a conspirator's perspective on US and "Zionist" support for the "extremist" Syrian rebels, they rejected the US coalition as a credible defense against ISIS, and used Western based conspiracy sources and theories to defend the conspiracies written in their own articles. In doing so, Hezbollah defends its involvement in Syria as necessary to prevent Western globalism in the region. Overall, Hezbollah media inaccurately characterized Assad's regime as victim to American and Zionist imperialism. The following chapters will discuss other conspiracies Hezbollah media supported to further defend their intervention, demonize the West, and legitimize Hezbollah's existence.

Chapter 3 - Chemical Weapons Use: A Globalist Plot Against Syria?

Introduction

It is well-known that throughout the war, the Assad regime used chemical weapons in attacks against civilians. These attacks not only have left countless Syrians dead or injured, but also are serious human rights violations (Schneider and Lutkefend, 12, Human Rights Watch). As Hezbollah has supported the Assad regime, the organization failed to acknowledge Assad's war crimes against his own people. Instead, Hezbollah's media apparatus adopted a conspiratorial narrative in which it portrayed the Syrian government as victim of systematic efforts to incriminate it of crimes against humanity. In this chapter, I will argue that Hezbollah media adopts this narrative to justify its support for the Assad regime.

I will begin this chapter by providing a brief definition of chemical weapons and an account of their use by the Assad regime and other actors during the Syrian Civil War. I will also discuss how the US and the international community has responded to these chemical weapons attacks. I will then highlight the conspiracies Hezbollah-affiliated media used to absolve the Assad regime of guilt, and how Hezbollah-affiliated media has weaponized Western disinformation to bring legitimacy to their claims.

I: Historical Background

The Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria

Extensive evidence exists of the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons in Syria. According to Tobias Schneider and Theresa Lutkefend, who are research associates at the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin, the Assad regime accounted for 98% of the use of chemical weapons during the Syrian Civil War, while ISIS can be accounted for the other 2% (Schneider and Lutkefend, 12). Similar reports, including Human Rights Watch reports, have attributed

blame to the Assad regime. The OPCW² in conjunction with the UN's Joint Investigative Mechanism also confirmed the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians (UN Web TV). Schneider and Lutkefend's report has documented that about 91.5% of the chemical attacks in the war have been chlorine attacks, while approximately 7% contained sarin (Schneider and Lutkefend, 12)

The first chemical weapons attack carried out by the Assad regime occurred in Homs in 2012 (Schneider and Lutkefend, 12). In 2013, the Assad regime used sarin gas in an attack, killing over 1,400 civilians in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta (Schneider and Lutkefend, 12, Sanders-Zakre). After the attack, US President Barrack Obama threatened the use of military retaliation against the Assad regime, and sought congressional support (Baczko et al. 150, Sanders-Zakre). However, the US ultimately stood down after it accepted a Russian diplomatic effort for Syria's chemical weapons to be destroyed (Baczko et al. 152, Sanders-Zakre). While the OPCW announced it had destroyed Syria's declared chemical weapons stockpile in January 2016, the Assad regime continued to use chemical weapons against civilians in 2017 and 2018, thus proving he had not given up its entire stockpile (Schneider and Lutkefend, 12, Sanders-Zakre, Baczko et al. 152).

American Responses to Assad's Use of Chemical Weapons

The US has conducted two one-off airstrikes against Syrian-government positions in response to chemical attacks. US President Donald Trump ordered an airstrike against Shayrat Air Base in April 2017, and helped orchestrate a joint US-UK-French air strike against Syrian

² The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is the implementing body of the Chemical Weapons Convention that was put into effect on April 27th, 1997. The OPCW has 193 member states, and is committed to the global mission of eliminating chemical weapons. The organization defines a chemical weapon as a chemical being used, perhaps in munitions, devices and other equipment, to cause intentional death or harm to a person (OPCW).

chemical weapons storage and research points (Gordon et al., Sanders-Zakre). Despite the strikes, they have largely proven to be ineffective deterrents as they have not prevented Assad from conducting further chemical weapons attacks (Schneider and Lutkefend, 12, Sanders-Zakre). Critics have also dubbed the strikes as incredibly risky, as US aggression further threatens civilian lives while also escalating tensions with Syria's chief ally, Russia (Sanders-Zakre).

International Response to the Use of Chemical Weapons

The United Nations Human Rights Council created the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic in 2011, primarily tasked with monitoring violations of international human rights law in Syria (United Nations Human Rights Council, Sanders-Zakre). The body works in conjunction with the UN International Impartial Independent Mechanism on the Syrian Arab Republic (IIIM) (Sanders-Zakre). The commission has identified thirty eight instances of chemical weapons use in Syria, and has attributed blame for most of the attacks to the Assad regime (UN, Sanders-Zakre).

The OPCW Fact Finding Mission (FFM) was also founded in 2014 to determine if chemical weapons were used during the Syrian Civil War (OPCW, Sanders-Zakre). As of June 2018, the FFM has investigated over 80 instances of alleged chemical weapons use, confirming the use of such weapons in 16 of the cases (CSIS, Sanders-Zakre). However, the FFM lacks the authority to attribute blame for the chemical weapons attacks (Sanders-Zakre).

Despite this, the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) was established by the UN Security Council Resolution 2235 in 2015, and tasked with assigning blame for the chemical weapons attacks (UN, Sanders-Zakre). During its two years of activity, it found the Syrian government responsible for four chemical weapons attacks, and ISIS responsible for two

(Sanders-Zakre). After the JIM found Syria responsible for chemical weapons attacks, Russia vetoed the extension of the JIM's mandate in 2017 and the mandate ceased operations (Security Council Report, Sanders-Zakre). Russia was almost certainly upset with JIM's conclusions finding their ally, Syria, responsible for heinous chemical weapons attacks.

