

## **"No salvation out of the Hezb." Female Militancy in the Lebanese Hezbollah.**

### **Summary:**

This article tells the story of women who live in the southern suburb of Beirut and who, at some point in their lives, have decided to be committed in Hezbollah. It analyses the plurality of motivations, life courses and types of commitments while restoring the symbolic and almost liturgical system which determines and maintains the political mobilisation for this party.

Adopting a socio-historical approach, this article grasps this political phenomenon "from below" through its female activists, its women, and its mothers.

To that end, the first part analyses the modalities of commitment to Hezbollah in the case of women. The second part explores the subjective dimension of this commitment. Here the concern is to see how this commitment is lived in everyday life and the sense that these women give to the party and to their commitment. This contribution is based on interviews with female Hezbollah militants since 2006 in the southern suburb of Beirut, as well as on observations made in this suburb during the commemorations, celebrations and lately funerals of party members.

### **Biography:**

Erminia Chiara Calabrese is a LabexMed postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Research and Studies on the Arab and Muslim world (IREMAM) in Aix - en - Provence. Her work focuses on the sociology of mobilisation and that of commitment. She also works on the political Shiism. Among her publications: "Al-Ghâlibûn: Le Hezbollah et la mise en récit de la 'société de la résistance' au Liban" (Al-Ghâlibûn: Hezbollah and the storytelling of the 'society of resistance' in Lebanon), *Journal of Muslim worlds and the Mediterranean* 134, December 2013; "HizbAllāh: muqāwamah ou le tournant culturel (HisbAllah: muqāwamah or the cultural turn", *La Rivista di Arablit*, III, 5, 2013; *Militer au Hezbollah dans la banlieue sud de Beyrouth (Militate in Hezbollah in the southern suburb of Beirut)*, Beirut / Paris, Ifpo / Karthala, forthcoming, 2016.

Every Thursday after the evening prayer, women alone or in small groups march in the streets of Ghobeyri, a municipality of the southern suburb of Beirut (Dahiyeh). They move towards the cemetery *Rawdat al-shahîdayn*<sup>1</sup> (the garden of the two martyrs) to visit the graves of their relatives. In this cemetery, today we also find the graves that became pilgrimage places, that of Hadi Nasrallah<sup>2</sup>, of Imad Mughniyeh<sup>3</sup> and of his son Jihad<sup>4</sup>, and other martyrs of the Resistance<sup>5</sup>. On each grave we see, with few exceptions, a photo of the martyr, his birthplace and frequently the operation during which he fell. On other panels, we can read the words "martyr fell while fulfilling his duty of *jihad*", a formula used by Hezbollah at the death of one of its members, often a fighter, but not necessarily referring to the only military struggle. Next to this cemetery, there is a long avenue lined with showcases with bright lights and small fast food restaurants and cafes, frequented particularly by young people of the neighborhood.

It is here in this cemetery that I met for the first time Hajjé Mariam<sup>6</sup>, a woman in her fifties, shortly after the 2006 war<sup>7</sup>. She was standing beside the grave of her son Hasan, 22, who was martyred on the battlefield in that war. With eyes full of tears, she was cleaning the headstone and kept kissing her son's photo. I came nearer and then she invited me to sit on a plastic chair, an accessory that is found in front of the tombs. Then, she began to tell me

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<sup>1</sup> This cemetery was built in homage to two young men killed in May 1975 during a fighting between the districts of Ain al-Remmaneh and Chiyyah in the southern suburb of Beirut. See: Monzer Jaber, "Les guerres des cimetières dans la banlieue sud," in Franck Mermier, Christophe Varin (ed.), *Mémoires de guerres au Liban (1975-1990)*, Arles, IFPO / Sindbad / Actes Sud, 2010, p. 365-389.

<sup>2</sup> Eldest son of Hassan Nasrallah, killed during battle in 1997 in southern Lebanon. The body of Hadi Nasrallah was returned by Israel, with other fighters remains, in 1998 during an exchange of prisoners.

