

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

AL-AKHBAR'S LEFTIST DISCOURSE:  
ANOTHER ALTERNATIVE THAT MAINTAINS THE SAME  
STATUS QUO

by  
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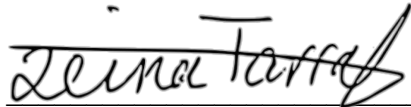
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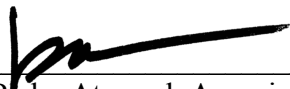


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# ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Elissa Ghattas Mdawar

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Title: Al-Akhbar's Leftist Discourse: Another Alternative That Maintains The Same Status Quo

This thesis develops a critical analysis of the leftist alternative discourse offered by Al-Akhbar. Al-Akhbar was launched based on the alliance between a major leftist voice in Lebanon which is the Lebanese Communist Party, and the allegedly resistance sectarian party Hizbullah. Back then, this alliance was built to challenge Hariri's capitalism and USA's imperialism and project in the Middle East. However, after 14 years since its launch, this newspaper, that established a leftist-parlance and championed a left leaning narrative in Lebanon and the Arab world, stopped offering an alternative to the status quo and became enlisted in the Lebanese sectarian power sharing system. As my thesis will show, the newspaper's discourse could not echo people's demands during the Lebanese October uprising and could not offer alternatives that transcended the current power alliances in Lebanon. It was instead supportive of Hizbullah's resistance and the Chinese-led global system as the only leftist alternative that would champion people's rights and build their welfare state. In my thesis, I will unpack how the outlet defines people as a socio-economic category and capitalizes on the elites/poor binary to legitimize the Chinese-led camp's alternative to the US-Israeli neoliberalism. I show that this alternative turns out to reproduce the same power structures it aims to dismantle because it focuses on identity politics and an a priori defined social agents and relationships between them, and it eliminates the heterogeneity of demands and their uniqueness.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Lebanon has been facing an accumulation of crisis and challenges since its so-called independence in 1943 that finally erupted in 2019, igniting massive protests that shook the whole country and subsequently, giving birth to the direst socio-economic and political crisis in its entire history (Baumann, 2018). And even if the direct obvious reason of the protest's outburst on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October was depicted by a majority of commentators or citizens as the "WhatsApp tax", the main fuel that ignited the uprising was none other than Lebanon's exceptionalism: consociational democracy and neoliberal laissez-faire economy maintained by a religious-political, sectarian and business elites whose main ally is the banking system, that intensified wealth inequality for more than 30 years (Assouad, 2021).

This uprising was a personal event to me as much as it was a political one. My friends and I were dedicated to the cause and felt personally responsible for changing our system, our country, and our lives. From day 1, I was participating in the sit-ins and protests and what I came to notice, among many other things, was the extreme excitement of my friends who were in the youth and students' committee of the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP). They started sharing photos of the Bolshevik revolution on their social media platforms with commentaries on the similarities between the two revolutions especially since they both happened in October. They sprayed the communist hammer and sickle on the banks' walls and on most of the buildings' walls in downtown. They started sharing excerpts from Marx and Lenin on WhatsApp groups and organizing public debates and seminars in the middle of the streets led by prominent



Marxist intellectuals and journalists. They were in the streets singing songs of Ziad Rahbani and Khaled Haber, and Sheikh Imam. They were sharing articles from the Lebanese newspaper, Al-Akhbar, that date back to 2016, 2017 and 2018. The articles that were circulating, were the ones that warned about the collapse and detailed how and why it will happen and some ways to avoid it; in addition to the ones that uncovered illegitimate banking measures and policies and their relationship to the corrupted power sharing oligarchy. Also, among the articles that circulated, were Marxist readings of the Lebanese political economy and the necessity to fight against the neoliberal world order that is at the roots of the crisis. The terms used by Al-Akhbar to describe the crisis were echoed in the streets by protestors who do not only belong to left leaning coalitions or circles, such as “we want an end to the oligarchy”, “we are the 99%”, “we want to topple the banking rule and dollarization”, “the country is for the workers, we’ll topple capitalism”, etc. No doubt that Al-Akhbar’s articles were shared during the first week of the uprising; the newspaper has been promoting the necessity of a revolution for more than 5 years. In fact, this outlet succeeded in promoting leftist parlance and leftist stances that mainly support the philosophy of resistance against injustice and tyranny and this includes the support of the Palestinian cause; all of which made it appealing to the masses more than the politicians (El-Richani, 2016).

However, and after only few days from the beginning of the protests during which the newspaper consecrated its pages in eulogy of the revolutionaries, Al-Akhbar took an anti-revolutionary turn. It started publishing articles that promote hate speech against protestors that were calling against the resistance party, Hizbullah. These anti-revolutionary stances led to the resignation of many leftist and Marxist writers and editors such as Mohammed Zbeeb, Vivian Akiki and Ghassan Deba who expressed their

disappointment from the newspaper's coverage that lacks any critical analytical framework that accompanies the revolutionary desire of the protestors. The leftist appeal of the newspaper and its commitment to emancipation, social justice and political change, that diminished during the Syrian uprising (Hanssen & Safieddine, 2016) seemed to disappear during this uprising. And the protestors' attacks on this newspaper became harder as it betrayed its revolutionary goals and betrayed them. The once left leaning influential oppositional daily that publishes strong critical, political and cultural content (El-Richani, 2016) pledged its explicit support for the resistance party, implicated in the neoliberal power sharing system, against the revolutionaries in the streets, all the while continuing to criticize this same system.

As someone who was personally involved in the protests and whose thoughts were deeply shaped by Al-Akhbar's pre-uprising content, I was intrigued to understand how can an outlet that produces such progressive and in-depth left leaning analysis of the socio-economic fabric and the political economy in Lebanon and abroad, take such anti-revolutionary stances. I am informed that the newspaper does not criticize Hizbullah, but it was not such a big deal as the outlet constantly produced critical readings and alternatives views that made sense. What did I miss while reading it? How can leftist goals become so devoid of their meaning and used against revolution?

To understand my confusion, I thought about embarking on this thesis that's purpose is to study Al-Akhbar's leftist discourse during this conjuncture in Lebanon. By analyzing Al- Akhbar's articulation of the Lebanese crisis, the protests, and the alternatives to the neoliberal system that the outlet advocates for, I aim to answer the following set of questions:

What is the leftist discourse articulated in Al-Akhbar? How does the resistance discourse

that the outlet promotes become problematic? How does the outlet articulate the socio-economic crisis? What alternatives do Al-Akhbar provide to break the neoliberal hegemonic system? How does a leftist discourse reproduce the status quo or how did Hizbullah coopt leftist narratives? How do leftist concepts and frameworks used by Al-Akhbar become inefficient in breaking a hegemonic order?

As I will show in my analysis, Al-Akhbar already endorses an existing and well-defined leftist project: a rejectionist leftist approach based on a dichotomous world view. I do not argue if Al-Akhbar is leftist or not, as I acknowledge the multiple trends in the left. However, my analysis aims to explain how and why this version of the left that Al-Akhbar advocates for is problematic and has some dangerous consequences. I argue that the left that Al-Akhbar actively participates in constructing, does not offer new possibilities that challenge the status quo and reproduces the same oppressive power dynamics and structures. I will do this by analyzing the articulation of relations and equivalences between social divisions and collective political identities and positions. I point out to the flaws of this leftist essentialist discourse in creating a counter-hegemonic narrative in a conjuncture characterized by the multiplicity and interrelation of grievances, identities and discourses.

In the following, I bring up a brief history of Al-Akhbar to show why and how this outlet's narrative is relevant in the study of a leftist alternative discourse. Then, I explain the methodology I followed and the framework that helped me analyze the discourse and understand it. By the end of this introductory section, I briefly explain the following chapters' content.

## **A. Al-Akhbar's leftist appeal**

Al-Akhbar saw the light on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 2006. To understand its relationship to the left, Safieddine and Hanssen (2016) contextualize the conception of the newspaper according to two main conjunctures; the first one is sociological and geopolitical and it includes the rise of neoliberalism and the anti-imperialist Islamism that coincides with the decline of the organized left, especially after the Iranian revolution and the US invasion of Iraq that marked a “new imperialist onslaught against the region” (Hanssen & Safieddine, 2016). The second one is more local and is related to the crisis of rule in Lebanon due to the division of the political life in two camps: the first one is 8 March coalition (that includes the LCP, Hizbullah and Amal party, later joined by the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)) that dominated militarily and was supporting the Syrian occupation in Lebanon against Hariri neoliberal politics and western imperialist agendas. The second one is 14 March coalition (includes the Future Party, the FPM (Free Patriotic Movement), the Phalangist, Lebanese Forces, the Democratic Left Movement (DLM) and other left leaning groups) who were all against the Syrian occupation and Hizbulla' s weapons (AbiYaghi & Yammine, 2020; Hanssen & Safieddine, 2016). Hanssen & Safieddine (2016) argue that it is this specific and tacit alliance between the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) and Hizbullah in the March 8 coalition after a war against Israel in 2006 that reinvigorated and strengthened the resistance narrative, that created Al-Akhbar.

The conjuncture of the outlet's creation pushed its founder, Michel Samaha, to position the newspaper as a project that aims to “challenge political culture in Lebanon” and break “the hegemonic pro-Western, anti-Syrian media bias propagated by *al-Nahar* and the Future Movement consortium in the wake of Hariri's assassination in 2005” and

an opportunity to build the state based on principles of sovereignty and citizenship (Hanssen & Safieddine, 2016). In the first op-ed titled “Good timing” the founder framed Al-Akhbar’s position as follows:

“We need to work towards building a state based on principles of citizenship. Only with such a state, just and sovereign and powerful, will we be able to recognize and incorporate this amazing capacity to triumph over adversity. Only such a state will be able to see resistance—any resistance—as an integral instrument of strengthening the country’s social fabric, defending its Arab identity, and preventing it from sliding into destruction—a condition long sustained by the illusion of a so-called neutrality that aims to deprive the Arab nation from Lebanon’s valuable contributions”  
(Samaha, 2006 as translated in Hanssen & Safieddine).