II: Hezbollah Media as a Platform for Syria Figureheads

In order to maintain political legitimacy for their armed support of the Syrian Army, Hezbollah media provides a platform for Syrian politicians to adamantly deny the use of chemical weapons in Syria. In an Al-Ahed interview between Al-Ahed journalist Ali Abdallah and the Syrian Justice Minister Dr. Najm al-Ahmad, al-Ahmad addresses accusations of Syrian-orchestrated chemical attacks in Khan al-Assal and Eastern al-Ghouta. Dr. al-Ahmad declares that the assertion Syria used chemical weapons is “a lie that no one will believe” and continues by outlining several points in which he hopes to make his case (Abdallah).

First, Dr. al-Ahmad argues that the “armed terrorist groups,” referring to the armed resistance against the Syrian regime, are behind the attack in Khan al-Assal. Al-Ahmad states, “every time the UN Security Council determines to convene a session to discuss the Syrian crisis, the armed terrorist groups commit a massacre in a region or another one or two days before the session... and then accuse the Syrian state of standing behind these massacres,” (Abdallah). Dr. al-Ahmad's argument stresses that the rebels are the ones conducting these atrocities in an effort to convince the international community that the Assad regime is actually responsible for the crimes. In doing so, he creates a narrative in which Syria is the defender of the Syrian public whereas the rebellion attacks the people in an effort to appeal to the international community.

Another argument Dr. Najm al-Ahmad makes to absolve the Syrian government of guilt is denying the Syrians possess chemical weapons, stating, “The Syrian state did not issue orders to the army to use any kind of heavy weapons, henceforth how can Syria use weapons it does not possess in first place? We are 100% positive our army never used lethal weapons not even once” (Abdullah). Additionally, al-Ahmad argues the Syrian government does not have the incentive to resort to such violence due to their strong grip over Syria, claiming, “The Syrian army is strong and firm, it can enter any area and does not need to use chemical weapons in first place against its enemy, for sure it will not use its against its people!” (Abdullah).

These statements are false. At this point in the war (around 2013-2014), Syria had lost large swaths of land to the rebellion and had resorted to using chemical weapons against their own civilians. However, these points remain crucial to Dr. Najm al-Ahmad’s narrative that Syria is not responsible for the chemical weapons use and has no incentive to do so.

Interviewing Syrian officials and providing their false narratives related to the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Civil War is not necessarily disinformation. However, Hezbollah media consistently defends the Assad regime and refuses to admit it is culpable in any of the chemical warfare. Hezbollah could not retain political legitimacy domestically or globally if they provided any information suggesting their allies were responsible for mass atrocities. Therefore, it is imperative for Hezbollah media to support conspiratorial narratives that “prove” Assad’s innocence which deflect blame on to the rebellion, the Gulf Countries, and the West. I will now discuss some of the conspiracies Hezbollah media have supported related to the usage of chemical weapons in Syria, and how they help build upon Hezbollah media’s larger narrative for the war.

III: Theories Spread by Hezbollah Affiliated Media

One conspiratorial narrative Hezbollah media has supported is that Saudi Arabia is responsible for arming the rebellion with chemical weaponry that was used against Syrian civilians. In Catherine Shakdam's Al-Ahed article, "Plotting Against the Arab People- The House of Saud in League with Zionists," she asserts Saudi Arabia armed rebels with chemical weapons to use against civilians. Shakdam explains the Saudis wanted to "falsely" incriminate the Assad regime to prompt a NATO-led intervention into the war (Shakdam). Shakdam provides false evidence claiming there was foresight into Saudi attempts to incriminate Assad for a chemical attack in Daraa, stating, "Interestingly, back in 2012, Arabi Souri, a political analyst warned that sources in Syria had established that Saudi Arabia and NATO powers were working together toward implementing an elaborated false-flag "chemical weapons attack as a precursor to a NATO intervention," (Shakdam).

By promoting this conspiracy, Shakdam proclaims Assad's innocence in the chemical weapon attacks, while also incriminating rival Saudi Arabia in carrying out the attacks. Saudi Arabia has been a chief financier for the rebellion, including extremist-Sunni militias (Martin 101-102). Through their media, Hezbollah paints a picture in which Saudi Arabia is a foreign power aiming to breach Syria's sovereignty by supporting rebellious militias largely composed of foreign fighters (Abdullah). This false narrative portrays the Syrian regime and Hezbollah as the defenders of the Syrian public, and victims of a conspiracy seeking to de-legitimize their authority (Abdullah). Therefore, blaming Saudi Arabia for the use of chemical weaponry fits into the narrative Hezbollah media supports, as they claim their Saudi adversaries are helping to carry out these chemical attacks in an effort to breach Syrian sovereignty and the desires of the Syrian people.

Hezbollah also falsely attributes blame for the chemical weapons attacks to Turkey. In Ali Oubani's Al-Ahed article, "Turkey's Involvement in Syria's Chemical Affair, a War Crime," Oubani implicates the Turkish government in the chemical attacks in Ghouta, stating,

"American investigative journalist and author, Seymour Hersh, disclosed an intelligence report showing the involvement of Erdogan's government in the sarin gas attack in Ghouta, in addition to a document revealing that al-Nusra Front has the capacities to produce the gas" (Oubani).

Oubani uses Hersh's testimony to further the narrative that the Syrian government is not responsible for the chemical weapons. Alternatively, Oubani uses this disinformation to incriminate Turkey, who has provided support to rebel factions, and the prominent al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (Baczko et al. 134, 137).

Furthermore, while Hezbollah portrays Hersh as a source of credible information, he has been a source of spreading disinformation about the Syrian Civil War, and his arguments pertaining the use of chemical weapons by Syrian rebel groups have been largely panned by experts. British Journalist Elliot Higgins and chemical weapons specialist Dan Kaszeta launched a fierce rebuttal of Hersh's account, stating, "Hersh relies heavily on single, unnamed sources for each of his claims... Hersh's story is full of holes, and it brings the reliability of his sources and conclusions into question" (Higgins, Kaszeta).