<sup>3</sup> Military leader of Hezbollah murdered in Damascus on February 13, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Jihad Mughniyeh, 25, was murdered on January 18, 2015 in an Israeli helicopter raid on the Quneitra area in the Syrian Golan, with five other fighters: Mohammad Ahmad Issa, 43, military commander; Abbas Ibrahim Hijazi, 36; Mohammad Ali Hasan Abu Hasan, 30; Ghazi Ali Daoui, 27 and Ali Hasan Ibrahim, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this article, I will use the capitalised word Resistance to speak of the Islamic Resistance of Hezbollah.

<sup>6</sup> All first names have been changed to protect the privacy of interviewees.

<sup>7</sup> On the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 2006, Israel, using as pretext the deadly ambush and the subsequent kidnapping of two of its soldiers on the western border between Lebanon and Israel in Khalat Warde region, near the village of Ayta Cha'ab, launches a large-scale military operation on Lebanon, with a main objective: "eradicating" Hezbollah and destroying the "terrorist cancer". In the afternoon of the same day, Hassan Nasrallah holds a press conference during which he states that Hezbollah fighters have kept their word and managed to capture two Israeli soldiers to exchange them for Lebanese detainees in Israeli prisons. He gives to this operation the name of *al-wa'd al-sâdiq* (the sincere promise). Nasrallah also says that he is ready to conclude a cease-fire and to begin indirect negotiations for a prisoners' exchange. At that press conference, the party's General Secretary says that Hezbollah does not intend to conduct Lebanon to a war, as this operation has one single goal, namely the resumption of indirect negotiations for the prisoners' exchange. On July 14, Israel imposes an air, sea and land blockade on Lebanon, destroys the main bridges in the country, bombs the headquarters of the *al-Manâr* channel and the southern suburb of Beirut. Israel says that the bombings will continue until the release of the two soldiers without negotiations. These bombings will cease on August 14 with the entry into force of the UN ceasefire. On this war, see: Franck Mermier and Elizabeth Picard, *Liban ; une guerre de 33 jours*, Paris, La Découverte Editions, 2007; Nubar Hovsepian (dir.), *The War on Lebanon: A reader*, Northampton, Olive Branch Press, 2008.

her story, the story of her son and of their commitment *bil-muqawama* (in the Resistance), a term commonly used by Hezbollah militants to explain their commitment to this party:

"The day that Israel decided to attack Lebanon for the umpteenth time, I knew that my son would join the battle. He had made his career in Hezbollah as a fighter and therefore, he could not do otherwise. But when party officials showed up at my door, I did not want to open it, because I already knew the news that they were coming to tell me. [...] I asked my oldest son to open the door and, from the kitchen, I heard that my son Hasan was martyred in the south against the enemy. I then began to shout, because I did not want to hear that. In fact, there is no pain for a mother more atrocious than losing her son."

Hajjé Mariam stopped her narrative, unable to hold back her tears. The other women in the room of the cemetery approached her, embraced her in silence. I knew later that these women shared with Hajjé Mariam the same story, the same pain of losing a son, a husband or a brother in the struggle.

Based on the history of women in the southern suburb of Beirut who decided, at some point in their lives, to commit to Hezbollah, this article aims to analyse the plurality of motivations, of life course and of types of commitment, while restoring the symbolic and almost liturgical system which determines and maintains the political mobilisation for this party. It grasps this political phenomenon "from the bottom", through its female militants, its women and its mothers, favoring the subjective dimension of this commitment.

To do this, the first part of this article will examine the modalities of commitment to Hezbollah in the case of women. Since the party's membership is only for men<sup>8</sup>, women's training does not presuppose military sessions, a necessary condition for the membership of the party<sup>9</sup>. But that does not prevent women from committing to the party, following a militant training, participating in activities and sometimes occupying prominent positions, but without being members.

The second part of the article will explore the subjective dimension of this commitment. This is to see how this commitment is lived in everyday life, and the sense that these women give to the party and to their commitment.

This contribution is based on an ethnography conducted with Hezbollah female militants in the southern suburb of Beirut since 2006, as well as on observations made in this suburb during the commemorations, celebrations and lately funerals of party members.