Samaha and the editor in chief Ibrahim AL Ameen, pitched to funders the newspaper as a platform that “opposes pro-US and pro-Zionist forces in Lebanon and the region”. The first investor was Hasan Khalil “who was reportedly keen to cement ties with Hizbullah and a number of other major political players—including soon-to-be Prime Minister Najib Miqati, who likely saw himself as a rival to Hariri’s son Saad” (Hanssen & Safieddine, 2016). Despite the presence of these funders who are politically close to Hizbullah, the newspaper disclosed its financial and political independence from Hizbullah and Mikati or any other political parties (Hanssen & Safieddine, 2016). Moreover, the outlet was “unabashedly critical to the extent that some financiers such as former Prime Minister Najib Mikati, according to a WikiLeaks cable, regretted having financially contributed to the launch of the paper” (El-Richani, 2016).

Hanssen & Safieddine (2016) argue that Al-Akhbar revived the radical press culture and promoted leftist parlance through its in-depth investigative pieces on state officials and public budgets and chauvinistic and nationalist discourses that were barely tackled. The newspaper was committed to the following: championing the rights of Syrian, Palestinian and any migrant and domestic (especially female) workers; coverage

of sexual abuse; coverage of the cultural scene and underground productions; coverage of women's issues and debunking the socio-politics of religion (Hanssen & Safieddine, 2016) in addition to center-to-left economic analysis (El-Richani, 2016). Very soon, Al-Akhbar became a "strident new daily" and "broke away from reporting protocol news and presented brazen critiques of events, leaders, and policies" (El-Richani, 2016). And through its unconventional style, investigative pieces, committed journalism, breaking taboos content that provides spaces and voices to the most marginalized in the society, Al-Akhbar became a "public opinion shaper among Internet-savvy groups and generations" and it extended "its readership beyond the Arab world as a leftist publication" (Hanssen & Safieddine, 2016). By 2010 Al-Akhbar's website ranked twelfth in a Middle East survey of the most used online newspapers in the MENA region" (Hanssen & Safieddine, 2016). Al-Akhbar had an English version that started in 2011 but stopped in 2015 due to the lack of funds (El-Richani, 2016).

Throughout the years Al-Akhbar's leftist appeal and its commitment to justice, citizenship and revolution in addition to its anti-oppression, anti-imperialist, and left leaning economic and political content gave it a huge "intellectual credibility and emancipatory trust" among a huge base of readers whether they were leftists or not (Hanssen & Safieddine, 2016). However, the status that the newspaper built for 5 years (from 2006 until 2011), as an outlet that is close to the people and committed to leftist ideals, was diminished due to its apologetic stances with Al Assad's regime during the Syrian uprising. The Syrian uprising moment marked a divide of the left regionally and internationally between a camp supporting the allegedly anti-imperialist regime and a left supporting democracy and anti-authoritarianism. This schism was reflected in the paper and it eventually led to the resignation of many journalists who were pro-democracy and

who thought that the anti-imperialist framework is outdated and needs rearticulation as it comes at the expense of people's freedoms and even the Palestinian liberation.

Disenchanted with Al-Akhbar's coverage and support to what was labelled a criminal regime, Max Blumenthal, a resigned journalist, stated that Al-Akhbar's leftist melancholic discourse no longer fulfills Samaha's dream of the independent journalism's transformative potential that leads to an alternative better reality (Hanssen & Safieddine, 2016).

Despite the negation of any relationship with Hizbullah and its Syrian ally, the newspaper's coverage of the Lebanese uprising proved otherwise. But the reason why the newspaper could still hold a leftist affective and effective appeal, was the strong commonality and continuous alliance between Hizbullah and the Lebanese Communist Party, which is the most organized and dominant leftist voice in Lebanon. In addition to the presence of prominent Marxists intellectual writers that contributed to almost all the newspaper's content. And given the alliance between Hizbullah and the LCP that was an artifact in launching the newspaper, it becomes crucial to highlight how this alliance was formed and consolidated to explore how it is exploited now.

In fact, the alliance between the Shia community - that was later led by Hizbullah - and the LCP goes back to the 1930 when the Shia were marginalized, without any feudal leader (Salibi, 1979), and oppressed by the French mandate and the national pact between the Christians and the Sunni (Al Azzawi, 2019; Siklawi, 2014). Most of the Shia who were facing poverty and neglect found commonalities with the LCP as they were both demanding agricultural reforms in the South and the Bekaa; resisting Israel and resisting the sectarian system -which was the roots of the injustices they were subjected to (Al Azzawi, 2019). Hence, the Shia joined the LCP (50% of the

Communists in 1975 were Shia) and other communist organizations and fought with them (Al Azzawi, 2019). With the rise of Musa Sader and then Hizbullah, most of the Shia joined their community leaders. And despite some armed conflicts between the Shia of Hizbullah and leftists even when they were allied during the Lebanese civil war (Yacoub, 2013) this alliance still haunts the LCP and encapsulates it. This alliance that is still ongoing since the Lebanese war consecrated a discourse of resistance that is used interchangeably when talking about Hizbullah and the LCP, especially since they both identify as resistant parties and they intersect in their core conceptual grounds based on the following demands: anti-US interventionism, anti-Zionism, anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism, in addition to the military support for the Palestinian liberation. Al-Akhbar contributed to the consecration of this interchangeable use of discourse and perception of Hizbullah and the left in terms of resistance. This was mainly done because the left in its major component and voice, the LCP was absent from the political and ideological scene. So, the newspaper's compelling left leaning narrative compensated for the gap of a strong, organized and appealing leftist discourse that was supposed to emanate from the dominant leftist party in the country (the LCP) between the 2006 and 2019. And it is exactly the failure of the LCP to differentiate between its own approach to resistance and the one of Hizbullah, or to renew its new political articulation of a leftist project that is reflected in Al-Akhbar and that I point out at. Hence the relevance of the LCP's discourse to my thesis. And it is to note that when I say the LCP I do not only mean the party, but the broader leftist trend that the party adheres to and commit to constructing and promoting, and that became centered on rejectionism.

In fact, and until present, the LCP is still unable to move forward with its discourse, alliances and political actions, past the March 8 coalition. In its latest national



conference meeting that happened in February 2022, the party, once again, reinforced its identity as a “resistant” party, and its readiness to fight militarily against Israel for the democratic and secular state, as this is its historical duty. The party restated its loyalty to the main causes: against Israel, the World Bank and the IMF version of neoliberalism; against US interventionism and against the US-Israeli project in the region; against sectarianism; against imperialism and dictatorships, etc. (The Editorial board, 2022). But it did not mention how these vague and broad demands can be achieved today. The LCP did not clearly state how its resistance today that includes all the stances mentioned above is different from Hizbullah’s resistance regarding the same issues. The LCP did not even mention on what grounds they differ from Hizbullah’s stances and why they should differ from the latter to achieve their democratic secular state, especially in light of the October uprising. The party did not articulate a new project that combines all the demands that were raised during the October uprising that were simultaneously against Hizbullah, against the US interventionism or any other form of intervention other than the American, Zionism and any other form of occupation, against oppression and authoritarianism, against neoliberalism, etc.

The October uprising that brought social justice matters to the forefront in addition to anti-sectarianism demands, was not the first one that seemed to be an awakening of the left in Lebanon (Bassil, Kebbi & Mardam Bey, 2020). For the past 13 years, some newly leftist coalitions and movements (most notably “Trotskyists”, “Youth of LCP”, “Socialist Forum”, and “Union of Lebanese Democracy”, and secular clubs) led protests to topple the sectarian system at the root of all corruption and inequalities. Among these protests were the 2011 *Hamlat Isqat al nizam al taifi* (campaign to overthrow the regime) and the 2015 “*tol’et rihetkon*” (You stink; campaign against the

corrupted elites in the context of the garbage crisis). But one of the main differences was that the two latter mentioned protests could not transcend 8/14 March sectarian divisions and could not create the change they wished to achieve as many leftists did not accept the demand against Hizbullah's resistance of Israel and wanted the protests to protect the party due to its alleged and historical fight against Zionism (AbiYaghi & Yammine, 2020; AbiYaghi, Catusse, & Younes, 2017). However, the October uprising marked a new moment as it distorted this image of this resistant party. We could hear in these protests: "*Kelon yaane kellon, Nasrallah wahad mennon*" (All the politicians are corrupted, and Nasrallah's one of them); a slogan that 2011 and 2015 leftist protestors were reticent to raise and which was the main topic of segregation between the protestors (AbiYaghi, M. N., Catusse, M., & Younes, M., 2017). Angry protestors, even among Hizbullah's resistance supporters, accused the party of mismanagement, preservation and defense of "a political class that has led the country to the verge of collapse" (Jalkh, 2019). Nasrallah's hierarchy of oppression that is only aligned with anti-imperialism alienated many of its supporters (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2011) as "social and economic demands have taken precedence over strategic issues" (Jalkh, 2019).

Despite the opportunity that a disruptive moment like this in the country's history offers, the main leftist party's (LCP) dissociation from 8 March's coalition and discourse did not happen. A leftist rearticulation of a new project that connects new demands combined together to change the current status quo with its current social identities and blocs, seemed far-fetched. And in this context, Al-Akhbar becomes an interesting case study of the leftist discourse. The harsh attacks on the newspaper that the protestors' accused of becoming anti-revolutionary, equated the attacks on the *Zu'ama*. This really shows the validity of studying the leftist counter-hegemonic narratives through this outlet

due to the high level of political parallelism that characterizes the mediascape in Lebanon and that is amplified during any crisis (El Richani, 2013; Dabbous, 2010) let alone this uprising. In brief, Al-Akhbar as the product of a leftist communist alliance with Islamic left that was not broken since 2005, and as the reflection of a national and international rejectionist leftist trend, make this outlet a good case study to analyze the impact of the leftist discourse of the left in this conjuncture.

