

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

LIVING WITH INSTITUTIONALISED ISLAM: A CASE
STUDY OF SOUTHERN SUBURBS OF BEIRUT

by
SHANTANU MEHRA

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Approved by:



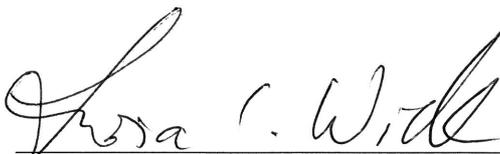
Dr. Sylvain Perdigon, Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

Advisor



Dr. Kirsten Scheid, Associate Professor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

Member of Committee



Dr. Livia Wick, Chair
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

Member of Committee

Date of thesis defense: May 2, 2019

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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This thesis is a study of how Shia Muslims relate to Islam in its institutionalised form. I do an ethnographic study of life around *mujamma'* al-Qaim, which is located in the southern suburbs of Beirut popularly referred to as Dahiya. By analysing Hizbollah as both a state and non-state actor, I study how spaces like al-Qaim come to institutionalise Islam. In doing so, I locate Hizbollah and by extension al-Qaim on the margins of the modern Lebanese nation-state. Building and complicating the work done by Naveeda Khan on the neighbourhood mosques of Pakistan, I study the aspirations and scepticisms pious Shia share with spaces like al-Qaim. The ethnographic vignettes share life trajectories of peoples who aspire, are sceptical, and share an open-ended relationship with Hizbollah through spaces like al-Qaim

CONTENTS

Introduction ----- 1- 5

Chapters

1. Where is al-Qaim ----- 6 – 43
2. The Quest to Align Struggles ----- 44 – 62
3. Shia Women in South Lebanon ----- 63 – 86
4. Conclusion ----- 87- 89
5. References ----- 90- 91

Introduction

As someone of South Asian descent, my understanding and lived experience of religion has been very different to what I have studied and experienced in the Middle East. I am always fascinated by the nature of the relationship that people have with religion in their everyday lives. Do they even think about their relationship with religion? As I progressed in my degree at AUB, it became clearer to me that questioning our relationship with religion also involves examining how we think about religion in the first place. In other words, what is religion and how does one know what it means to different people? Is religion an experience, a social category or an academic concept to study certain aspects of people's lives? Lambek notes that "for anthropology, religion implicitly informs and underpins the world in which people live, enabling the habitus (everyday practice) to run its course, to go 'without saying'. It also becomes the explicit subject and object of people's passion in marked rituals and other forms of enactment, creation, contemplation and devotion." (2002:7) It is the everyday practices that are almost taken for granted that sparked my interest and got me thinking about Muslims and mosques.

What follows is an ethnographic study of the relationship that pious Shia Muslims in Beirut have with their neighbourhood *mujamma'* al-Qaim. This particular *mujamma'* is run by Hizbollah and is located in the Southern suburbs of Beirut popularly referred to as Dahiyya. The reason it is referred to as a "*mujamma'*" and not just a mosque is that this space is meant to be much more than one for prayer. A *mujamma'* is a community space which is also used to conduct many socio-religious activities and has different areas allocated for different purposes, such as Islamic education, meetings — in some cases, a *mujamma'* will even house a gym (although not in al-Qaim). In the first chapter, I analyse in detail the concept of a *mujamma'* as understood by my interlocutors. The larger questions I wish to engage are the

following: how does Hizbollah use al-Qaim to institutionalize religion, and how does this institutionalization shape people's relationship towards Islam as a religion and towards Hizbollah as an organization? Can people who frequent the place over a period of time also become critical of Hizbollah's institutionalization of religion? At the same time, can it become a space where religion, in the process of being institutionalized, also gets debated and discussed? For instance, when someone from al-Qaim affirms their commitment to the politics of Hizbollah, what aspect of their piety is political? And what when people who consider themselves to be part of the community begin, over time, to doubt their piety and the relationship they share with Hizbollah? In short, does al-Qaim serve as a community space where people's connections to their self, their religion and Hizbollah get transformed?

In chapter 1, I critically examine the meaning and nature of the relationship which my interlocutors share with the space they call *Mujamma'*. Al-Qaim is not just a mosque; it is *Mujamma' al-Qaim*. Al-Qaim is a space for Islamic ritual activities such as prayer, but it is much more. Although architecturally it resembles a mosque, it is a space which also hosts an auditorium, a conference cum event hall, a hawza for both women and men and a residential space for the *mujamma'* caretakers. In terms of its management, it is run by Hizbollah and therefore all activities are either approved by or directly linked with the party. This chapter ethnographically introduces *Mujamma' al-Qaim* and also sets forth the bulk of my theoretical inquiry. I engage with the works of Lara Deeb, Saba Mahmood, and I build on the work of Naveeda Khan on Pakistan. In particular, I deploy Khan's concepts of aspiration and scepticism in relation to the people who frequent al-Qaim. Khan starts from the assertion commonly heard in Pakistan that the country was built as a mosque. She looks at mosques in the city of Lahore to study manifestations of aspiration and scepticism in the everyday lives of people who are involved with the mosques in various capacities. By paying close attention

to the relationships people hold with their neighbourhood mosques, Khan becomes able to argue that Pakistan as a state has an open relationship to Islam, and it thus keeps the potential for "experimentation" open in order for this relationship to be continually negotiated.

Building upon and complicating this argument, I explore its implications within the Lebanese context.

For socio-political and historical reasons, the Lebanese state has never been a fertile ground for establishing an exclusive relationship to any religion. There is currently no impetus in Lebanon for turning the state into an exclusively Islamic Republic. And unlike Khan's Pakistan, Lebanon is not a state in which Muslim citizens, whether they are Shia or Sunni, can easily claim to have an open-ended relationship to the religion of Islam. This is especially true for Shia Muslims who consider themselves to be part of the pious community associated with Hizbollah, because it has been observed that in Lebanon Hizbollah often works like a state-within-a-state. This thesis is not about the history of Hizbollah itself, but this history matters for setting the context of my research. Hizbollah, like and unlike Pakistan, holds the capacity to interfere, influence and institutionalize the relationship its Shi'i constituency has with Islam. At the same time, Hizbollah participates in national elections and has not replaced the Lebanese state per se or its operations, even for its own Shia Muslim community. For these reasons, I locate al-Qaim on the margins of the modern nation-state, i.e. the Lebanese state. I ethnographically demonstrate the relevance of the concept of 'margins of the state' by paying attention to bureaucracies involved in the day-to-day running of al-Qaim. Finally, I focus on the discussions that take place every Friday after the prayer, and which very often play a pivotal role in attracting many youths to associate themselves with al-Qaim and with Hizbollah at large. These discussions can be seen as a potential site for

approaching both the aspirations and scepticism internal to the day-to-day workings of al-Qaim and Hizbollah.

In the second chapter, I present the life stories of three young men who have been associated with al-Qaim or with Hizbollah through al-Qaim. In their life trajectories, I do not just locate aspiration or scepticism but also other emotions and aspects from their everyday life. For example, what are the frustrations involved in trying to be committed as a pious Shia Muslim? What does it mean to be a committed Shia Muslim but not share any relation to Hizbollah, and is this cause for internal confusion? Similarly, does one need to be religious to support Hizbollah? How does one separate 'Islam' from Hizbollah? Is it even possible to think about the latter without the former? What are the challenges involved when normative aspects of religion and politics clash with everyday realities? More specifically, my interlocutors' engagement with politics forces them to reconsider their understanding of what Islam is for Hizbollah and, by extension, their own relationship to al-Qaim. All three of them live their lives with various degrees of commitment to religion, politics and community. For some, the relationship is fragile, and it is one in which they simply appreciate certain aspects of Hizbollah's pious community; for others, it is a matter of absolute piety, one which requires more disciplining of the self than mere aspirations or scepticism towards either Islam or Hizbollah.

In the third and final chapter, I think about the gendered aspects of striving within the al-Qaim community. Although I did not have access to women's spaces in al-Qaim for participant observation, I meet two women who have been or are involved in the activities of al-Qaim in some capacity. Rather than sharing their journey with al-Qaim or Hizbollah, however, they share their experiences of studying at AUB. Their time spent in what they call

the "secular" atmosphere of the university campus alters their relationship with the religious community of Hizbollah. Through oral history, this chapter approaches the life aspirations and scepticism of two women who are set apart by a generation.

Chapter 1

Where is al-Qaim?

In 2013, Oxford Union organized a debate on the motion, “Islam is a religion of peace”. Leading academics, policy makers and journalists spoke on both sides of the motion. Renowned journalist Mehdi Hasan, speaking for the motion i.e. Islam is indeed a religion, of peace made some very provocative points. At one point of the debate he said, “I am not here to argue that Islam is a pacifistic faith... it is not. Islam allows violence and military action in a limited context, and yes there is a tiny minority of Muslims who take it out of that context. But is it religious?” To counter the stereotype that Islam is an inherently violent religion, he quoted a Gallup poll in which responses from fifty-thousand Muslims from thirty-five countries were analyzed and ninety-three percent rejected 9/11 and suicide bombings. And of the seven percent who did not, when spoken to in focus groups, “cited political and not religious reasons for their support” said Hasan. He further cited American political scientist Robert Pape from UChicago, who studied every suicide attack between 1980-2005 in his book “*Dying to Win* and quoted, “there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism or any of the world’s religions. Rather what all suicide attacks have in common is a specific, secular and strategic goal to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territories that terrorists consider to be their homeland.” Mehdi Hasan and others speaking for the motion won this historic debate at Oxford.

Mehdi Hasan, and more generally speakers on both sides of the motion, worked hard to speak about Islam in a manner in which it was divorced from the everyday lives of Muslims, in such a way that the experience of *being* Islamic or Muslim had no direct correspondence to how we think about the motion, “Islam is a religion of peace”. Therefore, 'everyday Islam' in relationship to the lives of Muslims is different to the abstract 'Islam' that the debate at

Oxford Union interrogated. In other words, there can be critique of religion, even a critique of secular governance which interprets religion to specific ends, but it is difficult to imagine a form of critique emerging from within religion, i.e., religion critiquing its own premises. The question is not whether there needs to be a strict definition of what qualifies as critique or whether Islam in this case can critique itself, but rather where exactly this critique is taking place. The *where* is a prerequisite to understanding what constitutes critique and who is doing it. Therefore, building on the Oxford debate, we can argue that sectarianism in Lebanon is a local problem, certain interpretations of Sharia are a Saudi or Iranian problem, or the misuse of blasphemy laws is a Pakistan-specific problem. In short, Islam as a religion has different meanings and interpretations and is experienced differently in each of these 'Islamic' states. When we contextualize, we are able to challenge orientalist and essentializing interpretations of how Muslims relate their lived experience to the religion of Islam. However, how do we study the very *contexts* from where these debates and discussions originate in the first place? As anthropologists, should we study Muslim institutions such as legal courts, or study traditional Islamic seminaries, or study places of worship and pilgrimage such as mosques or shrines, or study the constitution of Muslim majority countries, or speak to academics in western and non-western settings... and the list of potential options can go on.

All of the above options are valid, and there is much scholarly literature from anthropology available on all of these. My concern is not with the institutions per se but rather with the *context* in which these institutions in the everyday lives of Muslims become the site of ethnographic inquiry. By context, here, I mean the everyday settings, situations and processes which facilitate the creation of an environment or *sphere* where interactions between Muslims and state or non-state institutions eventually acquire their meanings. In other words, what is the nature of the sphere which gets created when Muslim (counter) publics interact

with different social, religious and cultural influences within, and through, what is known as a Muslim community?

It is imperative to keep in mind that thinking about the 'context' is also an act of methodological deliberation on the part of the ethnographer. Lara Deeb writes in the introduction to her book (2006:7), “It goes without saying that readers bring different backgrounds and desires to texts. While this book can be read as a depiction of life in an Islamist community, it is the conceptual deployment around notions of being pious and modern that most interest me. Indeed, it is those deployments that constitute the boundaries of the community itself.” As an ethnographer, I take it to be my responsibility to introduce and justify the context in which I do research. One such context is that in this study I treat Hizbollah as an actor which is on the margins of the Lebanese state. I shall elaborate below on the reasons for why I choose to do so. However, the context is also sometimes driven by logistical and practical limitations. My focus is on a single mosque in a particular suburb of Beirut called Dahiya. Like Deeb, one of the reasons for my choice is my access to the mosque as an anthropologist, albeit my fieldwork is based in just one suburb, whereas she was working on four.

In this chapter, I explore the spaces where institutionalized religion is produced and how it gets challenged by ordinary Muslims. Can Hizbollah institutionalize religion? Where and how does this institutionalization take place? I take the process of institutionalization of Shia Islam by Hizbollah as a form of arbitrating the normative practices and common good that bind the pious Shia community. In doing so, I try to locate and explore the possible emergence of a space which can facilitate debates and contestations between a Muslim public and their relationship to an institutionalized form of Islam. Specifically, I

explore the possibility of such a space and/or the practice of such a reflexive deliberation through a neighbourhood mosque¹, al-Qaim, located in Hay al Abyad, a small suburb which is part of the larger southern suburbs of Beirut popularly referred to as Dahiya. Hay al Abyad is dominated by Shia Muslims, many of whom find affinity with the Lebanese resistance movement of Hizbollah. I find the concept of "public Islam" as proposed by Salvatore and Eickelman (2006) very useful in this regard, as it helps us to think about Islam in relation to the notion of "common good" and not just in terms of a public sphere. For them, public Islam "refers to the highly diverse invocations of Islam as ideas and practices that religious scholars, self-ascribed religious authorities, secular intellectuals, Sufi orders, mothers, students, workers, engineers and many others make to civic debate and public life." (2006:xii) Although there appears to be no direct relationship between this meaning of public Islam as proposed by Salvatore and Eickelman and the institutionalization of Islam by Hizbollah, the relationship comes to the surface when we consider who moderates the terms and conditions when differences erupt between various stakeholders. In other words, who arbitrates when the public is not able to decide the common good? LeVine and Salvatore thus highlight the importance of studying the "variety of notions of the 'public' utilized - explicitly and implicitly - by socio-religious movements to define and justify their ideologies and actions to achieve social power. *Our hypothesis is that contemporary Muslim socio-religious movements attempt to formulate and implement discourses of the common good that aspire to legitimate specific forms of the political community, based on distinctive methods of public reasoning*²." (2005:29) I use this understanding to conceptualize how Hizbollah institutionalizes Shia Islam through spaces like al-Qaim in order to have a certain monopoly over the public and the discourse of common good. In pages to come, I specifically juxtapose

¹ The use of the term mosque in reference to al-Qaim is extremely problematic and I shall elaborate on this later. My interlocutors use the term "*mujamma*"

² Emphasis mine

this argument against Naveeda Khan's work (2012) on neighbourhood mosques in Pakistan, where she analyzes how the Pakistani state, through its interference and non-interference, creates the possibility for "experimentation" which allows Muslim citizens to have an open-ended relationship with Islam.

However, there still remains the question: is Hizbollah only a socio-religious movement, or is it part of the Lebanese state, or is it a non-state actor operating within the parameters of the Lebanese state? I address this issue later on in the chapter, but it is important to think about because often practices of arbitration are solely the domain of the state, through which it monopolizes conceptions of piety and critique (Asad, 2003; Hirschkind 2006 and Mahmood 2015). Theories around state and non-state arbitration are not the focus area of my research; however, it is important to mention at this stage is that I see Hizbollah as both a state and a non-state actor. I developed this notion based on the contributions of my interlocutors, as they often found it difficult to separate state and non-state conceptualizations of Hizbollah as an organization. LeVine and Salvatore (2005) realize the political implications of not being able to locate groups like Hizbollah and Hamas as either state or non-state actors. According to them, "this has created major political backlashes whose long-term effect on contested hegemonies is difficult to predict, as shown by the fact that the EU has long refused to bow to pressure to classify Hizbollah as a terrorist organization, yet has agreed to "charities" tied to Hamas." (2005:31) I was unable to confirm the EU's latest position on Hizbollah; however, even if their position has changed, the serious implications cannot be understated. My issue here is not to address the realpolitik considerations of International Law but to demonstrate why I choose to locate Hizbollah, and by extension al-Qaim, on the margins of the modern Lebanese nation-state.