Over the years, political and public action of Hezbollah has transformed some Dahiyeh neighborhoods into an environment where the dominant worldview is that of the party; it is

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<sup>8</sup> On this subject, see Erminia Chiara Calabrese, *Militer au Hezbollah dans la banlieue sud de Beyrouth*, Beirut / Paris, Ifpo / Karthala, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Naim Qassem, *Mujtama' al-muqawama, 'irâdat al-'istishhâd wasinâ'at al-'intisâr*, Beirut, Dar al-ma'ârif al-hikmiyya, 2008, p. 63-64.

a worldview that the latter eventually imposed as a "norm"<sup>10</sup>. And the good implementation of Hezbollah in this territory is accompanied by the presence of different local networks and associations of the party, which will not only provide material benefits to the party's activists (*bykhaddim al-nas*)<sup>11</sup>, but will also work, for some residents of the suburb, as "mediating structures", therefore contributing to the consideration of the party's ideas, values and ideology.

In some districts of the southern suburb, one can also find shops that sell gadgets and souvenirs of the party: necklaces, bracelets, pendants representing symbols of Hezbollah, books and tapes, photos and portraits of Hassan Nasrallah showing him in different positions (in military costume, as a father with a child in his arms, waving to the crowd during one of his rare public appearances).

In this suburb of the Lebanese capital, the space is saturated by the display of portraits of the party's martyrs, when it is not the streets that bear the names of Resistance leaders or martyrs as "Sayyid Hadi Highway", renamed in homage to Hadi Nasrallah. There are also plaques at the entrance of buildings, indicating the place of residence of a Hezbollah martyr, or monuments erected in homage to the martyrs that turn into memorial places.

Some stigmatisations want to make the Dahiyeh a territory "isolated from the capital, dirty, chaotic, illegal, inhabited by poor Shiite Islamists associated with Hezbollah and who are under Iranian influence."<sup>12</sup> In 2006, when Israeli air force bombed several times the whole neighborhoods of this suburb with the goal of "eradicating Hezbollah", it only reinforced these representations.

However, Dahiyeh is actually "a place to perform various subjectivities more or less close to the party of God, more or less protestor, more or less visible and provocative."<sup>13</sup> Its socio-economical space is mixed<sup>14</sup>, and it is inhabited by a Lebanese population, with a Shiite majority and a Christian minority but also by Palestinians, Sudanese, Iraqis and Syrians. Though Hezbollah is, in this suburb, a hegemonic political actor since 1989, it undertakes a relationship of competition and complementarity with Amal movement<sup>15</sup> led by Nabih Berri. Dahiyeh is also inhabited by activists of other political parties, particularly the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and the Lebanese Communist Party, even though their numbers have gradually declined.

### **At the party school**

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<sup>10</sup> See: Mona Harb, *Le Hezbollah à Beyrouth (1985-2005). De la banlieue à la ville*, Paris, Beirut, Karthala / IFPO, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>12</sup> Conversations with several residents of Beirut.

<sup>13</sup> Mona Harb, "La banlieue du Hezbollah: un territoire détruit, une lutte renouvelée," in Franck Mermier and Elizabeth Picard (ed.), *Liban : une guerre de 33 jours* (Lebanon, a 33-days war), Paris, La Découverte, 2007, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> See: *al-Dahiyya* magazine, April 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Amal movement remains very active in Ghobeyri and Burj Barajne.

Every week, between twenty and thirty women take place in a room located in one of the municipalities of this suburb to attend, for two hours, the course that Hezbollah gives to women who want to be active in the party. In a row on brown plastic chairs, they listen to Battul, a woman in her fifties who for five years has been invested by the party to undertake the training of female activists, at least in this neighborhood. They listen carefully and silently, while Battul alternates in her speech the Lebanese dialect and classical Arabic with a soft, familiar voice. Among the audience, there are employed women, housewives, and also several young students, all eager to accomplish their mission in this party. The audience is very diverse, socio-economically and generationally. Most are between thirty and forty years, and twenty years for the younger. The outfits are also varied. Some women wear a long black coat that covers the entire body (*'abaya*)<sup>16</sup>, others wear a long dark coat with a floral or solid color veil, while others wear a long shirt and pants. The calm in this room contrasts with the children shouts, and the noise of cars and motorcycles that come from outside. Here we have the impression of being cut off from the world.