## **B. Methodology and analysis**

The scope of this study is from July 2019 until July 2020 and this period is relevant because firstly, it delimits the time many media outlets started to publish warning indicators of a big upcoming crisis (in July) and to cover some shy protests that were taking place in different regions in the country. Secondly, it delimits a period centered on the economic crisis and lightly the health crisis (since March 2020) prior to the new phase that Lebanon entered after the Beirut blast (4<sup>th</sup> of August 2020) during which the collapse hit new rock bottoms and other discourses and solutions emerged.

I visited Al-Akhbar's online archives and selected articles from five rubrics which are: "*Lubnan*" (Lebanon); "*Ra'ey*" (Opinion pieces); "*Mulhak ra'es al mal*" (the economic annex titled the "Capital"); "*'Aalam*" (World, as world news); "*Aarab*" (Arab, as news from the Arab world). I ruled out the other rubrics such as "*Thaqafa wa nass*" (culture and people); and "*Riyada*" (sports). The first rubric is related to Lebanon hence it is directly relevant to the thesis. The second two rubrics form the theoretical leftist foundations of the newspaper where we can find the bases of the stances and the rationale of the discourse. The capital annex, produced once per week, includes in-depth theoretical and practical explanation of political economy in Lebanon and the world.

This section is an oscillation between the universal political and economic ideals, theories and practices and their connection and impact locally, hence it was very crucial to visit the articles written there. The two last rubrics, World and Arab, are also essential only in terms of their relation to the Lebanese situation and the neoliberal and imperial crisis that Al-Akhbar opposes. The rationale behind my choice is inspired by the words of the founder of the newspaper, Joseph Samaha, who reminded in his opening editorial “Good timing” (Samaha, 2006) that “a look into issues from the Arab region and the World is essential to understand what happens in Lebanon and to Lebanon; and to fight the mercantile rural trend that is at the core of the Lebanese ruling elites”.

For the data collection and analysis, I proceeded as follows: I read the titles of all the rubrics’ articles then skimmed read the articles searching for keywords in Arabic that relate to the following main themes: The Lebanese crisis and uprising, the neoliberal and imperial system, sectarianism, the left, alternatives and resistance. Some of the keywords I used translate to the follows: left – leftist – crisis – economy – economic crisis – political crisis – imperialism – sectarianism – social justice – demands – political parties – banks – system – elites – oligarchy – protests – protestors – corruption – socialism – resistance – alternative – austerity, etc. I filtered all the articles I read and kept 260 that I found relevant. Out of these 260, I finally kept 104 articles that I used for this thesis and that helped me understand the leftist articulation in Al-Akhbar. At a later stage, I read the 104 articles, summarized them, identified recurrent elements and noted how concepts are defined and articulated. I coded these elements and definitions then tried to understand how the newspaper constructs the relations between them to finally group them into themes and trends that became chapters. Secondary resources were used to help me rigorously analyze the articulations of the themes and social identities and make sense of

them.

My approach and methodology had many limitations and the most obvious one was the hardship I faced in clearly articulating my aim and connecting the fields of study I am engaging with. At some points it seemed like the project was well connected and coherent, but at other points I realized that I needed to include more reflections on the link between the arguments I put forth, the primary resources I use, the scholarly articles, and fields of study I contribute to. The second shortcoming was my data design process: I spent a lot of time reading the primary articles and I chose a big sample to prove my points. While a big sample helped me be surer of my arguments and ground my claims it took me more time to analyze and it made my coding process harder. I think that the lack of a well-defined and effective coding strategy from the very start affected my entire work, as I realize now that a better coding strategy would have definitely helped me pick better quotes and coherently link the arguments, quotes and statements. The last struggle I faced was the lack of similar researches, which complicated my work and made the process a bit stressful.

### **C. Articulation theory as theory and method**

I was reading some articles on left wing movements in Europe and got to know that two left wing rising parties (Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece) that were gaining so much popularity, base their political project on the ideas and theorizations of Laclau and Mouffe. I delved deeper to know more about these intellectuals' contributions to these leftist parties and I was inspired by their work that allowed me to critically deconstruct and understand Al-Akhbar's discourse. Laclau and Mouffe's first

project “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy” (1985) was born after 1967 leftist defeat and the fall of the Soviet Union that made the authors realize that there were incongruencies and internal incoherence of Marxist readings of events in the West (Townshend, 2004). The frustration from the Marxist dominant readings was due to the essentialist construction of society as base/superstructure that led the left to totalitarian actions and that became politically very limiting for the potential of mass socio political movements. The authors aimed through their theorization of the concept of articulation – that is the discursive process that explains how hegemony and power are constructed and maintained in societies (DeLuca, 1999) – to build simultaneously a theory of discourse and a political project because they thought that the crisis faced by the left was a political as much as a theoretical one. I think their work is relevant today because it tries to create a cohesive and democratic project that combines a complex multiplicity of social actors and grievances in a unified and democratic project away from “anti-democratic metaphysical foundations or totalizations” (Townshend, 2004; Kaplan, 2010). Additionally, they constantly revisited and updated their work, which is still evolving as many intellectuals and politicians are developing their ideas and building on them (Kaplan, 2010), which make their insights even more relevant and interesting.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, articulation is “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In other terms, articulation is the process of connecting different elements and discourses in chains to form new social identities or social relations and new united meanings (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). For Laclau and Mouffe, elements refer to the raw concepts and ideas; discourses are the ways through which social groups perceive the world; and social groups are not essential but acquire a

positionality that is constituted by the intersection of many conflicting discourses. The articulatory process is not merely combining pre-existing elements but the existence and functions of social groups and the relations between them are all constantly redefined according to this articulation. It is mandatory then to dig deeper in the political, historical and cultural contexts in which the articulation process happens to understand it more, especially that some discourses might be more appealing and widely accepted than others in specific contexts and conjunctures. And this is why the authors insist that discourse is not only linguistic but material as well (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; DeLuca, 1999).

To construct a political project and create change especially in times of crisis, it is important to construct unity between antagonistic social groups and conflicting or complementary demands by forming a new collective political subject and project. However, this unity does not mean the homogeneity of groups and demands (DeLuca, 1999). On the contrary, it suggests that the new collective political project that combines clashing elements, respects their full autonomy and difference without imposing any fixed united identity or any essential features on the new emerging project as a whole. This heterogeneity allows more diverse voices to be heard and is more inclusionary and democratic (Kaplan, 2010; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The new language that combines these antagonistic elements is usually an empty signifier to which all the different subjects relate, in terms of what it represents they're fighting against. Central to this formation of unity is the concept of contingency, which explains that the new united and stable political subject and project that was formed based on a chain of equivalence between many conflicting or similar demands, can always become renegotiated and re-politicized (Kaplan, 2010; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In other terms, when the linking

of many elements and discourses reproduces power relations instead of disrupting them, the connections between the discourses and elements need to be reconsidered.

In brief, the theory of articulation inspires my work in terms of articulating multiplicity of demands where each antagonism “retains their particularity but are linked as equivalent in that they all point to the limit of the dominant hegemonic discourse” (DeLuca, 1999). Laclau and Mouffe inspire my work as well in their conceptualization of the contingency of demands and subjects’ positions instead of the fixed identities and social actors: identities are built through discourses, and are constantly changing and negotiated in political moments (Kaplan, 2010; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

#### **D. Road Map**

This thesis is divided as follows: Chapter two is the literature review where I discuss how my thesis engages with and builds on scholarly work in three fields and how it wishes to contribute to each one of them. In chapter three, I tackle the populist leftist discourse of Al-Akhbar and I show how the resistance project that the newspaper claims it combines people grievances, is anti-democratic. Additionally, I show how the appeal to an international people have the potential to unite people against systems causing them the same types of atrocities. However, this strategy was used to legitimize the existence of Hizbullah as the party with an alternative resistance project to the neoliberal crisis locally and internationally. In chapter four, I argue that the alternatives to neoliberalism and imperialism that Al-Akhbar advocates for are fallacious, distort the audience view of the world’s hegemonic order power dynamics and hence is inherently anti-democratic. I show how the fallacies reproduce the same oppressive power structures and do not offer



any chance for actual emancipation. Finally in chapter five, I reflect on my findings and suggest some ideas for future researches.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

My thesis participates in and contributes to three scholarly fields: firstly, the articulation of leftist discourse in Lebanon; secondly, Hizbullah (as an Islamic leftist trend) media and communication strategies; and finally, studies about alternative leftist media in Lebanon. The three fields are actually linked together: I argue that Al-Akhbar's leftist alternatives presented a new reading for the political and socio-economic crisis that is not sectarian centric, but that tapped into neoliberalism's dynamics. However, these alternatives do not offer a potential for revolutionary change, instead they reproduce the existing power relations because the articulation of the connections between social groups and different grievances and demands are all perceived as fixed, essential and homogeneous. The analysis of Al-Akhbar's links between neoliberalism, the state, the banks, protectionism, resistance, China, the US, the left, politicians, and Hizbullah, etc. allowed me to show how and where the articulation of demands and identities lost its emancipatory potential. Hence, I could conclude that the leftist trend in Lebanon (that dominates the narrative) is still in crisis as it became completely coopted by the sectarian party, Hizbullah, included in the neoliberal power sharing system.