As Oubani blames Turkey for assisting Jabhat al-Nusra with carrying out the attacks, he stresses their actions are a part of a globalist agenda to overthrow the rightful Syrian regime. Oubani claims that while the international community is aware of Turkey's guilt in the use of chemical weapons, it will refuse to pursue legal action against them, stating,

“Dr. Hussein rules out such a legal action against Turkey, noting that the organizations concerned with fighting the usage of untraditional arms are controlled by the super powers and hence, prosecuting any state for using untraditional weapons is a political matter par excellence” (Oubani)

Instead, Oubani furthers a conspiracy that the international community encourages Turkey to help carry out these chemical weapons attacks, so they can incriminate the Assad regime as responsible for the heinous crimes to justify a Western-led invasion of Syria. Oubani asserts this by stating, “All this only proves that the scenario that was made to invade Iraq was being equally concocted for Syria” (Oubani).

By bringing up the ill-fated US invasion of Iraq, Oubani helps effectively create a conspiratorial narrative equating previous true US policy in the Middle East with a fabricated version of events related to Syria. Oubani correctly maintains the US justified their invasion of Iraq claiming Saddam’s regime possessed chemical weaponry, a claim that turned out to be false and launched Iraq into a state of instability for years to come (Migdal, 239). However, Oubani claims the US was aware that Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction, and used the false accusations as a justification for invading Iraq (Oubani). Oubani claims the US and the international community know that Assad does not possess chemical weapons, but are employing the same strategy they used for Iraq to pursue their colonialist agenda in the Middle East (Oubani).

While this paper will not examine the legitimacy of the intelligence and evidence pertaining the Saddam regime’s possession of chemical weapons, Oubani draws a false equivalency between these situations to further a conspiratorial narrative. While the US found no evidence that the Saddam regime possessed chemical weapons during the time of the US

invasion of Iraq, overwhelming evidence exists of the Syrian government's culpability in chemical weapons attacks in Ghouta and elsewhere in Syria during the civil war (Migdal 239, Schneider, Lutkenfend 11-12). However, by underlining US policy failures in Iraq, Oubani helps create a conspiracy where the US schemes to incriminate Syria to launch another invasion into the Middle East. The conspiracy also paints Hezbollah and the Assad regime as victims of continued US colonialism in the region. This conspiracy could be compelling to many Arabs who opposed the US invasion of Iraq, and already see any US presence in the Middle East in a negative light. Therefore, this information can be compelling to some in the region.

This conspiratorial narrative, blaming the West for falsely implicating the Syrian regime to launch another invasion in the Middle East, continues to be present in Hezbollah-affiliated media later in the war. In April 2018, the Assad regime attacked Douma with chemical weapons, killing at least 43 people and igniting international outrage (Schneider, Lutkefend, 11). While the overwhelming evidence pointed to the Assad regime's guilt in the attack, Darko Lazar continued supporting Hezbollah media's conspiratorial narrative in his article, "The Countdown," absolving Assad of any crimes. In his article, he states,

"all indicators suggest that the Syrian leader had neither the resources nor the motive to carry out an attack that could pave the way for a western military intervention in his country, at a time when he is inches away from victory over militant groups" (Lazar).

In his defense of Assad, Lazar asserts Assad had no motive to launch the chemical attacks as he was winning the war. Rather, as he also discusses later in his piece, this attack was a setup by the West to justify intervention into Syria (Lazar). While the US, UK, and France responded to the attacks by launching airstrikes against government posts, it does not change the fact that Assad was responsible for the chemical weapons attack in Douma (Schneider, Lutkefend, 9, 11). This

particular conspiracy further plays into the narrative Hezbollah affiliated media support during the Syrian Civil War, defending their support for Assad as vital to preventing US colonialism in the Middle East.

IV: The White Helmets

I will now give a brief overview of the White Helmets, and how Hezbollah-affiliated media portrays them to further their narrative defending the Assad regime. The White Helmets, also known as the Syrian Civil Defense, is a humanitarian organization of roughly 3,400 volunteers who conduct rescue missions following bomb attacks against Syrian civilians (Solon, Pacheco et al). The organization has been praised for saving thousands of civilian lives during the Syrian Civil War, and a Netflix documentary (titled after their namesake) recording their work received an Oscar (Solon). They have also received two Nobel peace prize nominations (Solon).

Despite their efforts, the White Helmets have fallen victim to conspiracies related to their involvement in the Syrian Civil War. The White Helmets video-record all their missions, and organizations use their footage to document war crimes orchestrated by the Assad regime. Therefore Assad sympathizers, including Russian propaganda, have attacked the White Helmets and their legitimacy as a humanitarian organization. Disinformation websites have linked the White Helmets to former Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. Info Wars, an American conspiracy website describes the White Helmets as an “al-Qaida affiliated group funded by George Soros.” While the White Helmets have operated in Jabhat al-Nusra controlled areas, they have no ties to the group, and have not received aid from George Soros (Solon, Cosentino, 104).

In order to further build upon their narrative absolving the Assad regime of guilt for the chemical weapons attacks, Hezbollah media incriminates the humanitarian group, the White

Helmets, for helping stage the chemical weapons attacks. In Mohhamad Eid's article, "Eastern Ghouta: Are the 'White Helmets' Preparing for a New Theatrical Performance?," Eid claims the chemical weapons attacks is merely a "theatrical performance" to elicit a Western response. He states, "the so-called White Helmets are working for the intelligence of western countries under the guise of humanitarian relief and are coordinating with politicized media in order to create convincing plays for Arab and western public opinion," (Eid).

While there remains to be no substantial evidence for Eid's claims, they are crucial to Hezbollah affiliated media's conspiratorial narrative that absolves the Assad regime of guilt (Palma). The White Helmets have recorded their response efforts with handheld and helmet cameras, and their footage has been used by non-governmental organizations to accumulate evidence of Assad's brutality against Syrian civilians (Solon). Therefore, Eid and the Hezbollah media apparatus must falsely discredit the White Helmets as Western tools used to spread fallacies about the Assad regime.