These sessions called “cultural sessions” (*dawrât thaqâfiyya*) are supposed to present the vision of the party about the society as well as its interpretation of Shii Islam. The courses centre on Shiism, the *wilâyat al-faqîh*<sup>17</sup>, history, philosophy, politics, the history of prophets, Imams and *'Ahl al-Bayt*<sup>18</sup>, the history of Lebanon and the history of Palestine, the current policy.

In this respect, Manal, a twenty-two years old militant, explains the main themes of this training:

“During this training, in addition to very general topics on how to make prayer and ablution, reading the Koran or the lives of imams, we also receive explanations for example on the importance of wearing the veil as desired by the party and the *'abaya*, though, about the latter, the party has softened its position in recent years. It is not only the question of wearing the veil but also of its meaning and its importance that we understand here. We learn how to educate our children according to our religious commitment and how to support our husbands who are committed to armed combat because our support is essential.”<sup>19</sup>

Leila, another activist, explains:

"During the training that we follow in the party, we learn, at first, the general principles of the vision of Shiism to which adheres Hezbollah. This is a very simple level that explains to us how to accomplish this mission adequately. Then there are other sessions that focus more specifically on the party's vision about the role of the woman in it and in the society. The work of political, cultural and ideological

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<sup>16</sup> For Hezbollah, wearing the *'abaya* by women is not mandatory but highly recommended. See: Hussein Abu Rida, *al-tarbi'a al-hezbiyya al-'islâmiyya, Hezbollah namûdhajan*, Beirut, Dâr al-Amîr, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Guidance of the theologian-jurist, Khomeini's theory, *wali al-faqîh* whose successor is Khamenei. This guidance applies in all spiritual and temporal areas.

<sup>18</sup> Literally, “People of the House,” refers to the family and descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>19</sup> Interview by the author, April 12, 2009, Chiyyah.

awakening is due especially to women who want to take up a high position in the party. These courses which take place at higher levels in the party are important because they also allow us to get permission to give religion classes later".<sup>20</sup>

As we mentioned previously, the party membership is only for men<sup>21</sup>. Training women does not imply military sessions – which is the necessary condition for being a party member – and women cannot, at least currently, participate in armed combat. For several party officials, the reason is that “now, in current circumstances, there is no need to recruit women to take part in combat.”<sup>22</sup> But nevertheless, as we can read in one of the manuals used in the militant training:

"If one day we need to confront the enemy to the extent that grown-up, working, and even sick men and women must bear arms to fight this enemy [...], all persons, men and women, must participate. There will be no need for the authorisation of the infallible Imam or of his special delegate"<sup>23</sup>.

And Naim Qassem, Deputy General Secretary of the party, confirms that point:

"Some (women) asked to have the opportunity to bear arms and participate in the fighting. However, the religious obligation of fight does not include them when the number of men is sufficient and when their participation is not necessary. The role of the woman is at the back of the front, in the support and mobilisation; which is better suited to her physical ability, in view of the division of roles between women and men. Her reward from God is by no means decreased since the reward depends on the religious obligation and that the woman performs it from her position."<sup>24</sup>

But women can nevertheless be active in the party, and can follow a training which, unlike the one for men only, has no specific deadline. They can participate in activities and sometimes occupy important positions.

It is noteworthy that at the beginning, Hezbollah had no structures to regulate the work of women. Therefore, they rather used to deal with organising events or commemorations of the party or with giving religious courses. But today, things have changed. Women's Committees (*al-Hay'at al-nisâ'iyya*) are the organisational structure that oversees the activities of female militants within the party. These committees work in villages and cities and dedicate their work especially to the educational aspect. Although women are not yet

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<sup>20</sup> Interview by the author, May 12, 2010, Haret Hreik.