#### **A. Articulation of leftist totalitarian and essentialist projects**

My goal in this section is not only to narrate the history of the left in Lebanon. On the contrary, I aim to show articulations of leftist political projects in 3 different conjunctures in the Lebanese history: before the civil war, during the civil war (1975 – 1990) and post-civil war. By doing so, I will be able to point out at the rigid, totalitarian

and essentialist patterns of theorizing and doing politics that dominated the most prominent leftist parties and that did not serve leftist revolutionary aims in Lebanon. As will be discussed, leftist conceptualizations of the political and social demands and identities were very hierarchical, essentialist, silencing antagonisms, and stuck in irreconcilable dichotomies; a pattern that is still dominant until present.

This being said, my thesis contributes to the intellectual history of and intellectual work on the left in Lebanon and the Arab world because it presents a contextual articulation within this field of study in a particular historical conjuncture that is: nationally the post-independence revolution (2005); regionally, the post Arab uprising; and broadly the post-cold war period. A conjuncture in which the left seems “caught unprepared for the important revolutionary movement” neither in terms of leadership and strategy nor in terms of intellectual framework (Majed, 2014). *Al-Akhbar* is a good case study, because it allows me to analyze the connections and links between social identities and discourses that form a leftist project. And understanding how the elements are articulated on the pages of this newspaper, is an interesting way to understand a leftist trend in Lebanon.

Throughout the articles, I noticed that there was always an issue with the articulation of a new leftist project especially in times of crisis. Leftist parties, activists and intellectuals in Lebanon have ascribed meaning to events based on socialist, nationalist and communist ideologies, theoretical debates on anti-colonialism, anti-sectarianism, anti-imperialism, and non-capitalist development, etc. Their political actions and alliances have always been guided by this meaning making process. More often than not, these interpretations could not bridge the gap between ideology and practice. In most cases, especially in times of crisis, whenever intellectuals or parties

tried to build a new leftist project that unites groups and grievances under the same common goal, the following happens: First, parties/intellectuals do not transcend the material construction of society as base/superstructure which does not give room for a political action that includes but is not limited to this essentialist conception of the social. And/or second, parties/intellectuals hierarchize demands instead of linking all of them and forming chains of equivalences between them against the oppressive system (for example, first pan Arab liberation, then national reforms follow). Or/and third, when/if the parties/coalitions create a connection between demands and disparate social identities, they do not acknowledge each's autonomy but they tend to eradicate any antagonism between demands and social groups and tend to impose only one feature on the new identity created. This translates in the anti-democratic organizational features of leftist parties that silenced any voice against the party's leadership. For instance, Mahdi Amel called leftist intellectuals and activists decided not to participate in the Lebanese civil war, "nihilists" that will harm the leftist cause (Frangie, 2012).

In the early fifties, after Moscow's agreement to the Palestinian partition, the LCP that was distancing itself from Arab national movement allied with the latter to fight for the liberation of Palestine and the Arab countries (Munoz, 2019; Hayakawa, 2021). In this juncture, the leftist project articulated by the communist party connected the military fight against colonial and imperial powers to liberate Palestine and Arabs, with the fight against capitalism along with anti-sectarian demands and socio-economic reforms in Lebanon all under the common goal of liberation, which was the new leftist political project that united nationalist, socialist and communists. However, in the sixties, it turned out that these demands were not respected as autonomous and unique and they were all reduced to the military action and full support to Arab socialist regimes, as the

regional fight took precedence over any other demand and was defined as the condition of their success or feasibility. The fight for liberation became only synonymous to the support for Arab socialist military regimes. In this time, oil markets boomed in the Arab world and the capitalist rentier economic model became the system Arab bourgeoisie put in place to benefit from its huge profits under the pretext of nationalizing the Arab resources. The bourgeoisie that was ruling and was supported by the Soviet Union, was getting wealthier without any concern for distributional policies in Arab societies or socialist economic reforms, and this consecrated the dictatorship of these regimes (Feliu & Izquierdo-Brichs & Serra, 2019). The LCP, that was still following Moscow's praxis, maintained its support to the Arab petite bourgeoisie without realizing how detrimental this alliance is on redistributive policies in Lebanon (Haugbolle, 2020). Hence, the main leftist project in this conjuncture supported capitalist and authoritarian measures that were of no benefit to the people, only because dominant leftist organizations including the LCP stuck to Moscow's stagism that legitimized Arab despot capitalist states as the righteous path that precedes socialism and communism.

As this dominant project was supporting rentier capitalism, some new leftist intellectuals in Lebanon such as Waddah Charara and Fawwaz Traboulsi among others found Socialist Lebanon (SL), a leftist movement that aimed to reject Moscow's stagism and the Arab bourgeoisie politics (Guirguis, 2019). SL produced pamphlets throughout which they re-read Marxist texts, engaged with them and formulated their own articulations of a true leftist project arguing that the militarily fight for the liberation of Palestine cannot be sustained if the leaders of this fight (the Arab bourgeoisie) promote capitalism and inhibit socialist reforms and redistribution politics (Guirguis, 2019).

Critical voices similar to SL emerged and demanded more contextual articulations of the

left, but the LCP stuck to its framework.

During the Lebanese civil war, communist intellectuals were searching for grounds to connect all the struggles under one project: they were rearticulating the sectarian war and the regional anti-imperialism fight, and the demands for secularism, social reforms and state welfare. Amel and Muruwa who were the prominent intellectuals leading the LCP, theorized the war in socialist terms as a “social, political and regional struggle against reactionary capitalism, imperialism and Zionism powers, led by national secular leftist powers” (Younes, 2016). They considered the civil war an extension of the armed struggle for Arab liberation (Frangie, 2012), hence prioritized the Arab fight against imperialist and capitalist forces as they thought it’ll automatically overthrow the bourgeois elites and laissez-faire economy in Lebanon, that sectarianism is a component of. Similarly, the New-left, most notably Socialist Lebanon (SL) thought that Lebanese authorities and nationalist politics that were neutral regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict were fortifying the laissez-faire economy and the national bourgeoisie. The latter was the result of imperialist resource pillage of the Arab region. Hence, they allied with the Palestinian resistance because they saw in it the external revolutionary agent in Lebanon that transcends sectarianism and will lead to the Lebanese socialist revolution and national reforms (Bardawil, 2016). These readings led most of the communist parties to fight in the war alongside the Palestinian guerillas and the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) against the Christians mainly the Lebanese Front and phalangists (Younes, 2016; Yacoub, 2013; Hayakawa, 2021). The leftist project was articulated as socialist reforms that necessitate a war against imperialist and capitalist forces in Lebanon and the region that will necessarily lead to anti-sectarianism and will more socialist reforms. However, this conceptualization accompanied by the

participation of leftists in the war led to tragic devastating outcomes and proved the failure of this leftist imagination. Still the LCP and prominent leftist intellectuals did not accept to change their strategies and continued to fight in the civil war (Younes, 2016). The anti-sectarian socialist reforms war made the leftist project exclusively military and leftist circles and parties became less democratic disregarding the socio-economic reforms or working on abolishing sectarianism (Yacoub, 2013). In fact, the LCP stood against any voices that demanded the end of the sectarian war and the focus on national and pan-Arab demands simultaneously such as anti-imperialism, anti-sectarianism and anti-capitalism in addition to the liberation of Palestine, without the precedence of one over the other (Yacoub, 2013). The LCP silenced any project that was not predominantly military. For instance, when leader of trade union Adib Abou Habib demanded more socio economic and legal reforms, the end of the sectarian war and the alliance between all worker movements in Lebanon to achieve these aims, the LCP expelled him from its circles and stood against this workers' organization (Yacoub, 2013). The LCP's stance led to the cooptation of trade unions by sectarian parties and weakened the latter in addition to deceiving people in terms of rights and changes of the system. Similarly, in the 80s, Ziad Harb, a leader of a group of LCP fighters, got expelled from the party when he suggested an alliance with the Lebanese army in the South to liberate it from the Israeli occupation. The party's view of the army as an imperialist entity without even analyzing or understanding the context, led it to accuse its loyal leader as a traitor to the cause (Yacoub, 2013).

Dissident voices or anti-essentialist conceptualizations were not well received in the LCP. Waddah Charara that fought with the Palestinians in the beginning of the civil war because he explained the civil war in socialist terms that can abolish sectarianism,

realized after the many massacres in the first few months that any justifications of this war, no matter their theoretical sources, are just too bankrupt (Bardawil, 2016). Charara reflected on his view during the first months of the war and wrote an auto critic after 10 years that rethought the categories of the political, beyond the dual and essentialist division of society (bourgeoisie/proletariat) and based on the multiplicity and complexity of infra-national loyalties of people to understand not only class but the ways power works within the Lebanese social fabric (Bardawil, 2016). And I think Charara's reflections are an avant-gardist alternative project that the left could learn and benefit from today, as it offered a different and a more inclusive and critical view of social agents and political power dynamics.

By the end of the civil war and after it, the main leftist political project was conceptualized as anti-sectarian. But anti-sectarianism since the Lebanese civil war stopped being equal to secularism and it was the many discourses that agreed to topple the sectarian power-sharing system (Hayakawa, 2021). The LCP thought to achieve their anti-sectarian welfare state by fighting Hariri's neoliberal and reconstruction policies and his allies the US and gulf countries, supporting Palestinian liberation and hence allying with the sectarian party Hizbullah who already raises the same project. These LCP's strategies stemmed from the Pan-Arab anti-imperialist stance led to its support to the Baathist Syrian oppressive occupation in Lebanon that inhibited justice and impoverished the poor; it also led to the involvement of the LCP in bloody sectarian tensions in the country; to the failure of uniting the workers and pushing for reforms that will benefit them; to the failure of producing new theoretical ideologies and new political projects; and it kept the party out of the parliament for 30 years (Khayat, 2012; Yacoub, 2013). These consequences that were based on the left's blind anti-Americanism and



Zionism and commitment to an essentialist conception of the world, damaged the party but also the political life in the country. Facing the inefficiency of the major leftist voice in the country, many activists and students formed new coalitions and movements especially in universities (among the new student movements “*tollab chouyou’iyoun*” (leftist students), “*Al khat Al Mubashar*” (the direct line), “*Bila Hudud*” (without limits), “*Pablo Neruda*”, “*Direct Action*”, etc.) demanding to break the ties with the civil war discourse; to stop the anti-democratic practice of the leftist communist parties; to reclaim resistance as one from the people and not as monopolized by Hizbullah; to have more freedoms and to focus on the national context, socio-economic reforms and abolishment of sectarianism (Yacoub, 2013; AbiYaghi, M. N., Catusse, M., & Younes, M., 2017). These collectives raised claims against the neoliberal system and at the same time positioned themselves against the Syrian occupation and Zionism (Yacoub, 2013).