V: Weaponizing Western Disinformation:

In order to bring legitimacy to their conspiratorial narrative regarding chemical weapons use in Syria, Hezbollah media have used disinformation from Western "experts" to support their claims. One of such sources is American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh. Hersh is listed as a source in several Al-Ahed articles to help bolster evidence Assad did not commit the chemical weapons attacks, as Ali Oubani states, "American investigative journalist and author, Seymour Hersh, disclosed an intelligence report showing the involvement of Erdogan's government in the sarin gas attack in Ghouta, in addition to a document revealing that al-Nusra Front has the capacities to produce the gas" (Oubani).

Higgins and Kaszeta's piece, which rejects Hersh's account, focuses on how the use of volcano rockets and complexities in developing Sarin gas makes it almost certain Syria conducted the attacks, conclusions consistent with investigations conducted by the Global Public Policy Institute, the UN's OPCW and Commission of Inquiry, and other respected investigations (Higgins, Kaszeta, Schneider, Lutkenfeld, 32, Al-Jazeera). Additionally, senior visiting fellow in the Centre for Defence Studies at King's College London, Paul Schulte, debunked Hersh's claim, stating, "The capability of sending sarin in and arranging for it to be fired in by Al-Nusra in ambiguous circumstances...who knows? What you're describing is a kind of intelligence black op, it's hard to do, no organisation specialise in this, and chemical attacks are rare" (Macdonald). Hezbollah affiliated media uses Hersh's account of chemical weapons use in Syria as "credible," when in fact his account has been largely debunked by experts.

Another figure Hezbollah media attempts to paint as credible, is Western-educated defender of the Syrian regime, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Theodore Postol. In Nour Rida's Al-Ahed article, "Western Media Frames and Filters: The Worthy and Unworthy Victims," she uses Postol as a reference when absolving Assad of guilt in the chemical weapons attacks, stating, "Since the first time the West accused the Syrian government of conducting a chemical attack in 2013, several reports have been issued by... MIT's Theodore Postol based upon field research and providing facts that prove it could not have been the Syrian government behind the attack" (Nour). Postol argues there is evidence the August 21st, 2013 chemical weapons attacks in Ghouta were staged, and the Assad regime did not commit these atrocities against Syrian civilians (Higgins).

Despite Hezbollah-affiliated media's portrayal of Theodore Postol as a credible source, Postol has been a staple in efforts to spread disinformation during the Syrian Civil War. While

Postol is a professor emeritus at MIT, he is not a chemist, and conducted his research related to the chemical weapons related attacks with Maram Sulsi (Ellis, Higgins). All of the chemical evidence in Postol's report comes via Sulsi (Ellis). Sulsi is a pro-Assad Australian chemistry student, lacking a PHD or other credible credentials to make her a reliable source. She has made appearances presenting her and Postol's research defending Assad on conspiracy shows such as InfoWars and the broadcast of former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke (Higgins). Sulsi is an avid defender of the Assad regime, which can be evidently seen on social media, including a picture where she holds both a Syrian and Hezbollah flag (Higgins). Sulsi also believes in conspiracies such as the Illuminati, a secret society that controls Western governments, and that 9/11 was a domestic operation conducted by the US government (Shachtman and Kennedy).

Postol's use of Sulsi, who lacks meaningful credentials and has been an information feeder for conspiracy websites, as his only chemical expert delegitimizes the credibility of his report. As Higgins notes, if Postol wanted to release a credible report, why didn't he collaborate with someone from MIT's Department of Chemical Engineering? (Higgins). Cheryl Rofer, a chemical weapons specialist, further debunked Postol's research efforts, stating, "Postol is operating from a naive set of assumptions, based on limited experience in a first-year chemistry laboratory...Nothing in Postol's argument sounds like it was written by a chemist or someone with a working knowledge of chemistry" (Higgins). While Hezbollah affiliated media attempt to portray Postol's report as valid evidence the Assad regime was not responsible for the chemical attacks, Postol's report is wildly flawed and cannot be taken as legitimate proof.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined how Hezbollah-affiliated media have created a conspiratorial narrative absolving the Assad regime of guilt regarding the use of chemical weapons, claiming

that accusations of Assad's use of chemical weapons is itself a conspiracy aimed at instigating foreign intervention into Syria. Hezbollah defends its support for the Assad regime, as it paints it as the true voice and protector of the Syrian people, and a victim of an international conspiracy seeking to discredit them.

Chapter 4: Conspiracies and Solidarity, Hezbollah and the Yemeni Civil War

Introduction

While Hezbollah has not been a direct participant in the Yemeni Civil War, it has been a strong supporter of the Houthi rebels who battle a Western-backed Saudi-led coalition.

Hezbollah media has used radical disinformation to falsely incriminate Israel, the US, and Saudi Arabia of carrying out nuclear and biological weapons attacks against the Yemeni population. In doing so, I will argue that Hezbollah advances its misinformation to incriminate its enemies as the sole aggressors and perpetrators of atrocities, further vilifying them to justify Hezbollah's continued resistance against their oppression.

In this chapter, I will provide a brief historical account of the Yemeni Civil War, foreign support for the war, and the current humanitarian crisis. I will also provide a history of the complicated and changing relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia. I will then discuss Hezbollah affiliated media conspiracies about the Israeli-Saudi Arabia partnership, and the atrocities they committed in cahoots with the US in Yemen. Lastly, I will examine the fake news website "Veterans Today" which Hezbollah affiliated media point to as a credible source of information.

I: Historical Background:

The civil war in Yemen

The Yemeni Civil War, labeled by the UN as the world's most dire humanitarian catastrophe, began in September 2014 after Houthi forces took control of much of the country, including Yemen's capital, Sanna (UN News, Human Rights Watch). The Houthis allied themselves with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had stepped down amid Arab Spring demonstrations in 2012 (Human Rights Watch, Casey and Kutsch). Yemeni President

Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia in response and appealed to the international community to assist in returning him to power (Sharp, 1).