<sup>21</sup> For training reserved for men in the party, see: Erminia Chiara Calabrese *Militar au Hezbollah dans la banlieue sud de Beyrouth*, *op.cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Several interviewed female activists expressed their desire to devote themselves someday to military tasks as well. Some of them explained that in the first years, even women followed the same military training, but Hassan Nasrallah then cancelled that decision. Note that this has not been confirmed by the party cadres. In the Basij organisation in Iran, Khomeini, concerned about the news arriving from the war in Iraq, decided in 1985 that women could also participate in the armed struggle and go to the front “to assist men in the defense of the nation.” The Organisation of *basiji* Sisters (*Basij-e khaharan*) was established in Basij later. See: Fatemeh Sadeghi, “Foot Soldiers of the Islamic Republic's 'Culture of Modesty',” *Middle East Report*, 250, 2009, p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> See: *al-Ma'ârif al-'islâmiyya*, p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> Naim Qassem, *Hezbollah: the way, the experience, the future*, Beirut, al-Buraq, 2008b, p. 67.

present on the battlefield nor in the *majlis al-shura*<sup>25</sup>, they still hold positions, some of which are important. In December 2004, Hezbollah, for the first time ever, named a woman, Rima Fakhry, among the 18 members of the Political Council. Similarly, the party named Wafa Hutayt as a deputy at the Hezbollah's Office of Central Information.

In addition to this training, the activities of women within the party are multifaceted: they not only concern education, but also mobilising other women, working in the parliamentary and municipal elections, organising celebrations, etc.

### ***Al-Din al-Haqiqi: an Islam that encompasses the whole life***

"What Hezbollah has brought is not religion, but a different way of living our religion [...]. Before the arrival of Hezbollah, the atmosphere (*al-jaww*) was different from that of today. We knew of course that we were Muslims, but our way of practicing Islam was quite different: we fasted during Ramadan because we had to do and that was all. Before, as we all know, the Shiites were especially committed to left-wing and nationalist parties [...]. I remember that before, the majority of girls in my neighborhood did not wear the veil [...]. Here in Chiyyah, there were no veils stores, so we used to go to Hamra Street or to Barbir neighborhood to buy veils. I remember that at first, the veils were of one color, we did not find all colors to match the clothes like today. I also remember that we used to ask couturiers to sew clothes of practicing girls, that is to say, long skirts and long-sleeved shirts because they were not as pretty as they are today in the shops. [...] Later, the family Murtada opened up the first store that sells veils at Chiyyah. I remember that those veils were imported from Iran and Iraq. [...] About religion and how to practice it, I also want to say that in the past, families were not educating their children to religion: when you were seeing a veiled girl on the street, you were automatically thinking that she belonged to a family of a Sheikh and it was therefore almost an obligation for her to wear the veil."<sup>26</sup>

With the arrival of Hezbollah and according to several women, Islam has taken a "different expression" (*al-'islam sar 'anduh ta'bîr mukhtalif*). They explain that by the fact that this vision of religion and its rituals touches not only the strictly religious dimension, but all aspects of the individual's life. These women committed to Hezbollah speak of "true religion" (*al-dîn al-haqîqî*)<sup>27</sup>, which is opposed to the traditional practice of the previous generation, the "ordinary religion" (*dîn 'âdî*). The latter can be understood as a banal vision of Shiism, detached from the present times. Battul's remarks about the participants in the "piety movement," as Saba Mahmood says, could be analysed as a critique of the dominant form of religiosity that existed before the arrival of Hezbollah, "where Islam is treated like a

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<sup>25</sup> This board is the most important organ of the party and is composed of seven members. Its task is to "define the objectives and the political line, to support the general plans of the party's action and to take the political decisions." *Ibid.*, p.91.

<sup>26</sup> Interview by the author, 23 April 2008, Chiyyah.

<sup>27</sup> On this issue, see Dalal el-Bizri, *L'ombre et son double*, Beirut, CERMOC, 1995. See also Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shii Lebanon*, Emory University, 2003.

system of abstract values that [...] plays a secondary role in the practical organising of everyday life."<sup>28</sup>

In this regard, Lara Deeb points out that many people in the southern suburb adhere to an "authentic Islam", resulting from a transformation perceived by inhabitants "in their religious practices and interpretations, a transformation that is a key aspect in the conceptualisation of social change and of the dynamics of Shiite identity in the contemporary world."<sup>29</sup>