This brief history shows that dominant leftist projects that were rigid and conceptualized the socio-political world as dichotomous with preconceived elements and relations, fail to understand or even respond to political realities and the complex changes of the power dynamics. And I argue that Al-Akhbar is an extension of this type of discourse which cannot but lead to the reproduction of oppressive power structures. As a mass medium that widely circulates and has a big reach, the articulations disseminated by Al-Akhbar instead of promoting new alternatives and possibilities for change, endorse the status quo and distort the audience’s views affecting their political choices.

## **B. Hizbullah's resistance communication strategy: adaptation to each conjuncture**

Hizbullah's success in monopolizing a resistance leftist discourse as exclusively its own is the product of years of its strong media campaigns and visual productions that continuously adapt the party's identity to the context and new circumstances. This party's communication strategy is relevant to the thesis because they established a leftist appeal supported from the people more than the communist or socialist entities. Moreover, it is relevant because as I mentioned in the introduction, the major organized leftist party (LCP) failed to formulate a discourse that dissociates from the March 8 alliance, resulting in a non-differentiation between revolutionary leftist claims and claims of a party that protects the status quo and the elites. And this non-differentiation is exactly what's reflected in Al-Akhbar, making it seem like an unofficial voice of Hizbullah.

Henssen and Safieddine (2016) mention that Hizbullah's leader himself acknowledges the shared affinity with the newspaper in his speech in 2010:

“I would like to clearly, categorically, and finally say: *al-Akhbar* is not affiliated with Hizbullah, not run by it, not committed to its policy or ideology, and it does not receive orders or even advice from it...If this newspaper is affiliated with us, is it conceivable that we allow it to write articles that harm us, that harmed me personally more than once and that harmed the party and its ministers, parliament members, and allies?”

But despite this clear separation 10 years ago, the affinity today seems more like an informal but serious alliance. In reality and in light of the Lebanese uprising, Al-Akhbar did not criticize Hizbullah and featured its speeches on resistance, the uprising and the alternatives to the collapse in Lebanon (such as heading East and collaborating with China or the resistance economy) as the guiding principles of how leftist liberation should happen. Al-Akhbar's leftist articulation of the crisis protects and legitimizes the

rejectionist left that is embodied by Hizbullah, and this narrative was exactly what made the outlet enlisted in the current power sharing system. Hence, my thesis engages and contributes to the literature on the party's media strategies by unpacking the leftist articulations in Al-Akhbar that give a clearer idea on why and how the newspaper becomes a tacit outlet for Hizbullah.

Hizbullah's media apparatus is exceptionally sophisticated and strong and it weighs as much as its military wing because it disseminates the image, the identity and the strategies of the party for the masses (Calabrese, 2013). The media strategy works on redefining the party's identity during each conjuncture, which made the party always appeal to bigger and diverse audiences. Hizbullah's media apparatus went from disseminating religious dogmas to producing more military, political and strategic messages after it entered the Lebanese power sharing system in 1992. And after 2006 the media barely capitalized on religious and communal appeal (Lamloum, 2009; Khatib, 2012). Since the triumph against the Israeli in the 2006 war, the party's media had worked relentlessly on consecrating the resistance discourse to amplify its power nationally and internationally and to legitimate its political positions, especially after Nasrallah's appeal as a Pan-Arab leader that succeeded in defeating the Arab's enemy (Khatib, 2012). And it was the party's media working as a "master of propaganda and psychological warfare" that helped the party actually win the war (Weimann, 2008). And since the war, the party's communication strategy relied on the rhetoric of resistance: a strategical guerilla resistance that has the main goal of defeating Israel and the US (Lamloum, 2009; El Zein, 2014). Hizbullah's general secretary Hassan Nasrallah does not miss a chance to praise the role of media in portraying this resistance -the national, Pan-Arab or international resistance not only the Islamic one- (Harb, 2016) because it is

strictly tied to the party's appeal, reason of existence, and sustainability. The military power resistance against oppression is a central aspect in the party's communication strategies. El Houry and Saber (2010) argue that Hizbullah disseminates videotaped military operations as a strategical asset in the discourse of resistance that showcases the power structures of the party used to subvert the domination of the US and Zionist other. Similarly, Cua (2007) argues that Al Manar's programming emphasizes concepts such as "oppression" and "occupation" to legitimize violent actions toward Israel and promote resistance against its oppressive supporter, the US. In his study of Al Ghaliboun's documentary portraying resistance against Israel, Calabrese (2013) argues that Hizbullah's media do not only show their resistance but tend to monopolize it making the liberation fight against Israel as exclusively and exceptionally theirs ruling out the presence or power of other forces included in the process such as communists and other nationalists.

However, this focus on the military aspect was not the only strategy used by Hizbullah's media. The party's apparatus takes into consideration the changes in geopolitics and reifies the party's discourse, image and identity. So, with the increased implication of Hizbullah in Lebanese politics, the party's media started producing new types of messages that are aligned with the military resistance goals in the battlefield. Cua (2007) argues that after 2008 Hizbullah's Al Manar gave the party's political agenda primacy on the military one in terms of quantity of material produced and even airtime. The author argues that Al Manar's key messages were abolishing sectarianism and protecting the people from Israel through the collaboration with loyalists. These political stances on sectarianism and resistance against Israel, imperialism and neoliberalism, that are at the core fight of leftist parties in Lebanon, became falsely attributed to Hizbullah

(Haugbolle, 2013). This success is due to Hizbullah's media apparatus, to the weakness and disorganization of leftist parties, especially the LCP and to the 8 March alliance. Islamic, communist, socialist, liberal and Baathist left already share some core concepts but differ in articulating them (Haugbolle, 2013), and the dominance, organization and funds of Hizbullah's productions popularized these core concepts according to the latter's readings that serve its own agenda.

As mentioned so far, and to legitimize the existence of the party, its media strategy shied away from religious appeal (though not completely), then focused on military resistance and in the recent years moved to combining its military resistance to its political objectives through careful media messages. In her study of Nasrallah's image management strategy, Matar (2015) argues that the party's media constructs different forms of knowledge at different times to make Nasrallah's image and what it embodies "appeal to different groups at different junctures": from father, to religious Sayyed to politician and international liberation leader. Matar (2015) explains that despite having some clear and fixed discursive elements in his speeches throughout the years (the use of *we*, the *jihad* and liberation of Palestine, etc.) Nasrallah mobilizes these elements to appeal to three types of audience in any conjuncture. For example, he frames *Jihad* (as struggle) when addressing the Shia audience as "the conflict with Israel as the first part of a campaign aimed at liberating Jerusalem and other Muslim holy places". But to a wider Lebanese audience and according to political events, the struggle becomes a "national" resistance against Zionism, US that is the reason of the country's collapse. To a larger Arab audience, the armed struggle resonates with "Arab nationalist cause against Israel, the United States, and their allies". And to an international audience, Nasrallah frames Hizbullah's activities "as part of a liberation struggle against an illegal

occupation force” (Matar, 2015). This adaptation of Hizbullah’s discourse is what makes it appeal to and accepted by a vast and diverse audience that includes communists, nationalists and socialists nationally and internationally.

In the recent years, Hizbullah’s adaptation strategy has transcended the political and the military and turned to the ordinary life of the people. Al Manar’s new visual productions tend to show a new identity of the party that is its closeness to the people in everyday life, emphasizing on the “normalcy” and openness of the party, contrarily to an image that is confessional or military or even political. Adly and Bseiso (2013) argue that Al Manar’s short films construct a new identity of Hizbullah: “an entity that is the people and a group that exists on and belongs to the land of the people in order to protect both the land and people”. The authors argue that the videos are used to disseminate a human and people centered image of Hizbullah: “Being Hezbollah doesn’t mean that you are a military woman or a military creature. It’s a way of thinking or acting. We are ordinary persons”, says Nooredine, the creator of these videos (Adly and Bseiso, 2013). The videos portray “farmers digging in the land with old traditional tools such as the scythe, planting, and picking lemons and tobacco” as they return from war; Children playing in the streets; elderly playing and greeting their families; women working and hugging their children, etc. (Adly and Bseiso, 2013). This communication strategy aims at making the Lebanese people an extension to Hizbullah, or even equated to the party, by showing that the latter is the ordinary people from all ages and all sects. This fusion with the people throughout the videos that shows what is the party and who does it protects, legitimizes Hizbullah as “the vanguard of Lebanese sovereignty” (Adly and Bseiso, 2013).

The party’s leftist anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal appeal and humanistic

image that its media worked on shaping for years was dented because of its participation in the Syrian regimes' crimes against the revolutionaries. But still, Nasrallah continued to use in his televised speeches "the antinationalist and anti-resistant frame to refer to the Syrian uprising" to legitimize its position and actions (Matar, 2015). This clearly shows that Hizbullah's media image and identity adaptation work as a domination mechanism to politically mobilize and control the population (Joy, 2017) to shadow the party's implications and complicity in the Lebanese neoliberal sectarian power sharing system (El-Hibri, 2017). Nevertheless, this domination mechanism based on the use of Nasrallah's framework are common with and still shared by many leftists: resisting oppression and occupation internationally; abolishing sectarianism; championing people's rights and Arab liberation.