Saudi Arabia, who had supported the Yemeni government against the Houthis in previous years, became distressed by the prospect of the Houthis, whom they consider to be a puppet of their arch-rival Iran, controlling a neighboring country and several strategic points for Saudi trade (Riedel). The extent of Iran's support for the Houthis will be discussed later in this section. Following Hadi's appeal, Saudi Arabia formed an international coalition, which included the UAE and other Gulf states, and intervened on Hadi's behalf, launching attacks aimed to restore Hadi as Yemen's leader (Sharp, 1-2). The United States supported the Saudi-led coalition with intelligence sharing, air fueling, and weapons sales (Human Rights Watch).

The ensuing conflict has been an incomprehensible catastrophe. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in February 2019, an estimated 17,700 civilians had been killed or wounded, mostly in airstrikes conducted by the Saudi-led coalition (UN News). The Yemen Data Project had similar estimates, approximating 17,500 Yemeni civilians had been killed or injured (Human Rights Watch). The actual civilian toll is expected to be much higher (Human Rights Watch). Both the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis have been responsible for reprehensible war crimes (Human Rights Watch). The Saudi-led coalition has used American and British munitions in scores of indiscriminate and disproportionate airstrike attacks against thousands of civilians (Human Rights Watch). The Houthis have used illegal landmines, recruited child soldiers, and indiscriminately shot artillery into Yemeni and Saudi cities, killing and wounding civilians (Human Rights Watch).

The war has also led to a dire humanitarian crisis, as more than 14 million people are at risk of starvation and outbreaks of diseases such as cholera. The Saudi-led coalition's blockade of

Houthi controlled ports and restrictions on imported goods has severely exacerbated the crisis. Houthi forces have also blocked medical and food aid from being delivered to populations in need (Human Rights Watch).

Insurgent groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and the Islamic State in Yemen, have been active throughout the war. These groups have orchestrated suicide bombings and other attacks (Human Rights Watch). The US has conducted drone strikes against both insurgent groups and has worked closely with UAE forces.

Background of the Houthi Movement

The Houthis are Zaydi Shiite Muslims, a sect of Shiite Islam that makes up roughly forty percent of Yemen's population (Riedel, Minority Rights Group). Their doctrine significantly differs from Twelver Shiism, which is predominant in Iran and Iraq. Throughout Yemen's history, the Zaydi Muslims have fought for control of the country with varying levels of success. Ali Abdullah Saleh, a Zaydi, came to power in 1978 and led the country for 33 years. During his time in power he had complicated relations with the US and Saudi Arabia, but ultimately enjoyed cooperation with both countries in efforts against Al-Qaeda (Riedel).

The Houthi movement was founded as a Zaydi resistance movement to Saleh's rule in the 1990s. The movement was named after Hussein al-Huthi, the movement's leader. The group focused on opposing the corruption of the Saleh government, as well as Saleh's ties with Saudi Arabia and the US. The Houthis were deeply radicalized following the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, as they were unnerved by US intervention in the Middle East. As a result, they adopted the slogan "God is great, death to the U.S., death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam." The Houthis developed strong ties with Hezbollah, which became their primary influencer for expertise and support, while Iran became a secondary source of support.

From 2003 through 2011, the Saudi-backed Saleh government fought the Houthi rebels but were faced with humiliation after spending tens of billions of dollars for failed efforts to remove the insurgent group (Riedel).

After Saleh resigned in 2012 following the Arab Spring demonstrations, the Houthis turned their attention towards overthrowing the newly established Hadi government. In an unprecedented turn of events, the Houthis colluded with their former enemy, Saleh, and plotted to overthrow the Hadi government. Hadi was highly unpopular. Portions of the population saw him as a Saudi puppet, and much of the Yemeni army remained loyal to Saleh. These sentiments paved the way for the Houthis to amass support and successfully seize Saana and most of the country in 2014 (Riedel). The alliance between Saleh and the Houthis ultimately deteriorated, and Houthi forces killed Saleh in 2017 (Human Rights Watch).

The Houthi Rebels have received support from Iran during the Yemeni Civil War, in what has become a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Riedel). For example, Iran is considered the origin of UAV and missile technology that has been used in attacks against Saudi Arabia (Sharp, 5). However, Iranian support for the Houthis dwarfs in comparison to Saudi support for Hadi, as Iran has invested a few million dollars a month while Saudi Arabia has invested nearly six billion dollars a month (Human Rights Watch). The US has continued to see Iran's connection to the Houthis as a threat to its security and has maintained support for the Saudi-led coalition despite the coalition's reported war crimes (Sharp, 16).

History of the Relationship Between Israel and Saudi Arabia

Israel and Saudi Arabia have had a complicated relationship. While they have been at odds with Israel as part of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and do not currently enjoy open diplomatic relations, their mutual disdain for the Iranian regime has drawn the two countries closer together.

Saudi Arabia voted against United Nations Resolution 181, which called for the British Mandate of Palestine to be split into neighboring Jewish and Palestinian states (Lillian Goldman Law Library). During the 1948 war, Saudi Arabia sent a small delegation of troops to Jordan in support of the war effort against Israel (Bahgat). However, while Saudi Arabia was angered by the formation of Israel, it initially saw Soviet presence in the Middle East as a larger threat to its national security, and therefore it refrained from taking strong action against Israel before 1967 (Bahgat).

The Six Day War in 1967 marked a turning point for Saudi Arabia in its hostility against Israel (Riedel, Bahgat). Saudi officials felt threatened after Israel gained control of East Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, considered to be the third holiest site in Islam (Riedel, Bahgat). At the same time, Saudi Arabia felt less threatened by the Soviet presence in the Middle East after Egypt ended its campaign in Yemen following their humiliating defeat in the Six Day War. Saudi Arabia saw Egypt as a potential partner for investment after they lost the Suez Canal and other strategic points to Israel (Bahgat). Saudi Arabia became a dominant player at the Khartoum Conference in 1967, which sought to unify Arab political and diplomatic efforts to pressure Israel into withdrawing from the land it had conquered in the Six Day War (Riedel, Bahgat).