In their daily conversations, female activists of the party stress this new vision of Islam – specifically of Shiism – and religious practices that Hezbollah has introduced: an Islam that is never ignored and that embraces all aspects of life. A way to practice Islam that Thurfjell called with regard to Iranian *Basiji* "all-encompassing religion" because it becomes "a framework that encompasses every thought and every activity."<sup>30</sup> Naim Qassem, Deputy Secretary General of Hezbollah, maintains that the party has a commitment to Islam that acts "like an integrated project of life" (*ka-mashrû' mutakâmil fi-l-hayât*), "a religion that also guides behavior in everyday life and in public life."<sup>31</sup>

These new religious practices are also present in the southern suburb of Beirut, and are vectors of change (*taghyrât*) of the atmosphere, as the two activists, Yemen and Jamal, say respectively:

"I was born in Dahiyeh and when Hezbollah arrived, the whole atmosphere has changed, because the boys became very practicing and mosques imams began to urge young girls to wear the veil. [...] After having observed them for some time, I joined the party and I wore the veil because I was finally convinced of my gesture. I'm working now in one of their associations and it is with them that I learned the true religion, it is with them that I feel, as a woman, useful in my society."<sup>32</sup>

"When Hezbollah arrived, we experienced a great religious awakening which was of course influenced by the Iranian revolution of Khomeini. Frankly, I have lived all that a little bit differently because I come from a family of Sheikhs. At nine and as a Sheikh's daughter, I was already wearing the veil, I was almost forced to wear it. I remember that I was embarrassed before my female friends because they did not wear a veil. Also, I was not aware of this choice. I remember that I was a student in a school in Ain Rummaneh, run by Christians, and I had to change school. [...] Today, I am proud to wear the veil and I'm not embarrassed anymore because I see that people understood the true meaning of religion and therefore the reason to wear the veil. Previously when people used to see a veiled girl, they were saying that it

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<sup>28</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politique de la piété, le féminisme à l'épreuve du renouveau islamique*, Paris, La Découverte Editions, 2009, p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> Lara Deeb, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> David Thurfjell, *Living Shi'ism : Instances of Ritualisation among Islamist Men in Contemporary Iran*, Leiden, Brill, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Naim Qassem, *op.cit.*, 2008a, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> Interview by the author, February 22, 2011, Chiyyah.



was probably her family who forced her to do it; while now, a veiled girl is respected. Now, it is the whole mood that has changed."<sup>33</sup>

For Yemen and Jamal, the commitment within Hezbollah was accompanied by a reflexive look on the reason of their backing of the party. If for Yemen, the religion courses of her militant training made it possible, for Jamal, already a Sheikh's daughter, the arrival of Hezbollah represented an "ulterior awareness." They take the example of wearing the veil, which was revalued with the arrival of the party.<sup>34</sup> When Jamal speaks about the veil, she points to this "distance," this "rupture" between an "authentic Islam" and "traditional Islam." She says: "Now, I feel comfortable with my veil and not embarrassed like I was before." She insists that henceforth, her choice to wear the veil is conscious, in contrast to when she wore it as "a Sheikh's daughter;" without really understanding the meaning because it was "almost an automatic gesture." It is often said about party activists that "they understand the religion" (*byfhamû bil-dîn*).

Furthermore, this religion is distinguished by its practice, in the sense that it is also conceived as a set of signs, codes and norms that govern individual and collective daily lives. Deeb refers to it as a "public piety" which articulates the religious, social and political values.<sup>35</sup>

This new form of religiosity made clear, as already noted in Deeb's survey in Dahiyeh, "why you do what you do"<sup>36</sup> and the practice also became a way to "personal development"<sup>37</sup> and to the "achievement of a pious self."

Religion thus becomes a way of being and acting which inspires all activities of daily life. Many women insist on the fact that during the cultural sessions of the party, they also learn "how to behave, how to behave to highlight this religiosity in their personal and public life."