In line with what I presented, I contribute to the literature on the political communication of Hizbullah that adapts to the political conjunctures and appeals to broader audiences by showing how the party tacitly uses a new alternative mass medium that is not affiliated with it or owned by it in order to construct and protect its image. In the case of Al-Akhbar, Hizbulalh benefitted from the conceptual intersections with the communist left and the work of the outlet in promoting leftist frameworks, to completely coopt the discourse and make it serve its political agenda in Lebanon and the region, sustaining and reproducing the same oppressive power structures.

### **C. Leftist media as alternative media**

My project engages with the body of studies on alternative media as a challenge to mainstream media and as spaces for alternative politics in times of crisis and upheaval. These studies highlight the importance of alternative media in challenging the status quo

and presenting dissident voices that are invisible in mainstream productions. However, some scholars argue that these media can still serve the elites and can easily fall in the trap of reproducing hegemonic narratives; for instance, the neoliberal sectarian power sharing system in Lebanon. As the left's history is rich in alternative media productions that attempt to resist the hegemonic system, my thesis reflects on the contributions of these alternative discourses. So, by unpacking what types of alternatives Al-Akhbar, as a leftist media, provides, my thesis affirms the argument that questions alternative media's potential in disrupting the system. It is to note here that I use alternative to refer to nonmainstream "media platforms that served as alternative sources of information for the protestors and that produced content critical of the power structures in the country" (Atkinson, 2017).

Additionally, my thesis engages with Lebanese media discourse studies on political events (notably in times of crisis) that are dominated by sectarian and religious readings and analysis. Despite the accusation of Lebanese media "of serving the elites who own and finance them rather than the citizens" (El-Richani, 2020), rarely did I read socio-economic discourse analysis of Lebanese media in times of crisis. Recognizing the "neutrality" of Lebanese media discourse when tackling socio-economic issues in contrast to their intense polarization in events and issues related to confessional identities (Fawaz, 2013), my thesis fills this gap and explores how socio-economic and political struggles are articulated in media in times of crisis, not from a sectarian or confessional lens. Al-Akhbar, that already tackles political economy way more than sectarianism, constitutes a great case study to understand the ways media reflect the political parallelism in Lebanon from an economic lens and not sectarian interpellation.

Media has always played a crucial role in leftist intellectual histories since the



ninetieth and twentieth centuries. Khuri-Makdessi (2013) shows that leftist periodicals, especially the *Al Muata'at* and *Al Hilal*, were the base throughout which socialist, anarchist, communist and progressive ideologies were discussed, negotiated and rendered accessible to the public in Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria. The historian argues that these periodicals, through immigration and translation, contributed to producing global radical narratives. Leftist media productions also had foundational roles: in fact, the texts produced and published in *Al Sahafi Al Ta'ih* (the Errant journalist) contributed to the creation of the LPP (Lebanese People Party) that later became the LCP, because it “organized the ways of thinking” of the founders and pushed them to create alternatives to their current system and fight for people’s rights (Munoz, 2019).

The Lebanese left’s history is one that is so rich in leftist cultural and intellectual productions that were always the guiding principles for political stances, alliances and priorities of leftist parties, collectives and movements (Haugbolle, 2020). The LCP produced so many newspapers, most of them did not live long such as “*Al Fajr Al Ahmar*” (The red dawn) (1931) “*Al Douhour*” (*long time*), “*Al Tali'a*” (*the pioneer*), “*Sawt Al Cha'eb*” (the voice of the people) (1937), “*Al Sarkha*” (the shout), and “*Al-Akhbar*” (the news) (1950). And even during the civil war, the LCP continued to produce content and founded media channels such as *Sawt Al Sha'eb* radio station and *Al Jadeed* TV station, that exist until present but without the leftist affiliation. Additionally, there were hundreds of books and songs produced from writers and artists who were tied to the left especially in the sixties and seventies but also during the civil war and until present (Khayat, 2012). Hodeib (2017) argues that Ziad Al Rahbani, Ahmad Kaabour, Marcel Khalife and Khaled Al Haber’s songs, widened the spaces of resistance and dissent. In fact, in times where neoliberalism and individualism were the trend, these

songs were actually essential tools that popularized leftist concepts among the masses and made revolutionary ideas such as liberation and social issues more accepted and appealing to them (Hodeib, 2017).

Media produced by leftist were usually labelled alternative because their content was always opposing the status quo and presenting different readings of the present circumstances aiming at resisting oppression and advancing a liberation political project. And within this sphere of alternative production, alternative leftist subcultures emerged and these are productions that negotiated and produced new meanings and interpretations of the left, that usually oppose the hegemonic alternative voices. This is the case of Socialist Lebanon's (SL) media for example in the sixties. Throughout their pamphlets, SL positioned itself as a leftist alternative to the LCP's interpretation of Marxist texts and to Arab socialism that all supported Arab national bourgeoisie. SL promoted their own reinterpretations of Marxist texts arguing that it should be used as an analytical tool that responds to local challenges while responding to the universal conceptions. They rejected the blind support of some Arab communists to Arab Moscow's stagism (specified by the mandatory phases to reach communism: feudalism, capitalism, socialism) that led them to support anti-democratic, neoliberal and authoritarian Arab national bourgeoisie (Guirguis, 2019; Bardawil, 2016). They were a vanguard group which media constituted an alternative to Stalinist interpretation of Marxism that dominated the Arab world since the fifties and led to detrimental political consequences that harmed the people.

Similarly, in 2003 a youth group that distanced itself from the LCP founded "*Al Yasari*" (the leftist) magazine and "Indymedia", a center for alternative leftist media, to promote a discourse that the LCP refused to tackle: it included pushing for Arab

freedoms, anti-dictatorships, anti-Syrian occupation in Lebanon, the focus on national reforms more than regional alliances, disentangling resistance from Hizbullah and making it to and from the people. These alternative media allowed them to organize and widen the scope of their protests and campaigns against Arab dictatorship and Baathist Syrian regimes and with sexual and social freedoms and national reforms (Yacoub, 2013).

The emancipatory potential of these media was very important as it was used as a precursor for revolutionary political mobilizations that would not have happened without these productions' contributions. But even these alternatives fall back in reproducing the status quo for different reasons. For instance, SL that promoted an alternative reading of Marxism that guided its political actions, could not achieve its revolutionary potential as it ended up participating and promoting the fight in the Lebanese sectarian civil war. Similarly, in her study of the Facebook political campaigns of three collective organizations trying to build new political alternatives in Lebanon (*Al Hirak, Sabaa* and *Beirut Madinati*) during the 2015 garbage crisis, Khneisser (2019) argues that these campaigns were inherently "tied to the neoliberal discourse and field of action" in Lebanon. The author argues that these campaigns indeed had a high potential in disrupting the status quo and are considered a real alternative to the political action and discourse: they prioritized the needs of the people especially in infrastructure and public services; they were able to mobilize many different coalitions towards one objective and bridged the dichotomies between local and global stances. However, they failed in creating coherent alternatives to the neoliberal system, which according to the author goes back to many factors such as the neoliberal sectarian power sharing system they operate within and the multiple internal schisms and external tensions they faced

(Khneisser, 2019). In her study on the alternative media that emerged during the Lebanese October uprising, Kozman (2022) argues that today, additional challenges face alternative spaces and coalitions hindering their attempts in inciting change and promoting democracy, such as the high level of polarization. Kozman (2022) explains that this high intolerance of outgroup opinions that are harshly silenced reproduces the same working modes as the Lebanese mainstream media, and disseminates fake news, which are all downturns to democracy. The author adds that the reliance of these alternatives on mainstream media and their poor funds made them susceptible to political manipulation by the elites for counterrevolutionary purposes (Kozman, 2022). This however does not disregard the potential of these alternatives that incited more civic engagement and helped revolutionaries on legal and logistical levels and contributed to knowledge production and a decentralized coverage, in addition to highlighting the people's demands and needs (Lteif, 2020; Kozman, 2022).

Regarding media and sectarianism, a big bulk of media discourse studies focuses on media as an instrument of mirroring, reflecting and fueling sectarian tensions (Fawaz, 2013) or creating confessional communities (Jreijiry & Abi Tamer, 2018) or intensifying and accentuating sectarian segregation between sectarian communities (Dajani, 2012). The exacerbation of sectarian tensions is also a recurrent theme in the study of different types of media such as TV humor (Haugbolle, 2007) theater, cinema (Khazaal, 2007) and political shows, events and news. And it is actually in times of crisis, that the Lebanese polarized media become “overly sectarian”, a trend that exponentially grew in the aftermath of 8/14 March (Fawaz, 2013). Analyzing the 7 May 2008 clashes, Barakat (2018) argues that TV channels demonize the sectarian other and aggravate sectarian divisions for increased ratings or pure political purposes. Analyzing the same event

chosen by Barakat, Harb (2013) argues that the polarized media system indeed intensified sectarian confrontations and divisions. However, Harb (2013) argues that this same system was able to create a “mood for change” for oppositional forces against the Syrian occupation in 2005. Harb’s take is interesting in terms of viewing the twofold role of the same media system: inciting alternatives and exacerbating conflicts at the same time. My thesis engages in this context of alternative media and alternative leftist media and highlights the discursive dynamics that challenge their revolutionary and oppositional claims.

## CHAPTER III

### WE THE PEOPLE: THE PITFALLS OF INTERNATIONAL LEFTIST POPULISM

The “people”, as a social category is centric in the discourses of leftist movements, intellectuals, cultural productions, and parties. For instance, the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), that was founded by journalist Youssuf Yazbak and labor activist Fuad Al Chamali in 1924 was called “the party of the people” – *Hizb Al Sha’eb*— (Baun, 2020).