Das and Poole, in their edited volume (2004), compel us to examine what an ethnography of a state and its margins look like. But foremost, what and where are the margins of the state? For them, "key to this aspect of the problem of margins is the relationship between violence and the ordering functioning of the state." (2004:6) They interrogate the Weberian notion which informs our understanding of the modern day nation-state. Hizbollah complicates the Weberian notion, as it is "political" insofar as it has in the past, and can in the future, exercise violence to safeguard what it understands as its territory. Yet at the same time it would be inaccurate to suggest that Hizbollah's primary objective is to subvert the Lebanese state *per se*. Das and Poole observe that "...the state is imagined as an always incomplete project that must constantly be spoken of - and imagined - through an invocation of the wilderness, lawlessness and savagery that only lies outside its jurisdiction, but also threatens it from within." This is especially true for the Lebanese state, i.e. that it faces definite challenges within from Hizbollah, regardless of the fact that the latter participates in elections in Lebanon. Hence when we analyze Hizbollah's social services, which are exclusively for its constituents, we are forced to think about how and why the bureaucracy, administration and violence which Hizbollah exerts is any different from that of a state. Al-Qaim, as I shall demonstrate, is entrenched in this very bureaucracy from Hizbollah. Asad, in the same edited volume, summarized three imaginations of the state's margins, and one of them is: "First, as peripheries or territories, in which the state has yet to penetrate..." (2004:279). This is true for the social and political world of Dahiya, in that it remains, in many ways, outside the bounds of the Lebanese state. In my research, I use the simple example of encountering checkpoints while going to al-Qaim in order to consider the issue of internal borders and spaces where the Lebanese state is not present. Lara Deeb's work on the social services Hizbollah provides to its constituents can also be used to locate the margins within which Hizbollah operates. I focus on how the institutionalization of Shia Islam by Hizbollah, through spaces like al-

Qaim, places Hizbollah on the margins as it continues to disrupt (or not) the current status quo with the Lebanese state. I further try and highlight the existence of these margins by analyzing the challenges Hizbollah faces from people who consider themselves part of a pious Shia community.

Thinking Where: Public Islam in the Mosque?

The meaning of 'field' and 'taking notes' in the field, i.e. doing 'fieldwork', has become an accepted tenet to the extent that asking “where is the field” and “what does it look like?” might suggest a lack of understanding about the very foundations of the discipline, or at least uncertainty about ethnography on the part of the researcher. If this research is an ethnographic study of the mosque, the field-site is, therefore, the mosque, and *going there* to take notes is doing fieldwork. Gupta and Ferguson provoke us to rethink both the what and where of the field by making the observation that “*the 'field' of anthropology and the field of 'fieldwork' are thus politically and epistemologically intertwined; to think critically about one requires a readiness to question the other.*”³ (1997: 4)

In this study, the mosque Al-Qaim is in Hay al Abyad, a suburb dominated by Lebanese Shia, many of whom share solidarity with the resistance movement (Hizbollah) by referring to themselves as the “community of the resistance”. What are the political and epistemic implications of thinking about the where, the 'field', when thinking about a community and/in an Islamic public sphere? What is the political meaning of community here? How is the political meaning of community related to notions of piety which a community may hold? More broadly, how do we understand embodying piety as a political project in the case of people who have affiliations with Hizbollah? Further, what role does the mosque play in

³ Emphasis mine

bringing together a political community? What imaginaries of a political space emerge from the mosque, and, above all, is it possible to understand the emergence of a public sphere from the mosque as an act of *becoming* by members of its congregation? In short, is it possible to think about the meaning of *where*, i.e. a public sphere in this case, by understanding the processes of *becoming*? What follows is a close and critical reading of the works of Lara Deeb (2006) and Naveeda Khan (2012) in order to think about and through the questions posed above. Building and complicating their work will eventually help me put my own ethnographic observations in conversation with broader discussions in the anthropology of Islam, and specifically the relationship between *becoming* and/in an *Islamic* public sphere.

Deeb's work focuses on pious Shi'i women, and her central argument is that for them material and spiritual progress are not binary opposites but are very much intertwined. Hence they are the *enchanted modern*. However, while Deeb uses the term "pious Shi'i Muslims", she does not really comment on what constitutes piety or what a working definition of piety could be. In a footnote, she explains, "*I use 'pious Shia Muslims' or 'pious Shi'is' as a gloss to indicate the particular community where I worked, a community that is itself bounded by specific ideas about piety.*" But what are the challenges to thinking about piety, when the very notion of piety is institutionalized? And further, how do we interpret the institutionalization of piety as a way to monopolize the discourse on common good? It is perhaps because of this tension that Deeb characterizes what constitutes piety only in the concluding chapter of her book, as she writes, "...piety includes community activism and participation; commemoration of a historic-religious martyrdom fuels a contemporary fight against military occupation, and where women wear the *hijab* as they participate actively in the public realm for the greater good⁴." (2006:228) It is clear by her broad definition that it is

⁴ Emphasis mine

difficult to think about piety outside of its institutionalized form. Political mobilization of the masses to commemorate those martyred in strategic geopolitical wars is very akin to how the events of Karbala are commemorated– this highlights not only the institutionalization of piety but also it occurring on the margins of the Lebanese state. I write below an ethnographic vignette about attending a private majlis at a Sheikh’s house who is now outcasted from the “public community” of Hizbollah, as he did not show much interest in, or support for, Hizbollah’s use of religion for its political project.

It was the Islamic month of Muharram, and, the first nine days leading up to Ashura are considered very sacred. Thousands of Shia from all corners of Dahiya go to attend majlis. A lot of them also invite Sheikhs to deliver majlis in their own homes; however, the doors are open to the public. This story is another testimony to understanding both the existence and workings off and on the margins of the state within the Hizbollah community.

It was around 5 pm, and I was already running late to reach Dahiya in time. I was accompanied by a friend, Ahmed, who advised that we should take Van 4 and then would also have to cover a significant portion walking by foot to reach on time. The traffic almost froze 2km before the actual checkpoints to enter Dahiya. There were New checkpoints had been set up as hundreds of people decided to walk by foot. It is not clear who was manning the checkpoints, but the ones very close to mosques or other spaces booked for majlis had Hizbollah's security personnel frisking people and also guiding them in the right direction. I was later told that the first checkpoint was manned by Lebanese army personnel, and the closer we got to the main mosques, it was Hizbollah's security. These checkpoints, in and of themselves, signify that Dahiya can be being construed on the margins of the state; where on hand Lebanese state security cannot,

or decides not to, penetrate, and yet on the other hand is present to support Hizbollah's bureaucratic and security apparatus during the month of Muharram.

During the first ten days of Muharram, after 5 pm streets were blocked, traffic diverted, side parking cleared to install big screens, and seating facilities made available so that people can hear and watch the majlis, as no particular mosque, or even all of them put together, is able to house thousands of people. In places like al-Qaim, TV screens and loudspeakers were installed as far as 100 metres away from the actual, physical boundary of the mujamma'. It almost seemed that a mosque extended far beyond its area into the streets and gullies only to merge into the similar extensions of another mosque. Although I do not speak Arabic, it was clear to me that different Sheikhs, albeit all affiliated to Hizbollah, had some form of unspoken competition for attracting the maximum number of followers or crowds. I did not research the topics of their lectures per se, but it is safe to assume that what they spoke about was aligned to Hizbollah's stance on religion.

Another vital facet to note is how gender segregation could no longer be observed in the way it is done within the boundaries of the mosque. Since during Muharram, the mosques in many ways extend to streets and gullies, converting almost all neighbourhoods as sacred spaces for majlis to be heard and experienced, maintaining gender segregation can be difficult if not impossible. Therefore, on the streets, families would come and sit as groups. Of course sometimes only groups of women or men or both would also go and sit to hear and watch the majlis on the big screens, all unsegregated. Further, these spaces are also open to other practices while the majlis is going on. Very often, scenes of coffee and argile being ordered from nearby shops, or brought from home, can also be observed. However, the people who

came early and were able to enter a mosque followed strict gender segregation within its confines.

My friend Ahmed and I decided to go to Sheikh Zain's house. Ahmed liked this Sheikh and wanted to attend a majlis away from the crowd. It is interesting to see how the private and public divide gets blurred during Muharram. The Sheikh's house is open to anyone, much like the space of the mosque. There are no speakers installed outside the home; however, the doors are kept wide open, and there are speakers inside in two rooms. You can hear the Quran playing at least a floor below and above. Inside the home, one room is for women and one for men. Like the mosque, shoes are kept outside on shoe racks, and I knew from the footwear I observed outside that there was a separate space for women inside. The rooms were curtained in such a fashion that there was only one way to enter, which directly lead us to the men's section. It was the living room of the house. I do not know about other times of the year, but this time it was set up completely like the interior of a mosque. There were religious flags, lighting arrangements, speakers and even a small phone camera installed to live stream the whole majlis. Multiplied manifold, this is also the interior of a mosque. Similarly, everyone inside does not necessarily know every other person, but people sit and get into conversations. One of the Sheikh's sons and one of his close associates took the responsibility of serving water and setting the podium from where the Sheikh was to speak. The atmosphere felt like a mosque - people sat waiting for the Sheikh to appear from behind the curtains. We sat down, and I took a glass of water. I felt a bit amazed at the whole scene. No one asked us anything; we just walked into someone's home and sat in their living room waiting for the majlis to begin. If people liked their experience, they informed others and on the following day more people would come.

I was compelled to ask why people would decide to go to someone's house for a "private" majlis when there is much happening out in the streets of Dahiya. I asked my friend if the Sheikh was affiliated with Hizbollah and if Hizbollah has a particular stance on the organization of such a private majlis in Dahiya. We did not come to know the official position of Hizbollah, only that Sheikh Zain used to be involved in Hizbollah activities. On my request, my friend enquired further about him from others in the room, and everyone agreed that he was well known and quite active, but not within Hizbollah. Sheikh Zain did not show much interest in geopolitics or in topics relating to resistance against Israel. He did support resistance, but it was not the cornerstone of his orientation towards religion. He was more inclined towards the metaphysical and esoteric teachings of Islam. For him, Karbala has a divine reality which does not always need the context of the martyrs of Hizbollah to be understood or spoken about. We talked to his associate, who explained that for Sheikh Zain the politics of Hizbollah can be divinely inspired but is not divinely ordained. In short, for him, the geopolitics of the region is not a lens through which Shia Islam has to be understood. His "apolitical" views led him to be sidelined by Hizbollah, and over a period he got completely removed from the 'public life of Hizbollah'.

We managed to gather all of this information through the conversations we had before the Sheikh arrived. That year, I attended his majlis for the first five days of Muharram. His attendees and followers are those who, like him, feel that Hizbollah has instrumentalized religion to an extent with which they do not necessarily agree. Their scepticism puts them on the margins of the Hizbollah community inside Dahiya. I tried many times to speak with Sheikh Zain directly on this topic. Every time, his associate refused to set up the meeting. However, every time I attempted to set up a meeting he reiterated that Sheikh Zain does not have much interest in issues of politics . He supports resistance like any other person who is

part of the community, but he wants to devote his time and energy to researching mystical dimensions of lived experience. I also realized that not a lot of people know about him now, especially among my interlocutors from al-Qaim. He is perhaps on the margins even within the Hizbollah community, although I am not sure if Sheikh Zain's scepticism would be very appreciative of me linking him with any community in particular. Through this vignette I wish to highlight the following: The subtleness of the institutionalisation project of Hizbollah and yet how comfortably Sheikhs who are “outside” that mechanism are still part of the community at large. The ambiguity who controls the checkpoints during Muharam is testimonial to the fact that certain duties which are functions of the state are also done by Hizbollah. The checkpoints became the ambiguous site of both the presence and absence of a (non)-state actor. Throughout the month of Muharram the (non)-state actor manages checkpoints and traffic of the incoming people. So is it possible to say that Sheikh Zain is inside the fold of the “pious community” ? To answer this, a closer look is needed what really constitutes piety in the community of Hizbollah.

Since Dahiya is considered a Hizbollah stronghold, discussions about the nature of Islamist politics need to be addressed when thinking about the different meanings of 'community of resistance' that pious Shias may hold. Hence what we have is a need to think clearly about the followings terms: community, Islamist politics and piety. Deeb tries to make a distinction between pious Shia Muslims and 'community'. In a section titled *A Community Bound(ed) By Piety*, she writes, “ *The Shia pious modern is not a community clearly bounded by space... As such, it is not accurate or useful to characterize this study as one of “al-Dahiya”* (2006:7). She notes that Dahiya is not homogenous by any standard, and it is counterproductive to make any generalizations about Shia residents from Dahiya or their relationship to the resistance. She further clarifies, “*I want to emphasize that this is not a study of 'the Shia in*

*Lebanon', but rather of a particular community, defined by forms of piety that reflect a specific Shia identity. There are many people in Lebanon who identify as Shia but not with the movement, and there many who are labelled Shia Muslims as I was labelled Orthodox Christian, but do not embrace that term with regard to faith and/or identity” (2006:11). I see this emphasis from her as not just saying that obviously no population in any geographical space, however tightly knit, should be assumed to be homogenous; rather, I feel she is trying to explain how all the diversity is part of negotiating *how to be Shia in Lebanon*, and the only way to make sense of it as a researcher is to be as explicit about the 'context' as possible. It is for this reason that I mentioned previously that context-setting is part of the method through which an anthropologist decides to engage with/in the field.*

Similarly since the meaning of the word ‘community’, can be ambiguous, Deeb describes her context with reference to her work on the ground. As mentioned earlier, according to Deeb, the values that her respondents see as part of public piety include practicing Islam “correctly” and interpreting a pious Shia version of “authenticated Islam”. Other values include “*sacrificing one’s time, money, and life to help others; and supporting the Resistance against Israeli occupation. Underlying all these values is a strong belief in the necessity of both spiritual and material progress.*” (2006:8) All these aspects constitute piety, which is practiced in a public realm, i.e., a community of pious Shia Muslims who “imagine” themselves to be part of the community of resistance. In a footnote here, Deeb again emphasizes that no generalization should be made and briefly hints at her extrapolation from Anderson’s “imagined community”. According to her, “...*neither ‘Shi’i Islamic community’ nor ‘Shi’i Islamic movement’ quite capture either the diversity or porosity of this group of people. Most people referred to their self-identified community of pious Shi’i Muslims simply as ‘our community’ – using the Arabic term mujtama’.* From the root (j-m-‘), *mujtama’*

carries connotations ranging from a 'gathering place' to 'the whole of human society' ..."(2006:8) . For Deeb, it was clear that the meaning of community shifted with context, and this shift was more often than not contingent upon her interlocutors' understanding of how they imagined their community vis-à-vis public piety. To this end, she clarifies "...it will become clear that how pious a person is or appears to be plays a major role in whether she is perceived to fall within the bounds of the Shi'i pious modern community, or whether she is included in a broader notion of 'our community' based solely on Shi'i sectarian identity" (2006:9). I engage so deeply in Deeb's writing simply to demonstrate the struggle and tension that Deeb faces in bringing to surface the *context* in which her research is taking place.

Throughout the first two chapters, Deeb has to consistently remind the reader that everyone in Dahiya does not support Hizbollah, and those who do support or show solidarity may not have any formal affiliations. This also means that for many Hizbollah is a party, for others it is a community or movement, and for most a mixture of all of these. But then how does Deeb identify or classify her interlocutors as pious modern? Who gets to be in and who is out? She does demonstrate what constitutes a community in their self-imagination. Hence, she gathers what her interlocutors share as social, religious and political values under the label of "public piety". "*Public piety is the public practice of faith based upon an interpretation of Islam that I term "authenticated Islam". This notion is built upon my interlocutors' sense of a shift that is a key aspect of how they conceptualize social change and the dynamics of Shi'i identity in the contemporary world,*" explains Deeb. My engagement with her writing is to highlight that conceptual understandings of *community, public, piety, faith, Islam* and *Islamist politics* collapse and converge and yet scope for new imaginaries still exists. Rather than applying a meaning of community in which pious Shia Muslims hold particular interpretations of piety

and material progress and engage with “authenticating Islam”, I choose to think in terms of ‘public Islam’ and margins of the state. While I found Deeb’s work extremely helpful, I felt that the elephant in the room was the nature of arbitration of who controls the boundaries of the community. By boundaries I don’t simply mean inclusion and access but also the margins of the state. What are the limits to which meanings and processes of defining piety can be negotiated between individuals and Hizbollah? Are you still part of the community if you choose to challenge a meaning of piety which necessarily includes commemoration for Hizbollah martyrs? Are you outside the community if you choose to only be politically inclined but not follow any religious practices, or, e.g., question the hijab? What happens when you do not publicly perform piety? I write in the next two chapters about my interlocutors who were confronted with such questions. However, I hope this detailed engagement with Deeb’s work makes my reasons clear as to why I choose to work theoretically with notions of institutionalized public Islam and the margins of the state. Deeb mentions that, based on certain contexts, her “field” is either an Islamic community or an Islamist movement. In other words, based on the ‘context’, her interlocutors could be part of an “Islamist/Islamic movement” and/or they could stay in Dahiya as an “Islamic community”. I choose to engage with the Hizbollah community as both a state and non-state actor which is on the margins of the modern Lebanese state.