The complexity between the articulation of this "authentic religion" and daily activities emerges from this conversation between two women; one of them is an activist in Hezbollah and the other is not. Zaynab, an activist within Hezbollah, explains to Maryam what "living religion as Hezbollah wants" does mean to explain how Islam is "an integrated religion" (*dîn mutakâmil*) that covers all aspects of daily life, and is also now present in all her activities:

"Watch your daily actions. Since I started working for an association of the party and committed myself to Hezbollah, all my daily life changed. Religion is now present in all the acts of my life [...]. Not long ago, and you saw it, I was in the kitchen when a glass fell to the ground. I immediately thought that this glass had become *najis* (impure) and I cleaned it so that it becomes *Tahir* (pure). It is only a small example [...]. Your behavior and your daily actions toward others become better. When I do a

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<sup>33</sup> Interview by the author, February 3, 2011, Chiyah.

<sup>34</sup> The veil and how to wear it represent in Lebanon an identity marker. About different ways to wear the veil, see: Roschanak Shaery - Einsenlohr, *Constructing Lebanese Shiite Nationalism: Transnational Shiism and the Lebanese State*, PhD Thesis, University of Chicago, 2005, p.250; Lara Deeb, *op.cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>35</sup> Lara Deeb, *op.cit.*, p. 5-6.

<sup>36</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>37</sup> David Thurfjell, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

good deed during the day or, for example, when I help people in need in the association where I work, I do what the religion teaches me to do. When you give money to whom needs it, you do what Imam Ali taught us, because he was very generous to all people. When in the morning you get up and do your prayer, now you do it consciously. Or when you take care of your parents at home, your children and your husband, all this also means that you are a strong woman and that you contribute in some ways to the welfare of our community. Religion also makes you altruistic. All this comes from the example of our imams."

The issue is not only about teaching other female activists the right way to perform the religious obligations but especially, as emphasised Saba Mahmood, about "teaching them how to organise their daily behavior in accordance with the principles of Islamic piety and virtuous behavior."<sup>38</sup>

This piety encompasses all aspects of social life and all spheres of life: from the clothing style, from the way to speak, from children's education to home management mode, the role of women in the society, relationship to work and authorised entertainment etc.

### **"The courage and loyalty of Sayyida Zaynab: a model for us all"**

"Imam Khomeini forced the woman to get out of the house in order to accomplish her duties, thus the man could not prohibit her anymore from going out. Sayyid Abbas Mussawi, the former Secretary General of Hezbollah, had no objection to help his wife in the house if she had to go out for meetings within the party or to participate in social activities. [...] Following the example of Abbas Mussawi, many activists that I know in Dahiyeh do not refuse to share household chores with their wives and do not hinder their work in the party."<sup>39</sup>

The vision of Shiism advocated by Hezbollah has also given a new place and a new role to women in the society. Women are now investing themselves in their communities, they defend this vision by defending its principles.

On many occasions, these women emphasise the role that Imam Khomeini had assigned to women during the Iranian revolution, because he "was directly inspired by examples coming from the Qur'an and from the life of the great female saints of Islam, Fatima al-Zahra<sup>40</sup> and her daughter Zaynab, without whom Islam would not have been maintained in its authenticity." For some female activists, Fatima "had moral qualities that only the Prophet Mohammad and imams have experienced."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politique de la piété. Le féminisme à l'épreuve du renouveau islamique*, Paris, La Découverte Editions, 2009, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Hajje Wafa', interview by the author, 12 April 2008, Ghobeyri.

<sup>40</sup> Fatima al-Zahra, daughter of Prophet Mohammad, wife of Imam Ali and mother of Imam Hasan and Hussein, who provided the progeny of the prophet.

<sup>41</sup> Shiite dogma makes Fatima one of the fourteen "impeccable" or "infallible," who do not commit mistakes; the other thirteen are the prophet and the twelve imams. See: Mohammed Ali Amir-

One must, therefore, defend his community as did Zaynab, sister of Hussein, before Yazid, "the usurper caliph" in Damascus.