The mobilization of populist discourses by leftist parties in Lebanon was also prevalent. Dylan Baun (2020) who studied the role of populism in the Lebanese civil war through media, argues in one of his book chapters that two of the most significant players of the Lebanese left during the seventies– the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) and the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP)- mobilized a populist discourse to achieve two aims: making alliances with the Palestinians, and legitimizing violence against the government and the army (perceived as two Lebanese rightist Christian led organizations that fight against Arabs and Muslims). Baun (2020) explains that in the Lebanese war context, these populist claims – built on the “virtuous” people and their “treacherous” enemy - aimed to accentuate violence, fuel tensions and point out at responsibilities, hence exacerbating the conflict. As we see from Baun’s arguments, while populism is usually associated with right wing politics, it also animates the discourse of allegedly leftist groups. In fact, populist discourses were predominant in leftist communist, nationalist and socialist parties’ narratives to appeal to broader audiences and gain legitimacy, credibility and adherence for their political agendas (Ayubi, 1996). And Nasserist and Baathist regimes were the best examples on how populism can be

exploited by socialist regimes to gain support even for the authoritarian rule (Ayubi, 1996). In this chapter, I argue that while Al-Akhbar claims to distance itself from populism, it in fact mobilizes a very dangerous type of populism.

Claiming to be a progressive counter hegemonic newspaper, Al-Akhbar clearly states that its discourse is not populist because the latter is associated with rightist conspiracist claims in social, economic, and political matters. In other terms, and according to the outlet, populist claims are usually made by the establishment or the corrupted politicians to trick citizens into believing that the solutions they suggest are in their favor. In “Indicators of crisis and risk [2]; the worst is yet to come!” (37), Mohammad Zbeeb explains that the Lebanese sectarian elites tend to blame refugees (mainly Syrians and Palestinians) and foreign powers for poverty and bad economic circumstances. They use this narrative to incite fear among the citizens and to shift their focus from the actual roots of the crisis: if foreign powers attack us, we need to fight with the regime to save us. According to Zbeeb, the elites disseminate this discourse to convince the people that there is a necessity of preserving the current status quo to avoid violence and civil wars and try to make the situation better. Zbeeb explains that this discourse is dangerous and is against people’s interests as it allows the sectarian elites to escape accountability and benefit from the sustainability of the system to stay in power and accumulate more capital:

“a rightist populist discourse is rising and throwing the roots of the crisis on a “foreign intruder” building a conspiracy theory that only fuels sectarianism and nationalism” (Zbeeb, 2019).

Despite clarifying on many instances that populism is always used as a strategy for the right, Al-Akhbar still prioritized the category of the people and focused on

defining it. The newspaper emphasized its proximity to the Lebanese people and its ability to create the theoretical and ideological framework of their demands. In a short column entitled “Capital” (1) signed by the editorial board on the second day of the October 2019 uprising, the newspaper clarified that the content of the annex (Capital) it produces is the agenda that the protestors are carrying in the streets:

“The Capital” annex presents the alternative solutions against the ones who are in power and who are deceiving the people by telling them that what they offer are the only possibilities the Lebanese can have in mind. No doubts that the content of this document is clearly heard today in the protestors’ slogans which gives the annex its ultimate meaning and purpose: the true proximity to the people” (The Editorial board, 2019).

Throughout this position, we see that Al-Akhbar actually mobilizes a populist discourse that promotes leftist alternatives. And in many articles, we can’t but notice how focused the newspaper became on defining this category of people and speaking in its name. A pattern that was emphasized since the beginning of the Lebanese crisis in 2019 but most importantly during the coverage of the uprising.

The cover article entitled “Embassy protestors” (43) referring to the protestors that are cursing Hizbullah’s general secretary, the editor in chief Ibrahim Al Ameen (2020) writes his perspective regarding the uprising’s goals. He explains that one week after the protests, the sectarian elites and the western powers dominated the protestors’ discourse and shifted it against the resistance. The writer claims that so many parties and groups including leftist ones failed to acknowledge the interrelation between resisting the foreign enemy US-Israel and the internal corrupted class, which make them traitors to the revolutionary demands. The traitors are those who do not align with the outlet’s understanding of the people and their demands, who are perceived by Al-Akhbar as agents of US and Israeli embassies that get paid to apply foreign agendas:



“The American succeeded in turning the protestors who get direct orders from its embassies in addition to other parties and civil society organizations (...) But today we test the real and authentic people against these “embassies’ protestors”, who are the counter-revolution”.

In a different article titled “Sayyed Hassan and the forty "revolutionaries"” (45) 3 days after the uprising, Pierre Abi Saab (2019) explains that Nasrallah supports the revolution and the protestors have no rights to criticize him like the rest of the politicians and include him in the “everyone means everyone” slogan because he is the head of the resistance. In a tone full of sarcasm, the writer argues that the people on the streets who oppose the resistance, can’t do anything and won’t topple the system:

“Today, the masses are angry against all the ruling politicians and are on the streets all around Lebanon protesting: the people want to topple the system, but which people? And what system? In addition to some groups that revolted against the sectarian parties and raised a slogan of “civil state based on social justice” we are seeing thieves (the protestors against Hizbullah) who want to steal the people’s anger”.

In these articles, we notice that Al-Akhbar did not examine the formation of a new consciousness and new alliances within the Lebanese people, but we are reminded that the outlet has an already pre-conceived conception of who the righteous people are, who their allies are, what their legitimate demands must be and what is their revolutionary road. The emphasis on the definition and delimitation of the people and the groups that are included in or excluded from this bloc, incited me to closely examine the populist discourse mobilized by this outlet to try and unpack its elements and discover how it affects the formation of Al-Akhbar’s leftist project and what does it really serve in the context of the crisis and uprising.

In this chapter, I analyze how Al-Akhbar constructs a leftist populist discourse and understand what type of discourse it is. I will do this by unpacking the elements of

populism (construction of people/enemies' categories) and the demands combined under the leftist populist project's name. I ask what relationships these combinations create or hide; how does the articulation of the leftist populist project, as a resistance project, contests or reproduces certain power relations; and how populist articulation becomes problematic. The analysis is an empirical example that leftist populism, just like the right populism, can fail to challenge the logics of the status quo and can reproduce structures of oppression and authoritarianism.

I argue that the leftist populist discourse advanced by Al-Akhbar is authoritarian, works similarly as right-wing populism and sectarian parties' populism in Lebanon by offering legitimacy to Hizbullah and maintaining the dominant hegemonic order. Al-Akhbar capitalizes on the Marxist view of the socio-political (base/superstructure) which allowed it to show that the people around the world are oppressed and the crisis of neoliberalism is international. This let the outlet to build a somehow international solidarity between the poor and champion their demands for welfare state, distribution of wealth and social justice. However, I argue that Al-Akhbar's leftist project as a resistance project only acknowledges Hizbullah's version of struggle and liberation. In other terms, all the protestors' demands against oppression; against neoliberalism; against sectarianism; against Zionism and occupation; against the banking system; against foreign interventionism; against the religious authorities and patriarchy, etc. are articulated in terms of resistance. This combination becomes authoritarian because the newspaper equates these all demands to the fight against US-Israel, the main agenda of Hizbullah. Al-Akhbar eliminates the antagonism and uniqueness of each demand to give the illusion that all the demands are the same, and legitimize the party, and the system. To understand this strategy in Laclau and Mouffe's terms, is to see 2 reasons that led to

an authoritarian discourse and alliance: the first one is Al-Akhbar's use of the essential material formation of society. And the second one is the outlet's elimination of contingency and heterogeneity of demands and political identities in the chain of equivalence. This eventually was way the articulation of a leftist common goal failed completely to respond to people's demands and ended up becoming anti-revolutionary and authoritarian.

This chapter is divided in two parts: in the first one I clarify which approach to populism guides my analysis; In the second part I analyze the elements and discourses of the outlet's populism and underline some conclusive findings on the shortcomings and potentials of the outlet's leftist populism.

#### **A. A political international logic**

Despite some doubts on the usefulness of studying populism (Fuchs, 2018), I think that the study of this concept still has an analytical value that can contribute to the imagination of new ways of governance and models of democracy at the local and global levels. An examination of this phenomenon in media discourses in the context of Lebanon is interesting for two main reasons. The first one is due to the role that media plays in constructing the categories it claims to represent and the ways this construction influences the broad political discourse within and beyond national borders (Chatterje-Doody & Crilley, 2019). The second reason is because of how populism is directly related to sectarian parties in the Lebanese consociationalism and usually incites deep divides in society, fuels violence and competition over state resources, and obstructs institutionalization and development (Salamey & Tabar, 2012). To this end, it would be

interesting to uncover the ways that the left mobilizes populism in different or similar ways than explicitly sectarian and rightist parties.

During the last few years, discussions on populism have resurfaced with the emergence of a large gamut of political populist movements and parties around the world such as *Podemos*, *Syriza*, *Front National*, *Trumpism*, *Occupy*, *Indignados*, etc. Scholars like Rodick (2018) argue that this rise of populist parties is related to the global crisis and “the economic anxiety exacerbated by globalization”; other scholars add that a plethora of conditions and new circumstances in addition to the globalized economic anxiety, nurtures the ground for populism, and these conditions are, to name just a few, political systems in crisis, corruption, weak states, failed systems of taxes, disparities and injustice in wealth distribution and neoliberalization of social democracy, etc. (Abromeit, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Wodak, 2015).