As the title of this section asks, “*Thinking where: Public Islam in the Mosque?*”, the parallels I seek to draw are between public Islam and the community (in contrast to Deeb’s work) on one hand, and the mosque and the state on the other (in contrast to Naveeda Khan’s work below). My claim is that mosque and Public Islam cannot be separated and thus *mosque is/in public Islam*. As hinted earlier, I find the use of the term *mosque* problematic, as my interlocutors always emphasized it as “*Mujamma‘ al-Qaim*” in Arabic, but always translated

it as “Al-Qaim Mosque” in English. The English word ‘mosque’ limits the imagination as to what constitutes a *mujamma*’, and a lot is lost in translation. A small example of this can be that other *mujamma*’s (although not al-Qaim) house not only a space to pray, which you would expect in a mosque, but also a gym, conference facilities, and sometimes even health clinics.

Naveeda Khan’s work (2012) is an ethnographic study of neighbourhood mosques in Lahore which become sites for aspiration and scepticism regarding the nature and relationship of Islam to the Pakistani state. The process of aspiration and scepticism opens avenues for open experimentation and initiates subjectivities of constant *becoming*. Her work is based on the commonly accepted assertion within Pakistan that Pakistan was built as a mosque, and that the Pakistani state has an open relationship to the religion of Islam. In other words, the ‘Islamic’ nature of the Republic is not settled and, borrowing historian W.C. Smith’s words, it was supposed to be a “*process of becoming*”. She explains, “*On closer scrutiny I find Smith claiming something a little different. He does not take the state form to be Pakistan’s primary mandate. Rather, he takes the aspiration to the state form to be more important.*” Quoting Smith, she continues, “*The Islamic state is the ideal to which Pakistan, it has been felt, should aspire. It is the aspiring that has to be fundamental; not this or that pattern of the ideal. Put differently, “not this or that pattern of the ideal” suggests that we should not assume that a particular Islamic state is the end point of Pakistan’s aspiration. In other words, the demand for a state may be equally a demand for a society or a self.*”(2012:8) My intention in quoting this long passage is to draw a contrast between Khan’s understanding and usage of the very meaning of “state” and Deeb’s use of “community” or “movement”. Naveeda Khan explicitly writes, “*I was drawn to the study of mosques because of the oft-repeated statement that Pakistan was a mosque (Pakistan masjid hai), to see what purchase this formulation gave us in understanding what it means to be Muslim in Pakistan*”

(2012:21). The quote in brackets is in Urdu, for which she has provided an English translation, i.e. Pakistan was/is a mosque. *Hai* in Urdu grammar can be used as both past and present-continuous tense, which also indicates the ongoing process of *becoming*. What I find interesting is the use of the Arabic word *masjid*, which means mosque. Here again the quest for context, and the researcher's deployment of context as a methodological tool, is at work. Like Deeb, my interlocutors didn't refer to al-Qaim as a *masjid* but a *mujamma'* – trying to say that it is more than a place to pray, and therefore not just a *masjid*. On the other hand, for Khan's interlocutors, the whole of Pakistan is a *masjid*. Through my research, and it shall become clearer from my ethnographic description below, my assertion is that till we clearly think about *where* the institutionalization of piety and politics is taking place, the answer to *who* has the power to institutionalize/regulate as sovereign *would remain ambiguous*.

I take the *where* to be the “*margins of the state*”; *this is where I locate Mujamma' al-Qaim*. For Khan it is the whole state of Pakistan, and for Deeb it is a community/movement of and for the pious Shia. This tension becomes more clear when in the section titled, *Religious Disputation and its Spatial Extension* Khan observes “*a brief review of the place of disputation (jadal) within Islamic history and of such modern-day permutations as bahas (argument) and munazara (debate) will suggest how Muslim striving in Pakistan may not rely upon a picture of Islam as open, but also upon the use of conventional forms such as debate and polemic, or even the building of mosques in order to affect experimentation.*” Here Khan suggests that debate, argumentation and engaging in polemics are pathways of experimentation in which constant critique is done in order to deliberate on the larger metaphysical questions about Islam and its relation to the physical space of the state of Pakistan. This is similar to Deeb's description of pious Shia Muslims engaging in what she calls “*authenticating Islam*” as a way of being in their *mujamma'*, Islamic community or

Islamist movement. But of course Pakistan is neither just a community nor a movement, because as a state it must deal with the question of sovereignty and its right as a sovereign over any form of arbitration. To this end, Khan writes, “*What we find in Pakistan, then, is a self-professedly ideological state and a colonial legatee, open to experimentation over what is to be Muslim in Pakistan and driven to ascertain and adjudicate its subjects’ relation to Islam.... in other words, the state creates the conditions of possibility for experimentation on what it is to be a Muslim as well as scepticism with respect to those who strive*⁵.” If the state is creating the conditions of possibility for experimentation in Pakistan, Hizbollah’s institutionalization of piety does this too as it can include performance of certain politics, providing social services, commemorating martyrdom etc. Needless to say there, is no homogeneity in either case. The key is to be aware of the messiness which erupts when actors like Hizbollah act as both state and non-state. As we shall see in the ethnographic descriptions below, there is aspiration and scepticism within the publics of Hizbollah. *There is failure, success, disappointment hope and scope for becoming. But this process is mediated through Hizbollah and not necessarily the Lebanese state.*

The Field

This was my first trip to Dahiya. I was waiting for Muhammad outside Costa Coffee in Hamra in Beirut from where we were supposed to go to Dahiya in Van number 4. Apart from being one of my key interlocutors in this research, Muhammad and I also became close friends. The bond we developed over months of fieldwork emerged both because we challenged each other intellectually and because he ensured that my curiosities were put to rest. As we walked towards the Van 4 pick up spot, I asked him, “Is Dahiya in Beirut?” Since a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ is never sufficient, Muhammad said, “Yeah, you can say that.” I did not

⁵ Bold emphasis mine

know how to interpret his answer. It is only towards the end of my fieldwork that I now realize what he meant. The fieldwork changed and challenged many of the terms which I took for granted in anthropological literature. For example, I came to understand that *location* is not just geographical; rather, any visible physical space is deeply rooted in invisible facets of life in the field. Although my ethnographic work is based on a single suburb, Hay al Abyad, the borders of the suburb were extremely difficult to demarcate. The terms 'location' or 'the field' are in some ways about markings. But as an anthropologist in the initial stages of my research, how do I identify these markings? At one point everything seems to be a marking - every bill board, flag, building, place of worship, parking lot, housing complex. Where does one enter the field? Is there an exit to leave its borders? More broadly, if you are writing about the public realm, how do you differentiate it from the literal meaning of a physical space? Hizbollah's transnational connections with Iran especially blur the notions of borders. Therefore, the physical space of al-Qaim is inside the physical territory of Lebanon, sharing a complicated relationship with the Lebanese state, and alongside exist the various forms of transnational connections with Iran. I was going with Muhammad to the al-Qaim which is located in Hay al Abyad. Very soon, I was about to understand 'spaces' are not just places to visit or be in, but also moments which can most definitely transcend physical space. Such realizations made me question the relevance of the literal boundaries and borders of that physical space. In other words, is al-Qaim only limited to its physical space and architecture? For now I was going to al-Qaim in Hay al Abyad, but soon I was to ask questions about the *where*. Is it really *only* in Dahiya?

Going to mujamma' al-Qaim

It was after the month of Muharram that I first went to al-Qaim. As we entered Van 4, Muhammad muttered *Salaamualaikum*. There was only one young woman sitting in one of

the passenger seats and the driver in the front. Neither of them really saw us, but both replied. The driver turned back only to ensure we had entered. The girl's reply had to be lipread as she mumbled *Walaikumassalam* staring into her phone screen. I don't think Muhammad was expecting a formal reply from them, nor did he greet them to get their attention. We sat down in the last row of seats of the van, two seats behind the girl. I hesitantly asked, "do you know her?" Almost confused by my question he replied, "Of course not! But why can we not greet strangers, since we are all going to Dahiya anyway?" My stay in Beirut made me realize that it is quite normal to greet to 'no one' and yet 'everyone' when using public transport. During many subsequent visits to Dahiya via Van 4 I saw many people wish salaam, and this was often done to get the attention of fellow passengers so that they could adjust their seating or relocate their seat, as men and women were often uncomfortable sitting close to each other in the van. Although this use of greeting is quite common, it cannot be generalized. There were many times where men and women in hijab (or not) would sit next to each other. At the outset, this observation about seating seems trivial, but just by observing people who stay in Dahiya and use Van 4 every day to come to Hamra or get off elsewhere in between, we get a glimpse of both the diversity of the people who stay in Dahiya and how they engage (or not) with religion in everyday mundane situations. Lara Deeb mentions that during her fieldwork, she observed how in many formal settings people behaved in a manner which would generally be perceived as informal. She gives an example of how in many banks and offices, the staff would offer coffee and water to visitors. It is not just about hospitality but about how one is almost part of a community by default. My experience of just using Van 4 to go to Dahiya challenged many stereotypes that I had accumulated from people who have never been to Dahiya. Perhaps the most important thing I learned is that you become part of the 'public' through using public transport. This becoming was not just about starting to see familiar faces and often getting into conversations, but also about starting to see the diversity

of life in Dahiya. It sounds naïve, but I thought everyone in the van would be religious to some degree, or if not religious at least would have some traits on which the stereotypes I encountered were based. The stereotypes were not about Van 4 but about Dahiya, which has often been referred to as a “Hizbollah stronghold”, “Shia ghetto”, or “a militant base” by CNN and similar news outlets. What is also true is that many Lebanese, including Lebanese Muslims, have a lot of stereotypes about Dahiya. My own experience was similar to Deeb’s, where I was sometimes warned especially by non-Shia Muslims about “going there”. What I found most fascinating was that sometimes not traveling to Dahiya can almost be a generational thing. I know someone from a Maronite background who, upon hearing where I was conducting my research, said: “I have never been there, nor have my parents... and I doubt we will have to go there any time soon for anything.” Similarly, many Muslims believed that everything in Dahiya is about resistance, and if you do not support it, you have to live like a second class citizen. I say this in reference to the stereotypical assertion that Hizbollah’s governance policies are such that if you do not abide by their rules, you cannot stay in Dahiya. My experience with Sheikh Zain challenges this assertion. Although he is not part of the Hizbollah’s institutional apparatus, there is no threat or intimidation towards him for being a Sheikh and not being very inclined towards Hizbollah’s politics. Such stereotypical views about Dahiya go back to the sectarian nature of the country. What I found most interesting was that spaces were politicized to such an extent that any discussion on the diversity within Dahiya is considered irrelevant to understanding the social world of Dahiya. I remember once while travelling on Van 4, the driver had to re-route because the municipality was setting up a big Christmas tree at a major intersection inside Dahiya. A few days later after my fieldwork, I went to see the decorated tree. Since it was surrounded by heavy traffic, there were not many people stopping by; however, many children were excited about getting their photographs taken next to it. I guess, for many, this would also be an

important memory of Dahiya. I do not write about them but Dahiya is also home to a Christian population which has been in the suburbs for many generations.

Back onto Van 4 for my first trip to Dahiya. This was at the beginning of my fieldwork, and I was yet to know more about Muhammad. Given the traffic between Hamra and Dahiya, I was confident that we would have plenty to talk about. Unfortunately, we did not. One of the reasons was that I had been introduced to him only recently and we were still strangers to one other. To Muhammad, I was a foreigner, and like Dahiya has been stereotyped, foreigners too have been stereotyped by locals, including by residents of Dahiya. One of the most common stereotypes was that all foreigners were potential spies who were visiting Dahiya to unravel the Hizbollah nexus. Needless to say, the stereotype was stronger if you were white and/or a Western passport holder. I always wondered how those who held such stereotypes reconciled them with the fact that Lebanese people themselves, including many who are from Dahiya, are dual citizens and have Western passports too. There were also plenty who worked abroad for years to send heavy remittances back home. Muhammad told me that such people are then never allowed to be part of Hizbollah. It never became entirely clear to me what “being part of” really meant. I could never tell who is an ‘insider’ and who is an ‘outsider’. There is certainly an element of secrecy and I detected that I was not meant to be told everything. But what is also true is that asking the question “what does ‘being part of’ mean?” is a potentially simplistic way of looking at it. Because what they are part of, i.e. Hizbollah, is a community for some, an organization for some, and a political party or even a movement for others. I therefore changed my focus to think about spaces and realms in relation to Hizbollah, rather than institutions and affiliations. I shall elaborate more on this in detail.

So far all my conversations with Muhammad had been about my research. Retrospectively, my fieldwork also made me realize the difference between conversations and interviews. Oftentimes we think we are in a conversation when it is more like an interview. This is vital as interview as a methodology often creates constraints, while conversations are perceived as being outside of research. Muhammad almost always became formal when I asked him something about my thesis. This also made him more conscious of the categories he used and created for answering my questions. Over the course of my fieldwork, I saw many concepts being constructed by my interlocutors to either challenge me or help me understand a view which they felt I would not be able to grasp as I was not one of them. A basic example can be them trying to explain to me the meaning of *muqawma*. We spent hours talking about why it should not be described as terrorism and what is so unique about the Lebanese resistance. Analysing the process of the construction of these concepts is beyond the scope of this research project. However, as I mentioned earlier, I saw all my interlocutors as co-producers of knowledge. What is, however, important to note is that a lot of these categories or concepts challenged much of what I assumed to be common sense. The following conversation is derived from a much longer conversation to demonstrate how stereotypes come into being and why it is necessary to be aware of terms and concepts which we might assume are obviously understood.

As we did not have much to talk about during our journey to Dahiya, I pulled out my phone and started watching a YouTube video of Ammar Nakshawani, a British-Iraqi Shia sheikh.

Muhammad glances over my phone screen.

Him: Hahaha.... You too follow him?

Me: I don't know what following means... Yes, I watch his videos. Why, what's wrong?

Him: We have our doubts about him and his views.

Me: I don't understand... Who is we, and what doubts? He is well renowned and has certainly served a lot to the Shia community in the West. Brought them into the attention of media and broader Western society.

Him: Exactly! He is West, he is not us?

Me: He is Shia, right?

Him: Yes, maybe, but he is not with us... Lebanese Shia, or like from resistance, you know.

Me: So wait, your issue is that he is not Lebanese Shia or that he does not support the resistance?

Him: Well... he does not support resistance, maybe because he is of Iraqi origin. There is a history and another story which perhaps you don't know of... yanni he is not like the Shia you will meet in the mosque.

Me: What is more important in the eyes of Allah? Being Shia or being a Lebanese Shia who supports resistance?

*Him: Habibi, by Lebanese **here** I mean Shia who support resistance... you know many Shia here do not support it. And we support it because this is the path to be closer to Allah. I think you have a limited understanding of resistance. It stems from Islam, to serve humanity in an Islamic manner. It is for all humanity, not just Shia. I think this message is clear from the story of Karbala.*

Me: So are you just Shia or Hizbollah Shia?

Him: I am Hizbollah.

Me: You mean you are officially part of the organization?

Him: I don't know how to explain... it is not like official or unofficial. I am just Shia who is with the resistance. I think these categories make us look like monsters... Hahaha... Wallahi we are normal!