After the death of Hussein and his companions at the battle of Karbala, Zaynab was taken captive, with the other female prisoners, to the caliph at the court of Damascus. "They carried the head of Hussein to the Caliph who began playing with it, with the tip of a stick. Zaynab then stood up and said: 'How dare you touch that head, those lips that the prophet kissed so often?'"<sup>42</sup> Then she gave a speech which, according to the female activists who report it, proves the courage of this woman raised up in front of the usurped power. Before the Caliph Yazid and the assembly, Zaynab defended her family and the memory of the prophet as well as the honor of Hussein.<sup>43</sup>

"Use your stratagems, broad your intrigues, expand all your efforts! I swear to God! You will not erase our memory, you will not put to death our revelation. Your opinion will only be reduced to nothing, your days are numbered and your group will only be dispersed, the day when the caller only calls may God curse the oppressors."<sup>44</sup>

The attitude of Zaynab in Karbala and the words she pronounced before the Caliph "prove the courage of this woman."<sup>45</sup> Zaynab is the image of the strong woman that remained strong during distress; she is a model in the Shiite Passion of Karbala, because it is thanks to her courage that the message of Hussein could be transmitted to subsequent generations. For these women, she also became a model because "she suffered in Karbala. And that is why one feels that she is close because she knew how to bear the loss of all her family with dignity."

The female activists have a very active role in the party's organisations and their educational networks and are also increasingly visible. Only the military and political spheres of decision still suffer from their absence. Asked about their absence from the battlefield, Maya explains:

"During the battle of Karbala, Zaynab joined her brother on the battlefield, but Hussein immediately asked her to go back to the camp to take care of children and other women. [...] She saved several times Hussein's son, Ali Zayn al-Abidin<sup>46</sup>, who was sick because al-Shimr tried to kill him more than once. She also took him out of

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Moezzi, *Le Guide divin dans le shiisme originel. Aux sources de l'ésotérisme en Islam*, Paris, ed. Verdier, coll. "Islam Spirituel", 1992, 73-75.

<sup>42</sup> Sabrina Mervin, "Fâtima et Zaynab, deux Dames de l'islam chiite," *L'éternel féminin au regard de la cathédrale de Chartres*, European seminar papers (30/6 – 1/7 2001), AACMEC, Chartres, 2002, p. 117.

<sup>43</sup> During the commemoration of the Karbala tragedy, all along the month of *Muharram*, theatre representations of the battle of Karbala also depict the capture of Zaynab, her arrival in Damascus and her speech to the Caliph.

<sup>44</sup> *La tragédie de Karbala. Le martyr de l'Imam Hussein*, Beirut, Beit al-Kateb, 2007, p. 315.

<sup>45</sup> The speech of Zaynab before the Caliph Yazid is often cited by the cadres of Hezbollah, who use it as mobilisation resource. This was the case of Hassan Nasrallah during the war of July 2006. This speech was very much studied, "there is certainly little truth in what has come down to our days. Regardless, since it is the mythical character that is meaningful." Sabrina Mervin, op.cit., P. 117.

<sup>46</sup> Ali Zayn al-Abidin is the fourth Imam of the Shiites.

the tent that had been set on fire. We must support this resistance by working in the party's associations that treat wounded combatants and thus follow the example of Zaynab."<sup>47</sup>

Maya defines the battlefield as a field that belongs exclusively to men, "while the role of the woman was that of spokesperson, that of preserving and transmitting the message of Hussein."<sup>48</sup> Hezbollah's mobilisation speech plays a role at this level, highlighting the figure of the woman who stands against oppression. For Maya just like for the other women interviewed for this study, the commitment within the party and in its activities is seen as a duty, in the straight line of the Shiite tradition to which these women belong. The examples of Sayyida Fatima and Sayyida Zaynab are regularly cited.

These women who for several years have shared with me their life stories and their courses have consistently described the commitment within Hezbollah and the adherence to the vision of Islam that the party offers as a way of life (*uslûb al- hayyât*), a way of acting that inspires all their acts, religiously and socially, and gives meaning to their lives. Many of them give the idea of this encompassing commitment by the phrase "*ma fi shi barrât al Hezb*"<sup>49</sup> (no salvation out of the Hezb.) These women admit that thanks to Hezbollah and by attending courses offered by the party, they have today acquired the skills necessary to an awareness of their role in the family and in society.

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<sup>47</sup> Interview by the author, April 12, 2008, Haret Hreik.

<sup>48</sup> Kamran Scot Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shii Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, University of Washington Press, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Hezb is the diminutive of Hezbollah.

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