Following the Khartoum Conference, Saudi Arabia pledged to provide extensive aid and military assistance to Arab countries bordering Israel, and the Palestinians (Bahgat). King Faysal, the ruler of Saudi Arabia at the time, became a leading supporter for Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and supported the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank, despite their ally Jordan's claims to the area (Riedel). Saudi Arabia also helped lead a 1973 oil embargo against states that supported Israel, which proved to

be devastating as it threw the US economy into a recession (Riedel). Saudi Arabia continued to fund the PLO during the Lebanese Civil War, where PLO and Israeli forces clashed (NYT).

Despite past differences, news reports and public statements have indicated Israel and Saudi Arabia have cozied up to each other in recent years, fearful of Iran's growing presence in the region (Black, Marcus). After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, and civil wars in Syria and Yemen, Iran has increased its presence in the Middle East, coming at the dismay of Israel and the Arab Gulf States (Black). Both governments in Israel and Saudi Arabia vehemently opposed the Obama-led Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iranian nuclear deal, believing the deal did not do enough to counter Iranian aggression in the region (Black). Therefore, Israel and Saudi Arabia's security interests have closely aligned, and while the two countries do not enjoy official diplomatic relations, the two have been suspected of secretly collaborating against Iran (Rahman, Black, Heller and Kallin).

In February 2019, Netanyahu met with Saudi and Emirati officials in Warsaw as part of a US-led meeting to discuss Iran's growing threat in the Middle East. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has also suggested improving ties between the two countries. When discussing the easing of tensions between Israel and the Gulf States, Netanyahu stated, "Cooperation in different ways and at different levels isn't necessarily visible above the surface, but what is below the surface is far greater than at any other period." Netanyahu's comments almost undoubtedly suggest there has been covert security cooperation between the two countries. Reports have indicated that Israel has shared intelligence surveillance of Iran with the Saudi-led coalition, and have sold Israeli drones to the coalition. However, cooperation between the

countries has remained confidential, and there remains little evidence that there is a considerable security tie between Israel and Saudi Arabia (Black).

II: Hezbollah Depiction of the Saudi-Israeli Connection

Hezbollah media constructs an alternative, conspiratorial historical narrative that paints the collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Israel to have been extensive and consistent over the past several decades. In Louay Toufic Hassan's Al-Ahed article, "Saudi-'Israeli' Ties: Secrets Brought to Light," Hassan provides a history of the relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia arguing Israel and Saudi Arabia sought to overthrow Egyptian President Abdel Nasser, stating, "Besides, both the Saudi and "Israeli" sides had alleged underhanded ties which resulted into the 1967 war; many documents were published in a number of newspaper [sic], proving that the war was funded by KSA to overthrow Abdel Nasser," (Hassan). Hassan also stresses Saudi Arabia's sponsorship of Israel during their invasion of Lebanon in 1982, stating, "In the summer of 1982, "Israelis" invaded Lebanon... That war was said to have been funded by Saudi Arabia... to shove the Palestinian Cause into oblivion..." (Hassan).

While Hassan makes some damning accusations, there is little evidence that supports his claims. Saudi Arabia had considered Israel to be a primary security threat following the 1967 War despite frosty relations with Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser, and became the chief financier for the PLO for decades to come (Bahgat, Riedel). Hassan's claims that Saudi Arabia has financed Israeli wars are false. However, they are not without a purpose. By creating this fiction, Hezbollah media seeks to demonize Saudi Arabia as a collaborator with Israel and the West to commit atrocities against Yemeni civilians. This appeal seeks to vilify Hezbollah's enemies, portraying them as merely puppets of Israel. Therefore, Hezbollah's resistance against

their enemies is further justified, as it is necessary to combat the criminals behind these atrocities.

Hezbollah-affiliated media was sure to highlight the alleged Israeli-Saudi extensive partnership during the Syrian Civil War and the Yemeni Civil War. One Al-Manar article, “‘Israel’ & Saudi Cooperate Militarily along Red Sea: Report,” written in 2016, highlights recent military cooperation between the two countries, stating, “The US website, Veterans Today, revealed an agreement between KSA and 'Israel' to hold a military cooperation along the Red Sea since 2014...the agreement stipulated that 'Israel' and Saudi administer Bab Mandeb Strait, Aden Gulf, Sues Canal [sic] and all the countries that overlook the Red Sea,” (Al-Manar). This article insinuates that Saudi Arabia and Israel jointly administer Yemen, thus implicating Israel and the Saudi regime in attacks carried out against Yemeni civilians.

While Saudi Arabia and Israel have almost certainly had some security cooperation in the past, the extent of coordination between the two countries is not expected to be at the level this Al-Manar article would suggest. While Israel may provide some intelligence information and military technology to Saudi Arabia, proclaiming that Israel and Saudi Arabia jointly administer military operations is a distorted claim made with little supporting evidence. The website the Al-Manar article uses as its source, Veterans Today, is a vehemently anti-semitic, anti-Israel, and pro-Kremlin conspiracy site, that has published articles denying the Holocaust and accusing Israel of conducting the September 11th attacks in 2001 (Schlatter, Schreckinger). I will go into further detail about the illegitimacy of Veterans Today as a proper news source later in this chapter.

After demonstrating the military alliance between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah affiliated media accuse the partnership of committing the most heinous of war crimes

imaginable: using a nuclear weapon on civilians. In an Al-Manar article, “Saudis Have ‘Israel’ Nuke Yemen for Them,” the author uses Veterans Today as a source to prove Israel supplied Saudi Arabia with a nuclear weapon to drop on Naqm Mountain in Yemen. The report alleges, “Delivery is most likely by an IDF F-16 with a Saudi paint job on the plane...The UN just ignores it unless the US, France or GB complains...This is now the second known use of nukes in Yemen by Saudi Arabia” (Al-Manar). Another article in Al-Ahed, by Ali Ibrahim Matar, furthered this narrative, stating, “US media outlets confirmed that Saudi Arabia had asked “Israel” to strike Yemen with neutron bombs, while noting that just recently Saudi labels were printed on “Israeli” warplanes” (Matar).