In the context of this conversation, what does it mean to be Lebanese, Shia, Lebanese Shia, British-Iraqi, Shia with(out) resistance? And who decides the meaning of these words, concepts, and ideas? What are we to make of Hizbollah in this context? Is it a national movement? Is it a political, religious, social or cultural movement ? Is it transnational ? If yes, in what sense? Is it part of the Lebanese state? Is Hizbollah only an Islamist group, and in the conversation I just mentioned does Muhammad prove himself incapable to critique or identify what can be said to be Hizbollah's institutionalizing mechanism? This conversation serves as a reminder that although it is necessary to ask these questions in and about context, it is also necessary to ask who decides what the context is and who approves of the particular context. In other words, in order to understand Muhammad and his relationship to Hezbollah, it is necessary to ask: who is the arbitrator of the context in which Muhammad understands his relationship to Hizbollah? To ask what it means to be a Lebanese Shia also means to ask: what does it not mean? To argue that Hizbollah is not only a military/militant organization, it is necessary to ask how it is different from the Israeli army against which it is eternally resisting. It becomes important to ask the question about context because if the Lebanese state is not the arbitrator of any form of religious and political difference, then who is? Given the constitutional framework of Lebanon, unlike Pakistan, it cannot have an open-ended relationship with any religion. And perhaps actors like Hizbollah fill the vacuum by providing the Shia constituency that space for experimentation. It is necessary to keep in mind that 'experimentation' for Naveeda Khan does not only have a positive connotation. The Pakistani state's dealing with Ahmedi Muslims is a case in point. Similarly, Hizbollah's attempt to monopolize the public realm of the pious Shia community creates spaces for aspiration, scepticism and many a times failed experiments – all in pursuit of facilitating a common good. It is for this reason I stated at the outset that in the context of this research I am treating Hizbollah as being on the margins of the Lebanese state. Naveeda Khan's work

on Pakistan is extremely useful, but what are the limitations of reading a state's open relationship to a particular religion? The common saying in Pakistan that "it was built as a mosque" is powerful, but then it poses difficulties in thinking about the nature of the state as an object of ethnographic inquiry. Deeb, for the same reason, uses community/movement depending upon the context she is describing. From the work of both Khan and Deeb, it is safe to assume that "context" is referred to as the processes through which hierarchy, order and legitimacy are established whether by the state of Pakistan or by Hizbollah. Das and Poole, while thinking about the state and its margins write, "...anthropology has always been, in many unacknowledged ways, "about" the state – even (perhaps especially) when its subjects were constituted as excluded from, or opposed to, the forms of administrative rationality, authority, political order, and authority, consigned to the state. *We contend that it is through the language of the state that anthropologists have traditionally constituted the tropes of social order, rationality, authority, and even externality for defining their subjects*⁶" (2004:24). It is in this regard that when I ask Muhammad, is there a definition or a set of characteristics that define a Lebanese Shia? And what meaning does this understanding have to the person's relationship (or not) to resistance? There is no easy answer. This is because on one hand Muhammad tries to use universal categories of justice and fighting oppression, and on the other hand also tries to maintain the exclusivity of Hizbollah as being Lebanese and made up of pious Shia Muslims. Remember Muhammad's last reply to me, when he said: "*I don't know how to explain... it is not like official or unofficial. I am just Shia who is with the resistance. I think these categories make us look like monsters...Hahaha... Wallahi we are normal!*" Over here, Muhammad is trying to navigate through the messiness of the institutionalizing mechanism of Hizbollah. Notions of official and unofficial or modes of identification create bureaucracies which Muhammad does not relate to. Often it is the

⁶ Emphasis mine

state's bureaucracy which has to deal with such categories, as was the case with mosques in Pakistan. The *qazba* or seizures were debated as being official or unofficial or Imams of the mosque were being officially avoided in order to avoid seizures of mosques. Muhammad struggles here to avoid dealing with these categories and being a "monster", which he is not. For him, being a Lebanese Shia with the resistance is a relationship that does not need any approval of/from state bureaucracies. And at the same time, he is unable to acknowledge bureaucracies that Hizbollah creates by othering Shias who are either non-Lebanese or not with the resistance. This is another example of why I attempt to locate Hizbollah and, by extension, al-Qaim on the margins of the modern Lebanese state.

Towards al Qaim

Van 4 took almost forty minutes to reach Dahiya. But since Dahiya refers to a collection of suburbs in the south of Beirut, why do most people refer to it as if all of Dahiya is one big suburb? Initially I thought this is because of convenience, referring to the geography, and to perhaps to contrast it with the rest of Beirut. But then when all of Beirut is not thought of as one homogenous space, why see Dahiya as one? Muhammad's reply to this question was because *we* are Hizbollah. I immediately pointed to our previous conversation, where he highlighted that everyone in Dahiya is not a supporter of Hizbollah. To clarify his point, he replied, "*but the atmosphere feels like we are all one!*" What are we to understand with "atmosphere" here? Does it refer to the air, sound, sight, smell of Dahiya? If yes, what is the essence of that air, sound, sight and smell that it somehow unites all the people into a singular essence, yet this unity is different from labelling all of Beirut as one? Our conversation was interrupted by the noise of heavy traffic. So far, vehicles were just overtaking one another whenever they could, and our van would literally honk and force its way through. But now

there was order to the chaos. The traffic was more or less falling into a single line. We were nearing one of the checkpoints to enter Dahiya, and the traffic started to align itself roughly one hundred metres before the checkpoint. Muhammad quickly reminded me to take note of the landmark, the Church at the traffic lights, so that I would know where to get off if I was coming to Dahiya alone. The church is considered to be a part of Dahiya. Since Muhammad was with me, we didn't get off and decided instead to stay on the van. The traffic was moving very slowly now. The checkpoint was divided into two, and each side had armed Lebanese army personnel. The driver in each vehicle had to roll down their window in order to receive permission to pass from the guard. If the guard stopped someone, the vehicle would have to be moved to the other side, where the driver would need to show their identity card and maybe even be questioned further. The checkpoint is only on the side of the road which enters into Dahiya. The other side of the road, which is used to exit Dahiya, does not have a checkpoint. I was told that these checkpoints were put in place after the 2006 war.

The stereotypes about Dahiya are so strong that even when we were coming up to the checkpoint, I was still not sure that we were about to enter Dahiya. Just observing the stretch from the Church to the checkpoint, there were cafés, hair salons and general merchant shops all around. Some cafes had seating outside, and people were sitting there despite the noise from the traffic. The hair salons were playing loud music, and next to them was a shop for ladies clothing with a sign outside which read, "The World of Islamic Fashion." Deeb, referring to her interlocutors as the "pious modern", writes: "...Where you enter al-Dahiya from many other areas of Beirut, there is generally no clear marker of division, but there is a palpable change. Your senses clearly indicate that you have entered an area that is dominated by a particular mix of politics and piety. The recent demographic changes that have occurred in al-Dahiya marked a new visibility for many Shi'i Muslims as a presence in Lebanon, and

especially in Beirut, inscribed on public space and time” (2006:48). I could not help but think through all the stereotypes I had about Dahiya. I was able to take note of all of these shops as our van slowly moved ahead in the traffic towards the checkpoint. I was somehow expecting a sea of change as we were about to enter Dahiya. But that was obviously not the case. All the stereotypes about Dahiya (a hub for terrorism, a safe haven for savages, there is no law there, everything happens as per the whims of Hizbollah, etc.) help create the Shia in/from Dahiya as the “other” in contradistinction to the rest of the Lebanese community. At that point, I was hard pressed to think of anyone who had been to Dahiya themselves before warning me not to visit. Not surprisingly, I could think of no one. There is a flyover which runs close to the checkpoint and connects the rest of Beirut to the road leading to the airport. It helps people bypass the atmosphere, or let’s say just the traffic, of Dahiya.

Dahiya surprised me because sometimes it was entirely ordinary as compared to the stereotypes that persist, and other times because of the sheer contradictions within it. For instance, it is nearly impossible to escape the sight of Hizbollah flags, posters of resistance martyrs in Syria and portraits of Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah. The flags and posters can appear anywhere, i.e. they can be on a tree, a billboard on the side of the street, under a bridge, or even outside a coffee shop, salon, book store or petrol station. There would simultaneously be Lebanese flags or pictures of some Lebanese politicians who are either in support of or in a coalition with Hezbollah. The social landscape which you see and hear is not just comprised of political or religious representations to claim dominance. Deeb, in a chapter titled *Al-Dahiya: Sight, Sound and Season* describes: “... the presence of a particular politics of piety, a sense of publicly displayed and claimed piety: what my friends at the American University of Beirut glossed as “Hizbollah” but what was far more complicated than a political party” (2006:51). This comment by Deeb resonates very much with my own experiences. It is safe

to assume that the phrase ‘research on Hizbollah’ can evoke different meanings to different people, because there is very little debate happening on what Hizbollah means to ordinary people in their everyday lives and what it is striving for within Lebanon.

Mujamma‘ al Qaim: not just a mosque?

Gayatri Spivak once said, “Translation is necessary, but never possible.” She was referring to the cultures of the subaltern and how their translation to secular sensibilities is almost always a failing endeavour. Their voices need to be understood on their own terms. The Arabic term *mujamma‘* cannot be captured in English easily. Deeb used it to refer to the meaning that her interlocutors give to their pious community, i.e. “a complete community”, “a whole gathering” and even using it to refer to the “movement of the resistance”. My interlocutors, too, had a similar understanding and explained that it refers to *a place that collects willing people*. “If you are scattered, the will to come together would, in a way, refer to *mujamma‘*,” explained Muhammad’s friend. Muhammad, while explaining to me the root word in Arabic and its connotation, gave another example: “*Mujamma‘ can be understood as the collection of people for the Day of Judgment... say in a way it is about the unity of the world.*” Later that day, he texted me to add, “*it can also be used for uniting things that are dispersed... say, for example, our souls.*” The idea was to convey to me that a *mujamma‘* is more than a big physical space, and of course al-Qaim is more than a space to pray or to simply gather. So what exactly is al-Qaim? How are we to make sense of what it really is in relation to more abstract notions of *mujamma‘*? Our conversations returned us to the stereotype that Hizbollah is a state within a state.

Al-Qaim is a five-storied building. From the outside, it most definitely resembles a mosque since the top has a dome and minarets on the side. The whole of al-Qaim is well-protected

with heavy gates and entry checkpoints. In the basement is a huge auditorium where there is provision for organising various lectures, conferences and meetings. Unlike the mosque area, the auditorium has facilities for both sitting on the floor as well as folding chairs. A series of steps lead us to the first floor. This part is the main praying hall. It can easily accommodate a few hundred people. Like any typical mosque, there is a space for performing ablution apart from the washrooms. Following the Islamic code of ethics, it is a gender-specific space and hence there is a praying hall on the floor above this one for women. Ablution and washing areas are also separate for women. The second floor is a *Hussainiyah* where majalis are held during Muharram. This space can also be booked for organising various family events like weddings or booking it as a space for collective reading of dua or the Quran. Often the space is also booked for Arabic classes for teaching very young children, or is booked sometimes for events exclusively for women. The third and fourth floors are *Hawzas* for men and women respectively. Hawzas are traditional Shia Islamic seminaries. Different age groups and different levels have it booked for different days of the week. The top floor is for residences of the people who are responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of al-Qaim.

It is very common that people come to al-Qaim for only specific purposes and may not necessarily come there to pray. Hence a student in the Hawza would come to al-Qaim on the days of his classes and would pray in the mosque section on those days. A vast majority would only come there to pray and have barely anything to do with the functions of the other floors. It is possible to imagine how each floor in a way would have a public(s) of its own. Everyone who is a pious Shia may or may not support Hizbollah but can regardless use facilities like the praying spaces in al-Qaim. And it is also true that in the language of day to day conversations, many would refer to al-Qaim as a “mosque” only. This, to an extent, demonstrates why al-Qaim is a *mujamma* ‘ and not a masjid. One of my interlocutors gave me

an example to further elaborate on the connection of the public to the concept of *mujamma'*. Every couple of years, or more generally when the carpets or curtains in al-Qaim are worn out, there is a public invitation to contribute. This means that based on your financial situation you can register to buy (contribute towards) x sq metre of the carpet. This can also be added towards one's obligatory zakat. Many people do not wish to have it included in that and do this independent of zakat. Again, many people who do this might not support Hizbollah but would have done it out of their commitment to piety and to their local 'mosque', i.e., al-Qaim. Many others who would not necessarily be very active in al-Qaim would contribute as a way to compensate for their lack of commitment or availability. While for many others it is simply a way to belong to their community, through activities and events at al-Qaim, and they feel morally obliged to contribute towards its functioning.

We were finally standing outside al-Qaim. Due to security reasons, no one is allowed to take bags inside. Muhammad told me to come with him to the falafel shop across the street. It seemed he knew the shop owner well. We all greeted each other and Muhammad told me I could leave my bag and laptop behind the counter. This became a habit for me throughout my fieldwork. Even when I went alone without Muhammad, I would leave my bag there. Since it was right opposite al-Qaim, the shop owner would barely miss a congregational prayer. Over some time, I felt that the falafel shop was also an extension of al-Qaim.

Large iron gates guard al-Qaim well. The streets around al-Qaim have running traffic, but there is provision for barricades. The barricades are used to divert/slow down traffic, especially during Friday prayers. They are some distance from the main structure. There is provision to create more roadblocks leading to al-Qaim if ever required. The iron gates at the entrance of al-Qaim have a small entrance for men. The entrance for women is similar but

from the other side. The steps leading to the main door of al-Qaim have movable donation boxes installed. Often there will be ushers standing at the door, greeting people and ensuring they go in smoothly, as many people enter just a few minutes before the prayer starts. Right after the entrance, there is a small passageway where people can sit and remove their shoes to place them on the shoe racks. The walls of this space have pictures of Imam Khomeini and his successor Imam Khamenei. I wonder whether to interpret these pictures as entirely religious or political, or both. A considerable proportion of Shia Muslims around the world see Imam Khomeini and Imam Khamenei as their spiritual leaders, without necessarily having any support or appreciation for Hizbollah per se. However, on the walls there were also pictures of Hizbollah martyrs, some of whom were linked to al-Qaim.

Most people ideally like to reach the prayer hall before the prayer starts. Some people greet and meet their friends when they arrive, while others meditate and perform short supplementary prayers. The prayer hall has a capacity of a few hundred people. On Fridays it is almost full. Soon the adhan goes, and Sheikh Akram comes from a side door which leads to his office space. He immediately starts the prayer as many people have to go to work shortly after prayers have finished. Following the Friday prayers, there is a Q/A session with Sheikh Akram. These sessions are what attract most of the youth to Sheikh Akram and have made him famous in all of the Shia community in Dahiya. My interlocutors had immense respect for him, and often many of them considered him to be a father figure. A lot of the youth would reach out to him for advice on personal and professional matters. Here is a description from one such interaction. Such sessions are a great site to observe the striving and aspiration, albeit within the institutionalization project of Hizbollah. Yousef helped me with the translations. These notes are based on translations provided by Yousef and include

the clarifications I requested him to ask Sheikh Akram towards the end of the session. We took permission for an individual appointment with him at a later time.

A university student asked Sheikh Akram if it is possible to be critical towards religion. And if yes, how can that critique be guided towards bettering one's relationship to God?

Sheikh Akram thanked the young boy for asking such an important question. He started by stating, "We all should have logical questions about existence, about where, what, when, about human existence on this earth." He said that he is going to divide his answers into four steps. Each step would include a set of recommendations or a list of dos and don'ts. Almost everyone started making notes on their phones, and some even carried a small diary and a pen. Sheikh Akram waited for people to be ready to make notes. He slowly started with step one.

Step one includes the following:

- 1. You have to think about critique in your own way, and not necessarily go with what society says.*
 - 2. Logical reasoning should be the basis for answers, and not impulse or instincts.*
 - 3. People should not assume scriptures provide direct answers to abstract questions about critique.*
 - 4. Think about Aqidah based on your reasoning, and not borrowed from your friends or family. (We later clarified that by Aqidah he meant critical thinking. For him, Aqidah is independent thinking about matters of faith. So Aqidah can be unique to each individual.)*
- He asked everyone to challenge anyone who forces them to accept any reasoning.*

Step two:

At step two religious scriptures enter.

1. Look inwards and think about how an individual can use Aqidah to look for meanings in the holy scriptures.

2. Aqidah is like glasses which we need to put on when reading the scriptures. It is the most crucial step. If your glasses are dirty, go back to basics and clean them.

(By this he meant go back to looking inwards, or reach out to people who can help you look inwards. Sheikh Akram emphasized a lot on the importance of this step.)

Step three:

1. This step includes the scope of mind in critical thinking. He referred to the mind as al-aql.

The scope is divided into two categories or themes: 1. causation and 2. consequences.

2. Aql can also have two features: 1. theory 2. application

As I looked around, everyone was deep in thought. Heads down making notes. In pauses, everyone looked at Sheikh Akram as he was framing his next argument. Yousef said to me, "See... Sheikh Akram makes everything so logical, simple and directly from the religion."

He spoke a bit more about the theory dimension of the aql. He mentioned the idea of Aidrak, which Yousef said roughly translates as perception or to perceive. He later clarified that in this case it is used in the context of "reaching out" to **strive**. Yousef translated this example which Sheikh Akram gave: "We should reach out/strive towards being in a state of knowing what is worthy of being known. Reaching out is an application of the critical mind. It will help us differentiate and choose between a good act and an evil act. This choice, in turn, will form the basis of our morality." Sheikh Akram emphasized and clarified for everyone that our theoretical mind is predisposed to push our souls towards reaching God. This push is called critical thinking.

He then explained the application dimension of the mind. He stated that acceptance of religious scriptures could only happen through critical thinking. He mentioned an Islamic concept of Maulat al Nadar, which means the duration taken to understand the nature of the problem. He told everyone to note that if a man is using critical thinking, he is still at Maulat al Nadar. And God does not punish anyone for being at that stage even if for a lifetime. He said to remember, "Critical thinking in itself is enough to give you Jannah, even without reaching Islam."