These articles accuse Israel and Saudi Arabia of collaborating to drop a nuclear weapon in Yemen, asserting that Israeli war jets disguised themselves as Saudi fighter jets. Although Saudi Arabia has been responsible for horrendous crimes against Yemeni civilians, and Israel has covertly provided Saudi Arabia modest security aid behind the scenes and is widely believed to have nuclear weapons, accusing Israel and Saudi Arabia of using a nuclear weapon in Yemen is extreme disinformation (Kristensen and Norris). This alleged attack was debunked by security expert Dan Kaszeta, who responded to Veterans Today’s accusations stating, “These particular reports... are largely re-circulating due to articles in the widely derided and generally discredited Veterans Today. It is clear to me... that the reports of nuclear warfare in Yemen are a fabrication...” (Kaszeta).

While Hezbollah-affiliated media relies on this extreme conspiratorial narrative to highlight Israeli and Saudi cooperation, it does so to further vilify their sworn enemies: Israel and Saudi Arabia. Hezbollah, who supports the Houthi rebels through its media apparatus, aims to paint Saudi Arabia as the foreign backed aggressor, responsible for atrocious crimes against

humanity with the aid of Israel. Hezbollah affiliated media, who have repeatedly rejected Assad's use of chemical weapons and placed the blame on the rebels and their supporters, are trying to prove that their enemies are the ones who use weapons of mass destruction, not the Hezbollah-Assad alliance. Therefore, Hezbollah uses these conspiracies to further build its narrative portraying itself as the victim by demonizing their enemies as committing severe atrocities against Yemen's population.

Hezbollah affiliated media builds on this phony account by presenting conspiracies linking the US for the current humanitarian crisis in Yemen. In Darko Lazar's Al-Ahed article, "The Pentagon's Biological Weapon," Lazar suggests the US may be responsible for the Cholera epidemic in Yemen, stating, "Still, the fact that Saudi jets used US hardware to annihilate Yemen's hospitals, clinics, water and sewage systems, just before a strain of bacteria - previously designated for biological warfare by the Pentagon - conveniently caused the worst epidemic in living memory, should do more than just spark people's curiosity..." (Lazar). While the US has supplied Saudi Arabia with weapons that have aided Saudi war crimes in Yemen, suggesting the US of unleashing a Cholera outbreak on the Yemeni populace is a hoax (Human Rights Watch). The Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi rebels deserve the bulk of the blame for the current humanitarian crisis, and biological warfare has not been the cause of the outbreak (Human Rights Watch).

Nevertheless, Hezbollah affiliated media welcomes this hoax implicating the US as it further demonizes its enemies, hence legitimizing Hezbollah's resistance against them. By creating a conspiracy in which the US actively uses biological weapons in Yemen, causing death and harm to millions of Yemenis, Hezbollah further implicates the US and its allies as the true enemy of the Arab people and accuses them of being the true users of weapons of mass

destruction against Arab populations. Alternatively, Hezbollah portrays itself, the Houthi rebels, and Syria as the victims of colonialism and the heinous war crimes of their enemies, legitimizing their existence as a resistance organization and ignoring the war crimes committed by their axis.

III: Use of Western Disinformation

In its hoax accusing Saudi Arabia and Israel of using a nuclear weapon against Yemen, Hezbollah-affiliated media points to Veterans Today as a credible “US website,” while in reality, the website is a petri dish for conspiracies and disinformation (Al-Manar). Veterans Today was founded in the US in 2003 following the US invasion of Iraq. The website had partnered with Iran’s state-backed PressTV in the past, and developed ties with Russian state-run New Eastern Outlook in 2013 (Schreckinger). The website has supported a range of anti-US, anti-Zionist and anti-semitic conspiracies, including stories that Israeli death squads participated in the Sandy Hook Massacres, Israel and the US orchestrated 9/11, and that the Holocaust never happened (Schreckinger, Schlattner). While Hezbollah portrays Veterans Today as a credible source, the website is deeply unreliable, and Hezbollah affiliated media use its published conspiracies as evidence to bolster their historical account that implicates their enemies of war crimes.

Additionally, the conspiracy claiming a neutron bomb was dropped on Yemen can also be found on US-based disinformation website Infowars. An InfoWars video published in October of 2015 suggested Saudi Arabia dropped a neutron bomb on Yemen, stating, “There is now unconfirmed evidence of a neutron bomb in play. Who is supplying these bombs remains to be seen. It could be the US, France, Israel, or China” (InfoWars). Similar to the Hezbollah-media apparatus, InfoWars uses this disinformation to further its agenda, portraying the US, France, Israel, and China as corrupt entities willing to commit mass atrocities to further their globalist agenda. This narrative is similar to that of Hezbollah’s media, which argues that Hezbollah and

Syria are victims of a US, Zionist, and Western conspiracy aimed at undermining their sovereignty.

Conclusion

Although the Saudi-led coalition is responsible for the egregious use of force in Yemen, Hezbollah media have used radical disinformation to falsely incriminate Israel, the US and Saudi Arabia of carrying out nuclear and biological weapons attacks in Yemen. In turn, Hezbollah has advanced a conspiratorial narrative incriminating its enemies as the sole aggressors and perpetrators of atrocities, legitimizing its existence as an opposition group dedicated to fighting these foreign actors.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

This chapter aims to summarize the arguments I made in chapters two, three and four, while also suggesting questions for further research related to Hezbollah's media apparatus. In chapter two, I outlined how Hezbollah sought to maintain victimhood by blaming America and Israel for starting the Syrian Civil War as part of a globalist agenda to colonize the Middle East. In doing so, they published conspiracies claiming America and Israel directly aided and supported Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS militarily and financially. Hezbollah media often cited Western disinformation sources, such as Global Research and Worldnet Daily, to bolster their claims. Hezbollah media also went so far as to claim that Hillary Clinton's leaked emails proved she had ties with ISIS. This is an erroneous claim popularized by disinformation campaigns in China and the US.

In chapter three, I argued that Hezbollah media adopts a narrative absolving the Assad regime of guilt in the chemical weapons attacks. They instead claim the Assad regime is the victim of an international conspiracy. In doing so, Hezbollah defends its military intervention in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime, placing the blame of his war crimes on the rebels, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others. Hezbollah media further use disinformation from discredited Western-based figures, such as journalist Seymour Hersh and Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Theodor Postol, to defend their claims.

In chapter four, I showed how Hezbollah media falsely incriminates Israel, the US and Saudi Arabia of carrying out nuclear and biological weapons attacks in Yemen. Hezbollah media does this in effort to further vilify their sworn enemies, further justifying the need for resistance against their oppression. Hezbollah media cites the disinformation website Veterans Today as a

source to back their claims. Their claims also align with that of US-based conspiracy website InfoWars.

In each of these chapters, I show how Hezbollah demonizes their enemies, accusing their adversaries of crimes against humanity in Syria and Yemen. In doing so, they paint themselves as the victims of oppression, justifying their support for the Assad regime and continued resistance. Hezbollah-affiliated media uses disinformation, some from Western based conspiracy sources, to help build their narrative.

Final Comments and Questions for Further Research

While this thesis outlines the disinformation supported by Hezbollah media, it only provides a drop in the bucket into Hezbollah's disinformation strategy, its connection to other disinformation sources, and the global proliferation of disinformation online. I am curious as to whether the Hezbollah media apparatus uses these same conspiracy theories on the Arabic versions of their websites? Are these the narratives they are trying to sell to their domestic audiences? In addition, do they cite the same Western-based disinformation sources as their English counterparts, or do they refer to other Arabic sources? If there is a difference between the narratives in the English and Arabic versions of the websites, we can learn more about Hezbollah's media strategy.

By analyzing both the English and Arabic versions of Hezbollah's media, we can also learn about the different audiences they are trying to cater to in both the Arabic and English versions. Perhaps Hezbollah media uses Western-based disinformation sources to gain the support of Arabs living in English speaking countries, while also appealing to American conspiracy enthusiasts and consumers of disinformation media. I also believe it would be interesting to explore Hezbollah's potential motivations behind appealing to these groups.

While I can only speculate as to what Hezbollah's intentions are, I believe they may be seeking both direct and indirect support. First, Hezbollah media may seek direct support abroad for their cause, whether that be direct funding or explicit support on social media. However, Hezbollah media may also hope that while they may not be able to create a substantial haven of Hezbollah-loyalists in English countries, they can use their media apparatus to tap into growing nativist and anti-globalist sentiments in Western countries (Achilles et al). In joining InfoWars, Worldnet Daily, Veterans Today, and other disinformation websites a part of the anti-globalist movement on the internet, they may hope that Americans will demand US foreign policy shift inward, potentially decreasing the US presence in the Middle East as well as the country's support for Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, I believe it may be worth exploring Hezbollah media's potential connection to Russia's disinformation campaign. Russia and Hezbollah both fought alongside the Assad regime in Syria, thus having similar goals. Russia has led disinformation campaigns targeting the US presidential election in 2016 and the Middle East. I wonder whether Russia has supported Hezbollah's media apparatus during the Syrian Civil War (Kagan, Borshchevskaya and Cleveland, 2). Has Russia supported Hezbollah media in any capacity? And if so, how have they given their support? Have they given Hezbollah media information or funding? Have they given them support on social media by using fake accounts to popularize their articles? I believe there is a lot more to learn here.

I also believe we can potentially benefit by examining the legitimization of disinformation by American politicians. Most notably, US President Donald Trump made an appearance on Alex Jones's InfoWars show during his presidential campaign in December of 2015. In the interview, Trump praised the show stating, "Your reputation is amazing. I will not

let you down. You will be very very impressed, I hope... a year into office you will be saying wow” (InfoWars). Trump has also helped fuel conspiracies that have been popular on InfoWars and the Worldnet Daily, such as one that claimed the Clintons assassinated a White House attorney (Borchers). Trump has played a role in legitimizing disinformation and these sources, further threatening the acceptance of disinformation on the internet. As Hezbollah-affiliated media expand their connections with these disinformation news sites, President Trump risks potentially legitimizing the Hezbollah-media apparatus.

Even more relevant to the findings of this thesis are US Congresswoman and 2020 Democratic presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard’s claims that the Assad regime did not conduct chemical weapons attacks in 2017 and 2018. On her campaign website, Gabbard defends her assertions referencing Dr. Theodore Postol’s report on Assad’s alleged use of chemical weapons. Gabbard portrays Postol’s report as having merit, stating, “Dr Theodore Postol is... a world-renowned explosive weapons expert. Dr Postol and a worldwide team of scientists, structural engineers, and mathematicians studied the OPCW reports and found them to be full of omissions, inconsistencies, and factual errors. Indeed, Dr Postol believes the OPCW has been compromised and its reports falsified” (Tulsi 2020). Gabbard fails to recognize is the inaccuracies and biased analysis of Postol’s report. Gabbard’s portrayal of Postol’s report as credible is an example of how an American politician is bringing merit to a conspiracy theory propagated by Hezbollah-media, which in turn could legitimize Hezbollah-affiliated news as credible.

Lastly, in both of these cases political actors use disinformation to amass support from target audiences, similar to Hezbollah’s media apparatus. Throughout his campaign, Trump found it necessary to legitimize disinformation about Hillary Clinton as it demonized her and

helped bolster Trump's image in his pursuit of the presidency. Similarly, Tulsi Gabbard promotes Postol's flawed report on her campaign website to appeal to a base that supports non-interventionism. As the proliferation of disinformation continues to spread online, I believe it incredibly important to explore how different political actors across the globe use disinformation to bring legitimacy to their own claims to power.

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