I started this chapter by talking about “public Islam” which holds the capacity for reconfiguring the boundaries of social and political life. Hizbollah in general, and al-Qaim in particular, do exactly that. As we saw with so many activities, it is not just a mosque, it is a *mujamma*’, a community space for many events where people come regardless of their political orientation towards Hizbollah. At the same time, we saw the institutionalization of Islamic discourse by Hizbollah to manage its various publics. The Q/A session with Sheikh Akram, who is appointed by Hizbollah, hopefully demonstrated this. The practice of critique and the way to *become* critical is broken down in two easy steps. The abstract notions of religion and philosophy are summarized into pointers in order to make them appear as tangible objectives. I could not gain access to Sheikh Zain; however, every time I enquired about him I was invited to attend his lectures or subscribe to them online. His small number of followers often come to al-Qaim but only for prayers. They do not necessarily partake in other activities. His scepticism is acceptable and he is still in many ways within the fold of the pious Shia community of Dahiya. Many other students at al-Qaim, with whom I spoke during the course of my fieldwork, saw Sheikh Akram as a saviour. He is well known for advising students to continue their studies as best they can. At the same time he encourages them to discipline themselves in a fashion which is aligned with the discourse on resistance.

However, there is a huge difference between speaking about normative ideals and translating them into everyday life experience. The next chapter is about the frustration and confusion when the normative refuses to match lived realities.

Chapter 2

The Quest to Align Struggles

My time so far in al-Qaim made me realise that people come here for different reasons, with different commitments, different expectations and share a different and often difficult relationship to both al-Qaim and others who come here. In this chapter, I share the stories of people who associate themselves to al-Qaim, yet more often than not struggle to explain and articulate their relationship to the space of al-Qaim. My experience so far made me think about questions like: why do you specifically come to al-Qaim? If you come here only to pray, how is it different from other spaces? Do you go to other places affiliated with Hizbollah? Similarly, speaking to those who do not necessarily like or share any affinity to Hizbollah, why do you continue to come here? Do you see al-Qaim as a space where anyone can go regardless of their political affiliation? In Lebanon, most of the practicing Muslims who go to mosques, prefer to go to a mosque of their sect. The larger theme I wish to explore is about the nature of the dedication or commitment people have towards al-Qaim. How did their relationship with that space change over time? What are the reasons for that change? Does al-Qaim facilitate that change? What allows certain people to continue to strengthen their relationship to al-Qaim, while others completely let go off every association and still many others try to be involved in some capacity while maintaining a certain distance? And how do people in these cases distinguish between their relationship with Islam as a religion, and with al-Qaim as an Islamic space run and controlled by Hizbollah? Above all how does al-Qaim which facilities a praying space and conducts many activities of Hizbollah - shape the understanding of these people about the normative meanings of piety and politics?

Samuli Schielke, writing about the trajectories of people who had encountered Salafism in Egypt at various stages of their life, observes: " when people try to be perfect, there is trouble involved." (2015:21) I think the situation for some people who are associated with al-Qaim is the same. They discover many contradictions or tensions between the normative aspects of religion and politics, and their everyday life. The question then becomes: how is the normative separate from everyday life? What happens when the normative ideals are translated into everyday life? How does al-Qaim facilitate that translation? I find Naveeda Khan's articulation of aspiration and scepticism very useful when thinking about the relationship between everyday life and normative ideals. As explained in the previous chapter normative ideals are not concrete, albeit Hizbollah's institutionalisation of piety tries to keep things synchronised as visible in the vignette of Q/A session with Sheikh Akram. The striving happens in the quest to cement the everyday life as per the pious expectations of the community. As Khan puts that spiritual striving happens through "doing and re-doing of known forms." (2012:7) But as I had asked in the previous chapter, who facilitates the dynamics of aspiration and scepticism? And where? Like the Salafi groups in Egypt with whom Samuli worked, Hizbollah tries to portray itself as having answers to each and every question about an individual's relationship to piety and politics. For Hizbollah, being pious is part of disciplining of the self, very much like disciplining the self for the military combat which one engages with while fighting Israel in the South of Lebanon or on side of the regime of Asad in Syria. Yet when people I talked to try to live those ideas and practice them in everyday life - there are contradictions involved. Every individual does not share the same aspiration and scepticism. This does not mean that such people will come to abandon their relationship to Hizbollah in the wake of these contradictions. people do not live life in binaries or even in extremes. They live life in degrees. In this regard, Schielke writes, "*... to understand a specific path of commitment and dedication, it is necessary to pay attention to*

existential pursuits, historical conditions and unexpected consequences. The strive for perfection is a paradoxical path in a life in the future tense that may fail to accomplish a pious formation of the self, and yet it always transforms those who give it a try – only it does so in unpredictable ways." (2015:21) This chapter tells the story of men who have different paths of commitment and still continue to discover their relationship to al-Qaim and Hizbollah at large. In Naveeda Khan's terms, they are always in the process of *becoming*, and they are not always in control of that process. An important aspect which came to the surface through my conversations is that supporting Hizbollah's resistance against Israel can mean very different things to different people. Based on their degree of affiliation and commitment, my interlocutors would be able to understand (and explain) the extent of their relationship to al-Qaim and Hizbollah at large. In other words, as we shall see, there is no direct relationship in the register of cause and effect between a person's religiosity and their involvement in al-Qaim, or more broadly even their support for Hizbollah.

With different degrees, what my interlocutors all have in common is that they understand the level of commitment which the pious community expects from its members; they politically support or sympathise with Hizbollah and perhaps some of them would be directly affiliated with the movement too. However, it is not just about the degree of commitment, but about the feeling one has that one's level of commitment is either sufficient or is maintained at a level beyond which one does not want to go at a given point of time in their life. With time, I realized the immense struggles and dilemmas people faced both in understanding their own individual relationship to al-Qaim and explaining that relationship to me. The latter was the most difficult for two reasons. First, most of them assumed that I come from a place where my understanding of al-Qaim would be shadowed by all the stereotypes that exist about any place or group of people related to Hizbollah. Second, it is difficult to talk about one's

personal experience of being religious and one's own engagement with politics without talking against or towards a normative understanding of what religion is in relation to politics. This becomes even more difficult when you have to articulate the extent of your own engagement: is the personal pursuit of religiosity always directed towards, or articulated in response to, the normative understanding of what piety is, or, in the case of Hezbollah, what supporting resistance ideally means? In other words, are the practices always to be understood in opposition to a normative? If practices make the everyday life, is the normative timeless, i.e., can the normative undergo changes or transformations over a period of time? If yes, do the practices change them? If not, what does? There are no easy answers and whatever answers we find are going to be layered, messy and troubled with many interpretations. This chapter tells the stories of people who either find, or once found, affinities with Hizbollah through al Qaim and tells of struggles in their life trajectories. The stories highlight their journey, how al-Qaim shaped it, and where they find themselves now in their relation to al-Qaim. Maybe through their stories too, al-Qaim as a place can be understood from the perspective of a person who continues to live and grow between aspiration and scepticism. Maybe like Pakistan, it is a place of constant becoming?

Being Khabib⁷

Khabib is a 22 year old university graduate and I first came to know of him through a mutual contact at al-Qaim. My first contact with him was to decide the venue where we could sit and have a long talk. I came to know of him through the mosque, and I assumed we would meet in the mosque or somewhere close by. We finally decided to meet in a bar in Hamra. The choice of the bar was made based on the fact that we both wanted to watch a football match. Our first meeting was very casual, and we just introduced ourselves. We did not speak about

⁷ All names have been changed

the research. However, he expressed his surprise at the fact that I was interested in writing about al-Qaim. We talked a lot that evening on a variety of topics from sports to politics to his studies and his plans and why Lebanon never fails to surprise us in big and small ways. He felt that European league football somehow beautifully unites the Lebanese community. "Although it can also get political like everything else in Lebanon, still that politics does not intensely affect us", he explained. Just before we called it a night, he asked me to tell him about my research briefly. I explained to him that I was doing ethnographic work on al-Qaim and the people who are associated with it through various activities. He said, "I would love to share about my time there... although I barely go there now. I still have to go sometimes, if they call me, but they haven't in a while, and I doubt they will again." I asked him to elaborate as it was not clear to me what he meant. He replied by asking if I liked the song 'Hotel California'. I was amused and said yes. Before I could inquire further, he said: "al-Qaim and Hizbollah more generally remind me of the last two lines of the song... *you can always check out, but you can never leave.*" We had a good big laugh about that comment. Somehow that evening and that moment also cemented our friendship. Before we left, he asked me if I was interested in MMA (mixed martial arts) and I replied in the affirmative. Our next meeting was going to be in a cafe near his gym where we could watch two of his favourite fighters take on each other. One of them was called Khabib. He wanted me to address him as Khabib in the research as well.

Khabib comes from a Shia-dominated village in the South of Lebanon. He describes his family as "super-religious". By this, he meant that his father was extremely active in the affairs of the community as well as those of the mosque in the village. He illustrated this by telling me that whenever the Sheikh of the mosque was absent, his father would act in his place, including regarding the responsibility of leading the prayers. His mother too is very

religious. However, she does not think about nor discuss politics as much as he wishes she would. His first association with Hizbollah happened through the route of the scouts, and he went quite ahead and even took some training in physical combat. Al-Qaim was a place where he spent some of his time when he was actively involved in scouts activities. The turning point in his life came with the beginning of the war in Syria. He lost friends; some of them were very close to him. Around that time he was also starting university and had already started to question Hizbollah as a whole and their use of religion. I asked him to explain to me in more detail what he meant by questioning. Khabib said, "the whole thing feels like a contract.. like just a business which is to be conducted in the language of religion..." Many young people are passionate about religion, and they are taught from a very young age that the only way to understand the politics around them is to understand it through the prism of religion. "So if they are interpreting politics in a certain way, they also feel they have grasped all the deep meaning of religion. The whole damn thing is reduced to simple yeses or nos and dos and don't... I am done with that stuff...completely done.", he explained.

His relationship with his father over the topic of religion and politics started to deteriorate. He clarified that while it was not the only element, but his questioning of religion and politics played a significant role in the degradation of their relationship. He shared an anecdote to make his point clear. In one of the lessons he was attending which were organised through al-Qaim, the qualities of a believer were being discussed. A lot of emphasis was put on asking questions and clarifying doubts. However, once you started questioning the very fundamental premise of how religion is taught and why, to what end - you are in troubled waters. For instance, he said that he was not convinced that people dying in Syria could directly be linked to an interpretation of what happened in Karbala. This is a misuse of religion, he argued.

"There is a deliberate attempt to make things simple so they appear black and white", he said. He had heated debates with his peers that turned into clashes of egos and he could not take those tense moments anymore. Another example he gave was when the topic of lying was being discussed. He said that one of the common messages that were reiterated was: "if you lie once you go to hell." For him, giving such examples in classrooms was pure hypocrisy to keep difficult topics from being discussed. He recalled an instance when he mentioned that often people join Hizbollah for the economic benefits that comes with it and not necessarily for their commitment to religion. Saying that everyone joins or supports Hizbollah for purely religious reasons is lying, he believed. This got him a great deal of negative attention from people. His father was informed of his trouble-making. I enquired: what happened then? He said: "religion stood in between blood ties". In hindsight, he understands that his father was bothered because of the wider religious community's perception of their family. Khabib said, "I cannot imagine the negativity in our family ties... all because of questioning religion and politics."

I asked him if there was a timeline to his association with Hizbollah and al-Qaim. He explained that he was associated with all the activities throughout his teens. But no more. However, he explained further that he understands why people politically would support resistance. Khabib believed that the occupation of Palestine could not be defended or justified under any circumstances: "Whether I am religious or not, drink alcohol or not, or whatever... how is their occupation justified?" He added in another meeting of ours that he knew of people who are not at all religious and have joined Hizbollah through spaces like al-Qaim. However, even if not religious, most of them would express strong support for the Palestinian cause. According to him, even if they understood that their reasons for joining the resistance are purely economical, they still find meaning in supporting the cause of Palestine. I asked

him if he would ever join the armed resistance. He said not until there is physical attack within the Lebanese territory. He further clarified that not everyone associated with the resistance is there for “superficial” reasons. He said: “even though I am not religious, I like Sayyed Hassan. He says and does what he means... unlike others around him who have double standards.” When I questioned him further on why he believes that Sayed Hasan is good, he explained that others have “hijacked the everyday functioning of Hizbollah to make it into a profit-making office”. For him “it is the few good men who do the good work and get things done”. He reiterated that it is precisely because of the people who are there for ulterior motives that his friends lost their lives. This meeting was when he mentioned for the first time that he lost a cousin too in Syria. There was a lot of frustration in him when speaking about this loss. Seeing him so tense I suggested that we go out for a coffee and not talk about this anymore. He readily agreed. At some point during the coffee, he asked me what I feel when I hear his views, and whether similar things happen in India. Truth be told, I am not very familiar with Muslim communities in India. However I did confirm to him that I do know of people who go through similar phases where they question everything they took for granted.

For our last meeting, we decided to meet in al-Qaim itself. He said he does not pray but goes there every few months to just feel the “good vibe” that the religion has to offer. “Vibe” to him consists in “small acts of worship and being quiet and not noisy about your relationship to God. It is between you and Allah. Simple as that”, he said. He also comes to reiterate his belief, that such spaces have been monopolised to serve vested interests and that his questioning is not wrong. And to see others like him who are fed up and wish to maintain some ties to religion but want nothing to do with politics. We were sitting quietly and reflecting over the moment seeing others read the Quran and meditate in the mosque. He

suddenly broke the silence and said: "man... I cannot forget those lame lessons... you are expected to shoot first and then ask why later on... can you really be spiritual in such an atmosphere?"

His story illustrates the complicated relationship some people share with al-Qaim. He goes every few months to meet some of his friends and socialise with them. For him, the struggle is about how to accept religion and politics as separate entities in such an atmosphere. In addition, he is not really sure whether it is really possible that a space like al-Qaim would not force religion and politics upon an individual. In making that decision about how much religion and politics he wants in his life lies his own trajectory of aspiration and scepticism.

I am Yousef

He tapped on my shoulder from behind and said: "Salaam... I am Yousef!" He was one of the first few people I met at al-Qaim. In the initial days of my fieldwork, I just wanted to meet anyone with whom I could have long conversations in English. As a university undergrad student, he volunteered to spend time with me. Unlike Khabib, he wanted at first to know more about me. Why did I come to Lebanon? Why did I choose to study anthropology? How is the discipline of anthropology different from political science? Yousef was in his early 20's and knew a lot of people from his age group in the mosque. He too knew Muhammad well who took me to al-Qaim the first time.

Yousef, like many others, hails from the South of Lebanon and was in Beirut for his studies. Our first meeting in the mosque was extraordinarily formal, and he was kind enough to give me a tour of the mosque. It was fascinating to see how he would frame his understanding of the mosque in a way that is accepted as conventional wisdom amongst Muslims. As we

started our tour, he asked me: "have you been to any mosque before in Lebanon?" I said, yes, in Hamra. He smiled and said, "this is slightly different... in a good way, I guess." He paid attention to details and showed me the various spaces for ablution, toilets, shoe racks, where all the books are kept and where prayer beads can be found. I said that I already knew all of these as I had been there before. But he wanted to ensure that I get an enjoyable tour of the mosque. As I explained in the previous chapter, al-Qaim is not just a mosque but a *mujamma'*. However, he gave me a tour only of the space designated as a mosque or used for praying. He said Muhammad would later give me a tour of the whole *mujamma'*. Our first meeting was extremely formal and ended with the end of my tour of the praying area. We decided to meet next for Dua-Kuamayl on a particular Thursday.

Dua Kumayl is a unique additional prayer in the Shia tradition. It is done on Thursday after the last of the five obligatory prayers. For such special prayers, people from all over Dahiya come to al-Qaim. One reason is that al-Qaim has a larger seating capacity; for many others, the choice is based on the distinctive voice of the reciter. It is a long dua, and at some point during the recitation, the lights are dimmed, and men burst into tears asking for forgiveness. As part of the dua, prostration is done for a more extended amount of time, signifying the intention to seek forgiveness and mercy. The lights are put back on towards the end. We decided to sit near al-Qaim and talk.

Yousef has a religious family background, but his family does not have any formal ties to Hizbollah. However, he believes that if someone from his village gets killed in any war, martyrdom of someone from the village automatically establishes a form of relationship. For him, in these cases, direct kinship do not matter. His father had decided to migrate to Africa during the Civil War, and the family came back in the late 90s. He recalls that he never felt

the need to think about religion or politics during his teenage life. However, he added: "not that I did not know how to pray or do the basics... but I did them as if they were all cultural practices. What religion is and what is the place of politics in it, I realised much later." He explained that his father was extremely protective of him and never allowed him to get much involved in politics. To ensure that Yousef would not get involved in any which way, his father asked the imam of the local mosque in the village not to talk to him about politics and especially not about Hizbollah. Yousef looked at me and asked: "what do you think the imam of the local mosque who is affiliated with Hizbollah did?" I looked confused and said that I could not guess. He said that they never spoke to him about Hizbollah or showed any intention to invite him for any of the scout related activities: "...you see, they never force anything." After finishing school Yousef came to Beirut to start university.

During his time at the university, he started going to al-Qaim, and at some point, he showed his intention to be more involved in the activities of al-Qaim. He mentioned the day when he went and filled his paperwork. I enquired: what does filling paperwork mean? He explained that supporting Hizbollah as a Lebanese Shia is not the same as registering oneself to attend classes and scouts. The latter is something entirely different. Muhammad too had explained to me that not everyone who comes to al-Qaim might have a lot to do with Hizbollah. The activities at al-Qaim inspired Yousef. What motivated him were the post-Friday Q/A sessions which I have described in the previous chapter.

Yousef started being more active in al-Qaim, especially through attending classes on religion. He said: "it is complex only for those who do not know how to study it... Is Islam there to make life simple or complex ?" I explained that since I do not know Arabic, everything is

tough for me, even the basics. He showed me a diary where he would take notes and write songs praising Hizbollah and especially Sayyed Hassan.

He started taking classes in Islamic ethics and philosophy. In one of our meetings, I showed him a philosophy syllabus which is being taught at a prestigious university in Lebanon. He was not at all interested and did not show much eagerness to engage with it. I repeatedly asked him: if it is just about an intellectual pursuit, why not pursue it elsewhere too, why just al-Qaim? His idea was that everything at al-Qaim has a purpose. It is not for its own sake. The aim is to help students have a better grasp of religion and of how to live a religious life in the modern world. "You see, Shantanu, I am not necessarily looking for all the critical thinking and stuff to complicate life... I am looking for meaning, and there is enough complication in spirituality... I wish to engage with that foremost", he explained to me. I was still not sure how to understand the transformation his life went through after he left his village and came to Beirut.

Over time, Yousef and I became closer. In the following meetings, we did not talk about my research or his relationship to al-Qaim. We only spoke about ourselves and our relationship to ourselves and what we think constitutes a good life. How do we know we have found the purpose in life which we were seeking and that it is not an illusion of sorts? Yousef felt that I was still confused seeing his enthusiasm about al-Qaim, especially since his association with al-Qaim was only two years old. We finally broached the topic in subsequent meetings. Yousef at the end of his school days had gone into severe depression and anxiety. He explained that he felt very uncomfortable with the way he looks and conducts himself socially. He had friends but nothing close to a close, real friendship. By close and real friend he meant, someone with whom he could share his depression and anxiety. Over time, he

became addicted to pornography. He feels embarrassed in admitting it but decided to share it with me nonetheless. He said: "we feel good about certain things as they provide a great escaping mechanism to difficulties of life." Watching porn made him feel good, helped him cope with depression and, on the surface, things seemed more manageable. It turned into an addiction. He started skipping classes and reached a stage where he had to seek professional help. Soon he was put on medicines, but it created further issues for him. He had a difficult time focusing and could barely focus on his studies. It reached a point where he had to choose between university and not being depressed. He took a semester break. He said: "my religious life was also bad... can you believe it? I did not fast during the last Ramadan and barely prayed. Maybe a few times a week, sometimes not even that." He decided to open up and share his situation with Sheikh Akram. The advice he received changed his life and also cemented his relationship to al-Qaim.

Sheikh Akram told him to forget about praying and everything else. "Do not do it if you cannot do it... don't force it upon yourself. We all have our journeys and relationship to God. Go slow... Can you believe the Sheihh said that?", Yousef said with a definite glow in his eyes. Yousef decided to continue with the professional help but also hung out a lot more with the people at al-Qaim. Regardless of whether he was praying or not, he attended all classes and took exceptional interest in politics, and especially in the events that were taking place in Syria. By the end of the year, he felt confident enough to come back to the university. During the Winter break, he decided to propose to the girl he was in love with. He discussed the issue with his parents to initiate the formal process of speaking to the girl's family. He thinks the few months at al-Qaim helped him cope. "I still have tough days, very, very tough days... but I don't give up. At least, pornography is out of my life." There was a sigh of relief in his voice and gesture.

His involvement in the activities of al-Qaim was such that more or less everyone knew him. A few months ago he got married and is now in a hurry to graduate. He now feels that somehow his relationship to al-Qaim has also changed. He emphasised that by “modified”, he means the relationship has evolved. We both were sitting at a cafe and having coffee. He explained that his new life made him appreciate religion and resistance in a new light. His political position for the Palestinian cause is not going to change. However, he feels there are more ways of contributing to resistance than just hardcore military combat. He is making plans with his wife to travel abroad and study at a university in the West. He felt the need to clarify that for him Hizbollah is not anti-West or against pursuing an education in the West or even potential employment opportunities is not a pursuit in contradictions. He reminded me of the people Lara Deeb worked with. Material progress and spiritual upliftment is part of the Islamic milieu which Hizbollah community creates for itself.

In one of the meetings, I asked Yousef what he thinks of the Hizbollah martyrs. He thought I was asking because I doubted his commitment to the cause. I tried to clarify that my intention was not to question anything about his relationship to al-Qaim. I am in no position to do that. I asked concerning his new life post-wedding. If changes in his personal life changed his connection to the place, he replied very sternly that he supports them from the bottom of his heart. He further added that it is naive of me to think that because he is not very keen on fighting himself, his commitment to Hizbollah should be questioned. He said: "there are many ways to contribute... of course everyone thinks it's all guns and bullets. There is more, and you should understand this well...". For a period of time, his activities were exclusively attending philosophy and religious classes. At least this is what he told is the limit of his

involvement. In our last meeting, he informed me that he has heard back from a prestigious university and is excited to start the new chapter of his life.

Understanding Muhammad

I have a special relationship with him. He was the first person who took me to al-Qaim. In a way, I knew him before I knew anything about al-Qaim. As I explained in the previous chapter, we would often talk about things as we did not know how to talk about research. He felt it was his responsibility that I got all the information that I was looking for. However, neither he nor I were sure what that useful information for my research looked like. I was going around the mosques, writing notes of everything that I felt deserving of attention. Muhammad did act as translator for me, especially in the Q/A sessions after the Friday prayers. We had reached a point where his life looked like a puzzle to me: I knew many of the pieces, but I was nowhere close to be able to put them together. Muhammad, too, felt that his responsibility towards me was to introduce me to others, and share more about himself. As I was approaching the end of my fieldwork, I told Muhammad, that I wanted to know more about him regardless of whether it would help me in my research or not. He started laughing, and because he had absorbed some anthropological language through his interactions with me, he said: "finally, I will be the subject under observation!" I winked at him and said: "if you would like to think so".

My sentiment is that with time Muhammad started to appreciate the ethnographic method. Initially, he felt, I only pretend to take notes and may perhaps ulterior motives. And one day, I would ask people to fill in a survey which would have difficult questions and requests for personal information. I remember that he once remarked that everybody in al-Qaim should conduct participant observation with each other: "this way, we will come to know each other in a better way". In the course of my research, he too met new people and got an opportunity to know some of them more closely. Muhammad stays close to al-Qaim and has been visiting the place since he was nine years old. As a child, his father used to bring him to al-Qaim, at

least for Dua Kumail and for the Friday prayers. Therefore al-Qaim was for him another place to make friends. He made more friends there than in his school. The people he knew both from school and al-Qaim are now his closest of friends. His father was not very active in the activities of Hizbollah. He only went to al-Qaim because it was close to their home and the Sheikh of the mosque was good. Muhammad recalled: "for my parent's generation it was mostly spiritual... somehow away from the realities of this life. But isn't religion meant to help us in this life?" I did not know how exactly to respond to such questions. More often than not, I both agreed and disagreed with him. My answers to him were only meant to convey that I understood or acknowledged the question. It rarely initiated a debate with him. I once asked him why it was the case that he never felt challenged. His reply was a bit surprising to me. He said: "You study anthropology... but can you really know how I feel and why I do what I do? You can try, but can you read intentions... Only Allah knows our intentions.... and isn't the purpose of this kind of studies... to start debates. Does it change the world?" I did not know how to answer. I said: "you will make a good lawyer." He laughed and said that his to be father-in-law feels the same.

When I went alone to al-Qaim, people would be surprised to see me without Muhammad. And often our conversations would start by talking about him. In one such occasion, another university friend of Muhammad's told me: "He (Muhammad) is a simple guy. I wish I had that relationship to al-Qaim and Islam. My life is so complicated." Another acquaintance said that Muhammad's commitment and search for becoming a better Muslim is unparalleled. "You know I know of girls... and they all say that he never talks to them without a purpose. Not that he is not friends, but he does not chill with them as a lot of the people do...", he said. I would often tease Muhammad telling him how others praise him. He would feel shy and say: "this is because I try and keep things simple. You know, Shantanu, this place gives me a spiritual pleasure. I hope to serve it better." On a particular Friday discussion after prayer with Sheikh Akram, he said: "I love this Sheikh. Does not use unnecessary jargon and yet can speak about complex philosophical ideas. He represents the true image of Hizbollah."

My fieldwork coincided with the time when the White Helmets in Syria captured the attention of the global media. Muhammad and I would have arguments over it. He knew I was very uncomfortable with him calling all of it pure western propaganda. I would often see the frustration in him because of my constant questioning. However, he was too self-aware to not come across as an apologist and would argue from a position which incorporated arguments from both geopolitics and his understanding of religion. In this particular instance, he asked: "So you would doubt Hizbollah?" I replied: "why not?" He double-checked by asking a slightly different question, "so you do not believe in what Syed Hasan says...forget about al-Qaim now or your research here?" I again replied: " I am an outsider, who does not even know Arabic. I take him as a politician like I would treat any world politician." He was shocked at my reply. He ended this debate by saying "Everyone makes mistakes... but our intentions are clean, and I do not doubt that... maybe you should hear the stories of our martyrs."

I was not sure if he would like to meet with me again. Almost after a week after this awkward incident, Muhammad and I met back in al-Qaim. We behaved as if there was nothing awkward and we spoke on a variety of topics like any other day. This time after prayers, we went to a different floor. Muhammad showed me the portraits of the martyrs affiliated with al-Qaim. Many of them were pictures of martyrs from Iran. I asked why they are present in al-Qaim. He explained that I need to think about the Syrian crisis beyond the geopolitics that the global media discuss. We never spoke a lot on the topic after that, but Muhammad showed a lot of interest in explaining the phenomenon of what he called "soft war". According to him, "soft war" is a way through which Western powers entice us to idealise their culture and eventually this enticing would make our minds justify and accept their war."

Over the next several meetings he explained how al-Qaim made him aware of the "soft war". For him, unless we understand the game of the "soft war", we will never be able to understand the war-on-the-field. Al-Qaim helped Muhammad adjust his lifestyle in such a

way that he feels that he is unduly influenced by Western culture. He is studying at a university which takes pride in the American educational ethos; but he feels it is al-Qaim where he gets to learn about society, morals, values and religion. In the last few meetings, I asked him if he would try and study in a hawza only and completely give up his education in an American education system. Maybe this question was provocative, but he was truly agitated by it. His reply was something similar to Yousef's but with a mix of anger and sarcasm, "this is what you think...people in Hizbollah don't value education or simply hate the people in West. No we don't! Really No!" Over the next several days, we continued to discuss al-Qaim and the challenge of the soft-war. In one such meeting, he said: "Sheikh Akram encourages us to get an education, from wherever and in whatever. Why should we not? The point is what we do with our studies and not where we study and what we study."

After the end of my fieldwork, we met again for a coffee. He had recently married, and we talked a lot about Lebanese culture. He insisted on the fact that he tried to keep the marriage strictly religious and not cultural, which for him involves a lot of spending money on meeting certain societal expectations. He thanked Sheikh Akram for conducting the religious ceremony. I asked him what his plans are once he graduates. He is nervous about the future but feels confident that he will be directed in the right direction. For now, he is continuing his activities at al-Qaim and preparing for exams and job interviews.

Khabib, Yousef, and Muhammad share different meanings of what it means to be committed and each one of them has a unique relationship to the religion. They are also different in terms of what their expectation is from Hizbollah. In this chapter I have tried to argue that ambiguity in people's lives should be taken seriously. We should not only engage with interlocutors who claim to be absolutely pious and committed without any doubts about their commitment or vice versa. Schielke while studying not so religious people in Egypt notes that, "...we should take seriously the ambiguous coexistence of different aims that

characterises people's moral, religious and aspirational lives.” (2015:7) In the case of my research, all three of them had very different aspirations, meanings and frustrations towards the pious community of Hizbollah. I also feel that the notion of “everyday” should be interrogated more closely especially when thinking about people's commitment and affiliations. Khabib's everyday does not include prayers, while Yousef 's and Muhammad's does. However, this does not mean that Khabib does not engage with ideas of piety and commitment on an everyday basis. Similarly when Yousef was addicted to pornography, he often thought about his spiritual life. These three portraits also speak about the ambiguities which emerge when one tries to match his or own piety to that of Hizbollah as an institution. This is because people change over a period of time, and their commitment is always in degrees but institutions do not necessarily change with the same pace. The Q/A sessions in the last chapter demonstrated exactly that. Sheikh Akram had a common answer for all as to what critique means and how can one be critical in his relationship towards the religion. For this reason, I titled this chapter, “The Quest to Align Struggles”. A quest individual takes to be (or not) part of the community. Here, *being part of or not* is also a form of aspiration. Khabib, Yousef and Muhammad are in a constant mode of *striving* to align their struggles, commitment and life paths with what Hizbollah and al-Qaim has to offer them. All of them are in the process of *becoming*, with different end goals in mind.

Chapter 3

Shia Women in South Lebanon: on being critical in a religious space?

This chapter is about the personal transformations of two women who consider themselves to be active within the Shia community. Both of them do not hail from al-Dahiyaa but they have been staying there for some time. They come from pious family backgrounds, although in their family there has not always been an emphasis to maintain a strong focus on linking piety to active involvement in socio-religious activities in the community. They both have been involved with the activities of al-Qaim in Dahiyaa, but, since it is a gendered space, I could not conduct participant observation with them in that space. However, both of them agreed to meet with me on several occasions to share their life stories. The personal transformation is their story of paradoxes on what coping means against a specific institutionalization of religion. The paradox manifests in the gap that exists between the normative ideals they wish to achieve, and their interaction with institutional bureaucracies which are meant to help them reach a desired level of piety. Their striving to achieve a certain level of piety gets complicated when personal experience create doubt towards institutions which were facilitating the striving in the first place. More specifically in this case, what being a good pious woman means when "good" and "piety" are defined as part of the governance project of Hizbollah through spaces like al-Qaim. Can you *become a different kind of* pious person by negotiating with(in) those institutionalised projects? Finally what personal notions of piety emerge from scepticism towards Hizbollah? And what does disciplining the self-mean when one is sceptic of the institutionally defined end goals? This story is about two Shia women who are set apart by a generation and how they relate to the institutionalisation of Islam. What kind of critiques they generate and what their scepticism

looks like. Since they both come from different villages in the South, their relationship to various socio-religious projects of Hizbollah also vary. They both bring that diversity of thoughts and experience to al-Qaim. However, what they end up sharing with me is how their time spent at the American University of Beirut years ago made them self-aware of their ambiguous relationship to Hizbollah and more specifically to spaces like al-Qaim.

More broadly, I try to highlight the aspirations and scepticism involved in the attempt of these women to be pious within the Shia community which finds affinity with Hizbollah.

Very much like the men, their attempt to link their everyday activities to politics and religion is not so much about piety but more about the disturbing ambiguities which arise in the pursuit to align their religious selves with the normative they have been taught to embody.

We come to know about their struggles and how it has changed their understanding of what it means to be committed. More interestingly, in their case, what they self-describe as the secular atmosphere of AUB becomes the catalyst for them to question their dedication towards a particular form of religious life. Their story is not one of abandoning but the struggle to be determined to be committed - without necessarily knowing what commitment actually means or looks like.

Feminist scholarship on Muslim women in socio-religious organizations has focused on analyzing complex issues such as agency and subject formation (Mahmood 2005, Deeb 2006). Building on, and also adding nuance to, this body of work, my research argues for the need to incorporate a broader understanding of the concept of a public-Islam and even public sphere vis-à-vis the gendered role of women when they participate in resistance movements within their community. Borrowing from Lara Deeb's seminal work on Shia women in Lebanon, 'gendered resistance' is the space created by these women while being part of mainstream socio-politico-religious resistance, where through their social activism they

define their 'selves' as well as 'others'. In the process, they initiate a practice of aspiration and scepticism through which they negotiate between western and Islamic notions of nationalism, feminism and secularism across two generations of Shia women. As we shall see below, what they refer to as the catalyst of the secular atmosphere of AUB is basically a space from where they look back at their relationship to the religious space created and organised by Hizbollah. Before I begin telling their life stories, I give a brief historical background of the women's movement in Lebanon in relation to the Lebanese civil war. This is followed by a brief account of Oral History and why I had to incorporate it as part of my ethnographic method.

The Historical Background

The Lebanese war (1975-91) broke all barriers. Miriam Cooke writes: "her silence would not be a form of passivity but rather a deliberate choice not to speak so as to not to offend. That choice, however, runs the risk of making her complicitous in a system that silences women who want to talk about war because it is believed that people can only talk about what they have experienced and women do not experience war (even when they do) and therefore they should keep silent" (1999:83) The effects of the war were felt in all spheres: economic, social, political, local and international. And all these were also elements and forces which led the country into a civil war in the first place. With respect to women, Shehadeh writes : "The involvement of Lebanese women in the destruction was almost non-existent. They had nothing to do with the eruption of the war, nor did they ever encourage it. Women were excluded from all decision making processes, whether in the initiation of the war or in bringing it to an end. Their roles were those of the recipients of the consequences and the outcomes of the war on the one hand and the makers and manufacturers of the laws of

survival on the other” (1999:148). However, this does not mean that all women were pacifists; many women across communities protested and staged marches. They were also active in submitting petitions to national and international organizations. Many of them were active in their cause by sending their husbands and sons to fight. And there were still some who participated in a direct form of mobilization by directly joining the militias (Shehadeh 1999).

Women in Hizbollah

In 1974, Musa al-Sadr formed the Movement of the Disinherited to mobilize the Shia and improve their social standing. On July 6, 1975 he announced the formation of Amal, which is an acronym for *Afwaaj al-muqawamah al-lubnaniyyah*. Amal played a marginal role during the initial phases of the civil war, but three events brought it to the foreground: Israel’s invasion of southern Lebanon in 1978, the disappearance of Musa al Sadr in Libya in 1978, and the Iranian revolution in 1979. In 1982, the Hizbollah militia, largely a splinter group from Amal, emerged to help Iranian Revolutionary Guards fight the Israeli invasion in the Bqaa valley. It is over implication but in some ways, Hizbollah emerged not as a monolithic organization but as an assembly of various groups with two main common aims: to transform Lebanon on the Iranian model and to take on Israeli invasion with material support provided by Iran.

Women were mobilized slowly in a step by step process. But the women’s role was limited in many ways because of social control and patriarchal values entrenched deep into the family structure. (Shehadeh, 1999) However, Musa al Sadr encouraged women to join men in the resistance movement. He maintained that a woman completed the man’s role for she

equalled him in heroism and glory. He said: "We, in our contemporary society, are in urgent need to fully realize the message of the Prophet. We need women who strengthen the will, for we need to enlist all our resources to achieve what God has ordained for us."(Shehadeh:152)

On the mobilization of women in the Shia community during the war, Shehadeh writes:

"Women may not have been the model soldiers in Amal and Hizbollah but they were the

'Spartan mothers' (1999:154). Holt, whose research is exclusively on Shia women in

Hizbollah and their participation in formal politics, writes: "although the Islamist movement is by no means monolith, it always contains a pronounced political tinge and frequently has a tendency to use women in ways that seem to represent a reversion to traditional practices."

(1999:172)

Female empowerment within the context of the war raised some very important questions:

what exactly is the nature of liberation in the case of the Shia women of Lebanon, and how is it different with respect to other communities? Also, did it continue to manifest itself after the war and if so, how can it be measured? Although this is not the central focus of this chapter

but is it possible to think of patriarchy as an institution through which men read scriptures

specifically to control women's bodies and discourses around what "true" emancipation means? Like other places, in Lebanon too, in times of war, and immediately after that

women's bodies become the site for asserting cultural authenticity and women's

responsibility towards "producing the nation", this becomes about more than an Islam v.

West dichotomy. Holt writes: "although women are allowed to occupy certain influential

positions within the Lebanese Shia community, they tend to be social, family-oriented nature. On the whole, women are not found in the ranks of political leadership and certainly never

become religious leaders This appears to confirm the argument that male religious leaders

have appropriated the words of the Quran." This quote in many ways summarises the tension

that my interlocutors face in their interpretation of what institutionalisation of Islam potentially means and the challenges they face in order to separate “true” Islam from its patriarchal interpretations. Further, as we shall see below, they do not necessarily evoke western notions and concepts of feminism as a way to challenge the Hizbollah structure from within. As we saw in the case of men involved with al-Qaim, there is *degrees* to one’s involvement and commitment to such spaces. The same is the case for these women. However, because I could not spend time with them in those gendered spaces, I decided to note down their life trajectories in order to trace moments of aspiration and scepticism. In order to do justice to this task of documenting their life stories, I found the method of oral history very helpful. As the quote from Cooke earlier suggested that *silence is not passivity*, oral history can help to elaborate what participant observation as a method perhaps cannot have access to. This was especially true in my experience with my interlocutors.

Oral History as Methodology

Before analyzing the oral histories, it is worth examining the use of oral history through which these two women try to articulate their relationship to resistance. Fatma and Balaghi, in their essay *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East Through Voice and Experience* (1995), argue “voice and experience can be utilized as the two conceptual parameters to recapture the agency of the hegemonized. Voice advantages the text of the subject over the interpreter; experience assigns primacy to the way the “subject” and the interpreter actively and consciously give meaning and mediate their social realities.” For my research, this means that I will be exploring the socially constructed gender roles of women across two generations. The key point for my research is to try and analyse the self-construction of these gendered identities by women themselves. It is for this reason that I use oral history as a tool

to study gender and gendered politics, past and present. Oral history can be used in an attempt to undo what is sometimes ‘forcefully’ theorized. Therefore, the aim of oral history is to ‘produce less partial, less distorted beliefs through acknowledging their historicity and social construction.’ (Abram, 2010) This was also important because I did not want them to just label every aspect of their life as religious and speak only from the perspective of being Shia. As women, aspects of gender, class, regional village dynamics, family background and kinship, all of these factors combined will have made their self different from each other’s. According to Abrams, a relational perspective on the self is important because it can “help the narrator talk about him or herself in relation to other people: simple comparisons, contrasts and placing of the self in relation to relatives, friends and so on.” (2010:22) In my research, it became clear that although the two women were closely linked to the resistance, their understanding of it was quite different from one another, and they articulated that difference well when they were able to compare and speak through each other’s perspectives. Another reason why I wanted both women to be aware of each other’s perspectives was what Abrams calls the “reflexivity of the self”. This is because in oral history we don’t just expect people to tell a story but also to reflect it in relation to other stories. Therefore, both the women too should be aware of the similarities and differences they had on issues to with Hizbollah and al-Qaim. In the process I did see them agree and disagree with each other a lot. It is in their discussions I saw traces of Khan’s powerful argument of aspiration and scepticism.

The women I interviewed, who I will refer to as⁸ Seema and Fatima, were aged 25 years and 52 years respectively at the time I spoke with them. They both hail from villages in the South of Lebanon and did not want their villages to be named. I asked Fatima if this is because of

⁸ All names have been changed.

security reasons, to which she replied laughingly: “No! we are all Shia and from the South! *Khalaas*.” There is a possibility that she did not want to share any other reason with me, but it made me realize the unity among people from the South. Later in the interviews I realized that organizations like Hizbollah work hard to maintain and coordinate that unity. By unity, I do not mean homogeneity in terms of political opinion of the people or membership of Hizbollah or any other organization. What I mean is that there are certain objectives that everyone agrees with and is willing to mobilize for if the need arises. So Seema and Fatima are entirely different from each other, but they have mobilized in the same manner on certain issues, for instance, against Zionist politics. The aim of my research in this chapter is not to study the common issues which they mobilize on, but to identify which issues they differ on and why. It is in their differences that One such issue is the role of women in resistance. It was clearly established in the interviews that the student life of the two women played a key role in how they understood the role of women in resistance.

Seema graduated a few years ago and is based in Beirut, and she was the one who introduced me to Fatima through a mutual contact. Fatima and Seema knew about each other in a formal capacity through some activities at al-Qaim, although they were not aware of each other’s political and social views. I had requested them that we all meet together so I was able to give a brief introduction to them especially in terms of the themes that would discuss. Fatima decided on the venues most of the time. They were different cafés in Dahiya and we met several times over a period of two months. I used unstructured interviews which were more in the form of conversations.

The objective behind the use of conversations as methodology is to challenge: 1) the putative hierarchy between me as the student-academic and the women as my research subjects, and 2) the hierarchies of colonial logic that define the relationship between the

'expert' ethnographer and 'exotic' specimens. Above all, the conversations which we had in public spaces (at mutually convenient venues) challenge the stereotype that religious Muslim women do not engage in conversations with unrelated men in public, and furthermore that men cannot do research on gender in Muslim communities as access is impossible due to cultural reasons. Although this is not the subject of my research, in many ways these two women challenged a lot of stereotypes about both married and single Muslim women in Lebanon and their interaction with stranger men in public space.

Their Stories

Hijab and/in secular space

Seema is 19 years old and Fatima is 52 years old. They both had more differences than similarities. In my conversations with them, two main themes emerged - one was around the *hijab* in the secular space of AUB, and the other around transnational influences on their perceived roles in gendered resistance. I would like to first start by showing the differences in their opinion about their time at AUB, and the themes of hijab and secular space which emerged from it. This space almost disrupted their previous notions of piety and politics. It is necessary to keep in mind that their time at AUB is to be seen more in terms of what Naveeda Khan calls "Time as becoming". For Khan *time as becoming* is the central argument of how she understands the state of Pakistan's open-ended relationship with Islam. She writes, "I aim to give an account of Pakistan that demonstrates its inheritance of Islam with an open future and a tendency towards experimentation, alongside its much criticized historical record." (2012:7) Needless to say, this becoming also entails frustrations, negotiations, and realisations about how to separate the religious from the secular. Above all, what being critical of one's own premise really looks like. Seema liked the atmosphere at AUB because it

helped her challenge her own biases, whereas for Fatima AUB was a difficult experience. At the centre of their negotiation here was the hijab. Seema discovered her true love for hijab because of the secular environment at AUB, whereas for Fatima it became a form of protest to challenge the secular nature of the AUB campus, which looked down upon women who wore the hijab. Seema, who came to AUB to study psychology, told me she wanted to fight patriarchal figures in her village who use religion to control women and mix religion with culture.

Shantanu- Why did you decide to study psychology?

Seema: because... to change the mentality of people in my village. I want to study sociology after this.

Shantanu - when did you realize that there is a certain mentality in the village which you would like to change?

Seema: I was unable to realize something like that until I came to AUB. I used to believe that they are the ultimate people. I used to believe that their way is the best way and they are always right. Then when I came here.. I was shocked. They are very wrong... on a lot of things.

Shantanu- Ok, so give me one example of something at AUB which made you think "Wow, I did not think of it this way?"

Seema: People in the village focus on things that are superficial.

Shantanu- For example?

Seema: Yanni for example, your appearance, your money, your family. But here at AUB they don't pay attention to all of these things. At AUB they focus on your abilities, ideas... information... There (in the village) it is completely different – they don't care about the way

you think, they don't care about your knowledge at all... all they care about is to be married, have kids and to have money and to be a family that has a good reputation... that's all.

Shantanu- When you were growing up, are these the values you were taught?

Seema: I felt like... the best way of living is to have money and be like this... make a good family.

Fatima, on the other hand, considered coming to AUB a challenge, where her deeply held beliefs were not respected by others. For her, the hijab is at the centre of her experience. She said:

So when I entered the university... I realized that I did not belong to this society... yanni... everyone who saw me at AUB then (because of my chador), would send me a message that I do not belong here... because we were exactly 4-5 girls only who wore the scarf. This is the year 1984 in the second semester. And by the first semester of 1985 I got to know the other girls and we gathered to talk about these issues and united. What attracted us at the university was not the studies but a weird sense of wanting to explore our own religion. We girls did not unite to study more and think about anything else but only got together to explore religion and explore it more deeply.

We were at AUB so as to defend ourselves... and convince ourselves of our religion. So we started reading more religious books and started like a reading group to read more about the religion and its use in every aspect of our lives. We did this to protect ourselves against the hate messages that we were receiving. I was not at all comfortable either in the classroom or in and around the campus. Because everyone would look at us as if we had done something wrong. And all of this hatred was coming from local students.

But at the same time, Shias were becoming stronger. For instance with the whole revolution in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Then Hizbollah came and the resistance started. We belonged directly to the movement. We lived in different times. Like I said, I came from a very good religious family but I had my real interaction with religion at AUB.

I mean things were so bad on campus...that I even stopped communicating with faculty here.

Amina Jamal (2009) who has written on women in the Jamat-e-Islami in Pakistan, observes: “There is a need for further theorising about both the 'Islamic' and 'the modern'. On the one hand, we need to understand Jamat women’s self-construction as religious or pious women; on the other hand, we must grasp the specificity of their claims to act as modern subjects in the time of political and cultural modernity” (pp.10). This is absolutely true for Seema and Fatima as well. They both spoke from a position where they wish to maintain their civilizational status and from that vantage point. Seema and Fatima’s experience mirrors the experience of the women Lara Deeb’s worked with in southern suburbs of Beirut. Like Deeb's interviewees, Seema and Fatima put a lot of emphasis on the modern. For Seema it was the modern aspects of AUB which helped her revisit her religion and take a critical look at it. The relationship which Seema has to “village life” is very different from Fatima's. While Seema found an avenue through what she called a “different” atmosphere at AUB to challenge village attitudes, Fatima found this very “different” aspect of AUB to be hostile towards herself . Of course there needs to be a critical understanding of what they mean by the “difference” of AUB and what they mean by “village life”.

AUB, as an institution, has gone through many changes since its inception. The 150-year old institution takes pride in the secular values of the university, which have helped in building a

bridging relationship amongst the various communities of Lebanon represented at AUB through its student and administrative body. The reality for Seema and Fatima is ostensibly more complicated. Both Seema and Fatima have had a different relationship to AUB, because AUB has changed as an institution and so too has its practice of secularism. It became clear to me that secularism for my interlocutors was not a mere ideology which opposed or stopped people from having a particular world view. Secularism, in this case, becomes a mechanism which facilitates in practice particular ways of being in this world... more than just ideas. As we will see later in this chapter, that secularism and AUB are often used interchangeably by my interlocutors. For Seema and Fatima AUB becomes a space where ideas, experiences, understandings of what it means to be religious, social, political, cultural are all challenged. The very meaning that religion holds for both of them gets challenged. The wearing of hijab in AUB is a talking point for my interlocutors to think more broadly about the why, who told who to wear it, what happens if one does not wear it; all aimed towards challenging the very pursuit of a particular form (religious) commitment in life. Time spent in AUB becomes the engine to reflect on these immensely frustrating, ambiguous, self-reflecting questions about identity, belonging and meaning-making of various facets of life. The secular-space of AUB challenged them to their core. Seema, Fatima and I were walking towards a café, and just before we entered, Seema, said: "I was thinking about our discussions so far and I feel AUB is a like a laboratory, you go in and you change..." I asked her in return: "was the village too like a laboratory? She said: "yes, off course, but I find this one more useful...". Fatima did not comment but kept on acknowledging what we were discussing by a few nods and later explained to me that although Seema seems to have certainly benefited a lot from her time at AUB, this is because she is reaping the benefits of the hard work and activism done by Fatima and her peers to create the space for the hijab to be accepted. Seema did acknowledge this, however she claimed that AUB is a space which helps her to think on how and why to

challenge patriarchy (as a system) in her village as people there are not open to her views. Seema's perspective are clear from the following excerpt from one of our conversation:

Shantanu - as a hijabi you think asking girls in the village to wear the hijab is superficial ... and here at AUB do you think it is any different?

Seema: In the village they wear (the hijab) because they are forced to wear it, because... to be accepted in the society you have to wear it... Even though you don't know the meaning of the hijab at all. It is all related to the shape and appearance of women and to be accepted. They don't know anything more than that... about the reasons.

Shantanu- You never thought or talked about these things when you were in the village?

Seema: Actually I did try to have such a discussion with my mom and we had a very big fight. And when I spoke to my friends, they thought I was being pretentious and ridiculed me as if I know more about the religion... and I feel that I am better than my friends (she giggled)... So I just prefer not to speak about it.

Shantanu- After coming to AUB, you started realising that things are much more complicated and different?

Seema: Yes to an extent but it is not just solely because of AUB. It is also because I am growing.

Shantanu- Personally, how has your understanding of wearing the hijab changed before and after AUB?

Seema: So it is not just because of AUB as an institution but people at AUB, the Muslims and non-Muslims (student and faculty) at AUB. There is a huge difference between Muslims at AUB and Muslims at the village. Here at AUB they understand, what's the meaning of the

hijab.. so I now believe the hijab is something to protect me, in terms not of physical protection but to give me the value of a human being. So like as a female I have a lot of attractive things and men are very sensitive to these attractions ... So to be treated as a human and not as a female, to prevent men from being distracted by my female qualities, (this is why) we wear the hijab. Because when men treat you as a female, you can sense they are being controlled by their instincts... just as if they are treating (a piece of) meat... so if they saw meat and they want to eat... they look at me in that way.

Shantanu- you realized this after coming to AUB? What was your previous understanding of the hijab?

Seema: Just like other villagers. It is something that you have to wear because God asked us to wear it and to be accepted in society... (laughs) and it is a full Shia village.

This conversation with Seema makes it clear that there is a clear tension between what her understanding of piety and what piety constitutes within the realm of the pious community. It is worthy to recall here the quote of Deeb which I used in the first chapter on how she introduces her work, she writes, “I want to emphasise that this is not a study of “the Shia in Lebanon” but rather, of a particular “community” defined by forms of piety that reflect a specific Shia identity.” (2006:11) Does Seema with her scepticism of the pious community of her village, still qualify to be part of the “community” as defined by Deeb? Further Seema’s experience also demonstrates my use of the notion of public-Islam. As we shall see later, Seema gets criticised by her mentor’s in Hizbollah for being critical of the common good that Hizbollah discourse aims to instil in the community through their use of public-Islam.

Shia identity and transnational influences

For Fatima, it was the secular principles of AUB which could not give her the space she deserved. It is also interesting to note how Fatima perceived non-hijabi Sunni and Shia women alike – both were secular, which is quite different from Seema’s point of view.

Shantanu- What was the response of the Sunnis to your being dressed in a chador ?

Fatima: They were all the same... like Sunni and Shia were same but I was the odd one out. They were together combined as “secular” and I was the other one! They were not religious and same talk and same fashion... So even Shia were here for the same superficial reasons. God knows who funded them but they were all, what can be said, “secular” in order to study. This university was not for the poor people. Only rich and very rich who were more materialistic and less religious. But now things have changed.

Shia were always poor in the history of Lebanon and there was discrimination at various levels. The Shia were like workers and servants to Christians and even sometimes to Sunni. I mean the point is that we were just being discriminated at various levels. Even the Shia leaders who were meant to represent their people were corrupt and perhaps Shia people themselves did not really care and demand change. So if Shias wanted a better life for themselves, the man would go somewhere else to work and send money back home. They would go to places like Qatar, Kuwait or somewhere in Africa and send in money from there.

Shantanu- Is it fair to say that from then to now you have seen a generational change ?

Fatima: Of course, yes, I have! I have seen a generational change from my parents to me and me to my daughter. My daughter will never have to face and see what I had to face either at AUB or otherwise financially.

But let me say this. Israel's fight with the Palestinians... accidentally Shias were at the South of Lebanon and they helped the Palestinians and they trained with the Palestinians... and this fight with the Israelis against their occupation has been a defining moment in terms of giving Shias a political position domestically and internationally.

And Israel decided to make it a full-on way with Shias... especially with the rise of Islamic Republic of Iran and...since it was a revolution there, we decided to rise with it here. So here at AUB during that time, we got all the books of Imam Khomeini and read them in our reading groups at AUB. It was a very strong and influential time for us. It helped us see our religion with a new side. And this was different from what our parents told us about it... totally different time this was for us.

Here I would like to borrow from Deeb's analysis on Shia women in Lebanon and their relationship to the hijab. She writes: "civilizational discourses are embedded in gendered assumptions." Women themselves often play the role of signifying those gendered assumptions. So the hijab becomes the barometer through which women check their piety and compare it with others. However, what is more interesting is the use of transnational discourse by Fatima to explain her politics, especially regarding the veil. And this is where her main disagreement with Seema lies. In Fatima's case, the influence of the Iranian revolution is more political, and in Seema's case, it is more spiritual. But is it really possible to differentiate the spiritual from the political? We saw in the case of men who go to al-Qaim that often their struggle lies in defining the contours of what is political and spiritual in their everyday life. We also saw the role al-Qaim plays in shaping that decision. Can I go to a bar to just listen to good music ? Can I date someone without having sex ? What happens if I don't pray but politically support Hizbollah? Similarly, for these women, their understanding of what the Shia community is and should be gets challenged by their time spent at the university. This, in turn, changes their relationship with their community which is still very

strongly influenced by the religious and political ethos of Hizbollah. Both Seema and Fatima drew on their interpretation of what happened in the Iranian revolution and what influence it was on their lives as women in Lebanon. The influence of the Iranian revolution was so strong that their difference of opinion about the nature of patriarchy in Hizbollah and the secular atmosphere of AUB - both drew on theological and philosophical scholars from Iran. In that regard, it may be possible to conclude from this example that in order to understand the positioning of women in the Shia community which considers itself to be pious, we need to look for socio-religious justifications which have roots in transnational discourses on piety and politics. On the influence of Iran, Fatima said:

I don't think there is a big impact... the impact of the revolution on women in Iran is very different from the impact of the revolution on women in Lebanon. Although the comparison is not valid between here and Iran because the women in Iran were given a lot of rights, even before the revolution, but I will tell you something.

Across the Arab world across history, women have been treated extremely badly because of ignorance. And when there is ignorance, women suffer the most. And it is during this time that man starts thinking he is superior to women around him and he can control them. So men suppress women all over the world... because they think she is soft and he is strong and he can control her... and then he justifies it all with the wrong interpretation of religion.

The trouble is that when the sheikh and the 'alim themselves are not able to differentiate between culture and religion, what can be expected from the public but to be stuck between the culture and the religious?

Sheikhs have reduced all this to a job, made into a way of living. With Israel oppressing us, and Shias not part of the regime in Lebanon... what do you expect us to do?

At the same time, Russia's influence on Shias was also great, especially the youth.

Communism was strong then. But they did not have much to talk about religion and even less on ethical concerns which are part of being religious... and therefore this also led the youth to become delusional.

So what do we do now? Then Imam Khomeini arrives. And we revolutionize. And now was the time for sacrifice. Therefore things also started changing in Lebanon... because Shias were all over the place. You must remember this is the time that the Amal party was already there but they were more or less conveniently compromising without really caring about the people. ...however there were good people too inside Amal, who were true followers of Musa (al Sadr) and wanted to help Shias politically and socially.

So some Shias and people from Amal went to Iran to meet Imam Khomeini and asked him, "What should we do in Lebanon?" And he said only one thing, "Fight Israel and you will see God will help you."

While Fatima was more concerned with transnational exchanges, Seema was more concerned with the local and emphasized that there is a huge difference between theory and practice. According to Seema it is all good to discuss the rights of women in theory, but men of the community do not allow it to be practiced outside its institutionalised form and that is something she wished to challenge. And Seema succinctly answers of what she thinks when any religious organization opposes secular principles at AUB by calling them Western. What Seema sees as hypocrisy within Hizbollah is not necessarily recognized by everyone - she is questioning the culture, and preservation of culture (which is deeply patriarchal) is the mandate of the cultural wing of Hizbollah. This is because the institutionalisation project is ruptured with individuals being sceptical of the project from within. However this does not

that Seema and Fatima abandon the community completely. Rather they strive for a *different kind of becoming* by continuing to be part of the community. This is especially true for Seema as visible from the interaction below.

Shantanu- Do you have friends from your village here at AUB, and do they also think like you?

Seema: I do have a friend here and she is studying engineering, (but) I feel she is not getting the chance and exposure to reflect like the way I m getting the opportunity... Studying social sciences is really a life-changing experience for me.

Shantanu- Are you still associated with Al-Mahdi Scouts now?

Seema: Yes I was, but they kicked me out once.

Shantanu- Why?

Seema: You will laugh if it I tell you. Because I put my photo, like a profile picture on Whatsapp. But now I don't care! You want to kick me, kick me out. Because of that they kick me out... They again started the argument that I am corrupted and this and that. But now I don't care. So I m associated but I doubt they will ask me for work.

Shantanu- Tell me more about this whole episode?

Seema: So two years ago I went on a trip with my friend, and I put my photo on Whatsapp. And then the leader in the Scouts, she spoke to me that I am doing something wrong, and that my hijab is changing and that I am wearing all colourful clothes... I should not do this... like they spoke a lot about my hijab.

Shantanu- What is wrong in your hijab, according to them?

Seema: So they are like, it is becoming very tight... and it was the same, nothing changed at all. And they said that because I was wearing an abaya and then I stopped wearing it, so they

thought that I'm corrupted... because of that. But then one person cannot challenge them. One person cannot bring about a change.

Shantanu- And what was the response of your parents to all of this?

Seema: My mom initially was shouting but then she got used to it...and accepted it. But this whole episode is before AUB.

Shantanu- But before that, you never doubted what they are saying may not be correct?

Seema: Indeed, I was doubting myself and thinking that I might be going on the wrong way.

Shantanu - What do you think of Hizbollah in Beirut and the role of women in Hizbollah here?

Seema: Hizbollah in Beirut is completely different from Hizbollah in my village. In Beirut they give women their rights. They know that women have rights. Just like Imam Khomeini...that women should work, we should use women's abilities to improve our state. Hizbollah in Beirut does that. But in my village the Hizbollah thinks that women should only stay at home and raise kids. Serve her husband and nothing more.

Shantanu- What does "serving her husband" mean ?

Seema: To do household chores, that's it. And raise kids. Why should I be at home and serve a man? I don't want to do this... I mean I would love to raise kids but not be a servant at home.

Shantanu- is there something else about village life that you find disturbing?

Seema: Yes both Al-Mahdi Scouts here and Hizbollah here (in Beirut) will agree with my views as compared to both in my village. I think people here will accept me... as they are completely against the views of the village. Thanks to AUB.

Shantanu - Do you want to change Al-Mahdi Scouts?

Seema: I am planning to make a revolution in my village. This is my aim.

Seema does not want to quit Hizbollah but wants to see a different kind of Hizbollah where women have different roles. She aspires for a different future than what institutions of Hizbollah currently have to offer. By taking lead from Khan (2012), maybe I can argue that Seema has an imagination of Hizbollah where there is space for experimentation and constant striving. She is working every day to create that space for herself and others like her. The scouts are part of the *mujamma'* al-Qaim and Seema stands in an awkward relation to them because they are aware of her attitude towards the scouts. However, even the scouts at al-Qaim have not completely outcasted her. Like Sheikh Zain from the first chapter, she is part of the community, but for now exists on the margins. May be the process of striving, can also be realised being on the margins of the pious community of Hizbollah. At the same, the striving and aspiration of Fatima to include Seema as much as possible demonstrates that experimentation for better times is always a possibility which should be received seriously.

After thoughts on *doing* Oral History:

This has been one of the most rewarding writing experiences I have ever engaged in. While writing this chapter, I realized that Seema and Fatima's oral histories for me were not just about their lives but also got me engaged to think about religion through the lens of guilt, aspiration, failure and skepticism. I learnt a lot through this experience, not only on the topic itself but also on ethical issues related to oral history. I knew Seema and Fatima in a personal capacity and they readily agreed to speak, but there are many things which they chose to keep off the record. Oral history helped me realize both the limitations of academia and its evolving strengths. Oral history combined with feminist perspectives in anthropology has the

potential to open new avenues for debates and discussions. Fatima and Seema made me realise that in any ethnography, participants are always the co-producers of anthropological knowledge. However, given the lack of trust or larger institutional politics, I feel they did not share a lot and in some instances requested me to keep many things off the record – hence unavoidably forcing me to exclude certain perspectives.

With Seema and Fatima continuously asking me during our conversations the same questions that I asked them, I realized that oral history is a two-way process. Needless to say, I got a view from the inside into the gender dynamics of Hizbollah. This is an under-researched area, and there is a dearth of scholarship on oral history in Islamist groups worldwide. Although it was not the focus of my research, I realized that oral history does challenge a lot of 'knowledge-production' on Hizbollah by international relations scholars. I do not mean that IR as a discipline does not have legitimate arguments to make on Islamist politics, but often the validity of the knowledge they produce is denied by people living that politics. I realized this during my talks with Fatima. I would ask her a question based on the readings I had done on Hizbollah from IR or political science disciplines, and she would argue the opposite. When we discuss the validity of knowledge-production, it is not about what qualifies as objective. Rather it is and should be about what constitutes 'knowledge' - why is Fatima's perspective any less valuable than that of scholars who do not engage with ethnographic methods? For these women, Hizbollah, as an organization, is what its members make it. And they argue that women have a key role to play in that. For Seema and Fatima women's voices need to be heard both within and outside of Hizbollah. With changes in generation, the politics of the organization is likely to change, and this must be documented if we are to study either the evolution of the organization or the factors responsible for it. Both Fatima and Seema spoke English and hence collecting these oral histories has been a memorable

experience. However, more than its personal significance, I hope that it can prove to be a contribution from which others can learn, and which can be used to build further upon oral history as a method to study gender politics in socio-religious groups in West Asia and beyond.

Conclusion

I was very skeptical when I started to do research for this project. A lot of people warned me that having access to *mujamma' al-Qaim* would be extremely difficult. I decided to go ahead anyway. I initially had started to write about the relationship between different notions piety and critique. However, over the course of my fieldwork and subsequent writing, I decided to focus on the relationship Shia Muslims have to their religion through *mujamma' al-Qaim*. In effect, what I did was a study of how Shia Muslims relate to Islam in its institutionalized form. The work of Naveeda Khan informed a lot of my own writing. Khan's formulations of the concepts of *aspiration* and *skepticism* helped me in my own theoretical formulations. This involved a lot of close reading and re-reading of her book. She summarizes her book, "*Muslim Becoming*" as, "*my argument, in brief, has been that the creation of Pakistan inaugurated the aspiration to strive to be Muslims. This aspiration did not concern itself with final ends. This while the emphasis of striving was on self-perfectibility, it never emphasized perfection. Although, undoubtedly has seen leaders, movements, and parties with notions of what kind of society, state or self Pakistan should forge, the particular tendency that I track through the philosophy of Iqbal to Pakistan's early constitution makers and its implementation in this place maintain the necessity of an open future to enable striving experimentation on the self. I take the construction and maintenance of mosques in neighborhoods of Lahore to be sites of such experimentation, with struggles over these mosques expressive of aspiration and its possible undoing.*" (2012:203) I found her argument very compelling and indeed al-Qaim was also a place where instances of striving and scepticism could be observed. However, I found it difficult to translate her argument in the context of my research, which lead me to theoretically diverge my position from her. For Khan, there is striving, aspiring and becoming taking place in the everyday life of Pakistan.

But a close reading made me ask two questions: Who is striving and where? Is it the modern nation-state of Pakistan who is constantly striving or the Muslims citizens of Pakistan or both? There is a difference in each of the positions. For me there is a difference between the religion of Islam, and Muslims who practice (or not) the religion of Islam. In the context of Lebanese state, Hizbollah occupies an unpredictable yet a secure position. The unpredictability comes from the fact that it is at once both a state and a non-state actor. This assertion was shared by my interlocutors as well. For Khan's interlocutors Pakistan was built as a mosque. But Lebanon, as I had suggested in the introduction, does not aspire to be an Islamic Republic. Hizbollah is not a state actor in the Weberian sense of the word. But then it is neither non-state. Hizbollah has a military arm which intervenes in wars by its own choice and maintain more ties with Iran than what the foreign policy of Lebanon would prescribe. It runs social services often exclusively for its own publics (Deeb 2006). So, if constant striving is facilitated by the state of Pakistan to be in a position of always becoming, who is striving in Lebanon and where? Is it the Lebanese state striving or Hizbollah or both? It is for this reason, I decided to use the concept of margins of the state and I locate *mujamma' al-Qaim* on the margins of the modern Lebanese state. I use the work of Das and Poole (2004) to think about the margins of the state. And I try to argue that Hizbollah within those margins creates a space for striving and aspiration. Because Pakistan as a state claims to be an Islamic Republic, the language of striving and aspiration has a tone which alludes to both the Islamic and Republic nature of the Pakistani state. Hizbollah is not a Republic in that sense. Hence it tries to monitor and even create a discourse around its unique relation to Islam. I use the concept of public-Islam as proposed by Salvatore and Eickelman (2005) to demonstrate how Hizbollah through spaces like al-Qaim attempts to institutionalize Islam. Within this institutionalized Islam, there is space and opportunity for aspiration and skepticism.

I show the tendencies of aspiration and skepticism within this institutionalized Islam. The chapter 2 follows the life trajectories of three people who are or have been associated with Hizbollah through al-Qaim. Actually, to answer the very question whether are associated anymore or not is difficult because the nature of their relationship is so ambiguous. They have different meanings of what commitment is and what is the path to be committed. In this way their future to Hizbollah is also open-ended. The final chapter deals with the gendered notion of these debates. How do women relate to such institutionalized forms of Islam in a country which almost had close to two decades of civil war? How they negotiate gendered roles within Hizbollah? What impact does the Islamic revolution have in the institutionalization of Islam are some of the questions which I deal with in this chapter. Like men, there is both aspiration and skepticism in the lives of their women and they hold different meanings of piety especially when they set apart by a generation.

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