There is no consensus over the definition of populism, but four main approaches have been identified: a thin centered ideology according to Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017); a political style reliant on the leader’s performance; a political strategy used by the leader; and a political logic/discourse (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). For the purposes of this chapter, I will be using the definition of populism as a political logic. Despite the many definitions of populism, there are two main distinctions that dominates the literature and that separate between two subtypes of populism on the political spectrum: one on the right and one on the left. The former is related to exclusionary politics that exploit the cultural, national, and ethnic cleavage to exclude foreign citizens from the benefits that the welfare state can provide to its citizens. This subtype was predominant in Europe where populist strategies emphasize on the threats caused by immigrants in stealing the nation’s wealth and depriving nationals from its benefits. Populism on the left that was

mainly predominant in Latin America, is perceived as more inclusionary as it does not discriminate against people based on their ethnicity or nationality but conceptualizes people as a socio-economic entity or a majority excluded by neoliberal or foreign policies (Rodrik, 2018; De la Torre, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Abromeit, 2017). According to this subtype that is more inclusionary and based on class struggle, I can describe the populism in Al-Akhbar as left: it does not discriminate between foreign workers and national ones and it constructs people as a socio-economic entity that fights those who are stealing its wealth and exploiting it. As we will read in the following part, the equation in Al-Akhbar was always the poor of all the nations against the elites worldwide, and within the poor category, the outlet does not discriminate between refugees, domestic workers or minorities but includes them all in the fight against the 1% of international wealthy elites.

Whether on the left or on the right, scholarly discourse has taken a paranoid approach to populism and argues that this concept poses a danger to democracy and pluralism due to its tendency to impose a certain preconceived consensus of elements and identities, contradicting specificities and multitudes (Muller in Abromeit, 2017; La Torre, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). In contrast, Laclau's reparative reading of the logic of populism (2005a, 2005b) identifies a potential of populism for the left in breaking the current world hegemony and contributing to advancing democracy. By adopting Laclau's framework, I will show the complexity of Al-Akhbar's populist claims and unpack the ways this leftist populism that could have been emancipatory, failed to assume its potential and ended up reproducing the status quo. Using this framework can be explanatory of the ways rigid and essentialist conceptions and separation of left and right populism can easily blur the lines between the two as they can both become more

authoritarian or more democratic and inclusive (De La Torre, 2019).

For Laclau, that builds his theory of populism based on the evolution of his work on articulation and hegemony, populism is a mode of politics that has 4 structural features “equivalences, popular subjectivity, dichotomic construction of the social around an internal frontier and floating signifier” (Laclau, 2005b). In other terms, populism requires a dichotomous construction of frontier (people against enemies; and in Al-Akhbar it is the poor/weak/oppressed against the wealthy and the elites) and the creation of relations between unmet heterogeneous social demands that are combined in a chain of equivalence around an empty signifier that can unite them under one singular project. This definition can justify the anxiety around populism as an empty signifier condenses all concerns, identities and claims and eradicate multitudes and diversity of struggles. However, Laclau addresses the incompatibility between conceiving one universal homogeneous project that combines disparate particularities and preserving the complexities of the latter by arguing that the “relation of equivalence is not one in which all differences collapse into identity, but one in which differences are still very active. The equivalence eliminates the separation between the demands, but not the demands themselves” (Laclau, 2005b). Hence, in this case, the equivalential link enhances democratic unity but recognizes and respects difference and plurality as constitutive of the socio-political. This conception treats identity politics as subjective, contingent, specific to historical conjunctures and constantly open to contestation and redefinition (Laclau, 2005b), instead of having a priori, objective, and established entities. In other terms and as an example, if the Lebanese Communist Party took the slogan of resistance with the oppressed and against the oppressors, this does not mean that there is one pre-defined oppressor and one oppressed and one battle between them. The LCP could be on

the side of the oppressed people when it raises their demands against neoliberal measures such as a haircut imposed by the government. But the same party could also be on the side of the oppressor when it disregards anti-patriarchal demands in favor of the priority that is anti-neoliberalism. This contingency in forming identities and social relations is always necessarily contingent, means that they are constantly refused, accepted, and negotiated in an articulatory discursive process and that “at a given time, they all take a particular form, but they could have been - and can become – different” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Laclau’s conceptualization of populism that highlights the necessity of contingency and heterogeneity becomes more useful when studied as a national and transnational phenomenon according to Moffit (2017) and De Cleen (2020). Because international solidarity claims complicate the usefulness of populism beyond national borders as it increases the difficulty of building a democratic project in the country while hiding layers of oppression, which is the case of Al-Akhbar.

Transnational populism according to De Cleen (2020) and Moffit (2017) necessarily depends on the construction of the category of the people and not the elites. The construction of the former is “spread over a number of different national contexts, or indeed may be spoken of at a level above the nation-state” (Moffit, 2017). Even if scholars used to conflate nationalism and populism because they use the same unit of analysis, that is the people, De Cleen (2020) sees that it is better to study them together but as separate fields to gain more analytical understanding of power structures. Based on his definition, the study of populism and nationalism in international and national contexts, should work on both the vertical (up-down, usually used for studying populism only) and horizontal (in-out, usually used for studying nationalism only) axes of

exclusion simultaneously (Custodi, 2019).

De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) and Moffit (2017) define transnational populism as follows:

“a dichotomic discourse in which ‘the transnational people’ are juxtaposed to ‘the elites’ primarily along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which ‘the transnational people’ is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to ‘the elites’ conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group”.

Two dimensions or two main distinctions exist when we talk about populism outside the nation-state: the first one is international populism and it reflects a cooperation and coordination between national populist leaders and movements on an international level. In other terms, international populism is a coalition between national actors who have a shared enemy on an international level or a common concern, which is in De Cleen’s words (2020) “a marriage of convenience” or an alliance based on similar interests. In international populism “populists relying on nation-based conceptions of ‘the people’ temporarily enter into alliances with other ‘national’ populists within an international setting [...] these alliances between populists representing peoples in the plural, are strategic and usually temporary” (De Cleen et al., 2020). Consequently, these alliances are only formed to fight a common enemy but are not necessarily built on the solid grounds of the people’s demands and needs. Contrastingly, transnational populism tends to build people as underdogs according to their common demands rather than only linking national actors that have the same enemy, with the aim to construct a ‘people’ that supersedes the national settings (De Cleen et al., 2020). This populism is more lasting, as it is not constructed for electoral representation and wins. It is also more inclusionary and democratic, as it includes many diverse actors beyond some defined parties and leaders (Moffit, 2017).



Moffit (2017) and De Cleen et al. (2020) explain that international populism is the most prevalent because transnational populism face many obstacles in delineating the peoples' demands and elites on a global level especially in the representative democracy's systems.

Based on this understanding, the international solidarity that Al-Akhbar succeeds to build refers to the international populist construction, which only exists in the outlet to support the broader appeal to Hizbullah as a liberation anti-occupation project and not as a leftist project that carries people's demands on an international setting. It works exactly like Hizbullah's media image strategy that adapts its articulation of grievances to the context to gain more appeal nationally and internationally in order not to lose its reasons of existence (Matar, 2015). And in this context of leftist protests and international anti-neoliberal claims, the capitalization on class struggle seems to work best in serving this image maintenance strategy, more than merely the fight against Israel Zionism.

### **B. From international left populism to the national left populism: what is at stake?**

Al-Akhbar shows that the economic crisis in Lebanon is configured in terms of a class struggle between the people and the elites which is something that Lebanese media barely ever focused on. In "Lebanese revolution is without a revolutionary ideology, Part two" (61), Ali AlQadri (2019) argues that "What is going on in Lebanon today is the consequence of 30 years of politics that reveal itself in the social misery of an entire people that are subjected to deadly doses of violent neoliberalism. Hence the natural social reaction to these circumstances is a class fight". AlQadri explains that these times of crisis in Lebanon reveal the truth of this revolution that is: democracy, poverty and lack of bread are indeed cross sectarian and at the core of the struggle. The

writer explains that leftist parties have to play a critical role in this revolution in terms of rethinking socialist principals in light of the American imperial and neoliberal strategies that only want to end Hizbullah. Additionally, in “Notes on the October uprising” (92) Amer Mohsin (2019) explains that an upsurge that happened during the first week of the revolution is a very authentic historical moment because it shows that the poorest people lost everything. However, this authenticity should not be tainted by the media that frames the fight and depoliticize it. Mohsin states that “the uprising is a blend of classes in the streets: poor people crushed by the system walking side by side with others from the middle and lower classes”. Then, after defining who these authentic people are, he directly defines the ones who are excluded from this category: “those people who demonize the resistance are exploiting this uprising because the real fight must target the strategies set by the US that aims to increase taxes and stop social services and sell the state and people’s property and infuse more debt”. Al-Akhbar configures the grievances of the poor as a part of the international fight against the US neoliberalism. In the above-mentioned article, AlQadri argues that the ruling elites in Lebanon are an extension of the American neoliberalism: “The reason why the banking sector exploits the country through so much interest rates is because their patrons, the international financial class, collect so much gains by inducing poverty and war in Lebanon and the region (...) poverty and war are the United States’ project in the region”.

As an international class struggle, the newspaper draws the boundaries between the people and the elites on the national and international levels. I was able to differentiate between two separate lexical camps that each correspond to the enemies/elites and the people/poor in Al-Akhbar’s populist antagonism. From one side, we have a broad alliance between national and international groups under the elites

category including the following: The Lebanese state, the government, the richest, the ruling class; the sectarian leaders, the 1%, The IMF, the world bank, Lebanese and gulf media, the oligarchy, the banking sector, those who accumulated wealth, bankers and businessmen, the hegemonic minority, Hariri (and his party), Riad Salameh, the bourgeoisie, the right, the West, the U.S, Israel, Qatar, Saoudi Arabia, gulf countries, big depositors. From another side, a broad alliance is made between many actors that represent or support the people and these are referred to as the following: the 99%, the poor, the lower and middle classes, the poorest, those who have a minimum wage, 99% of the people, the workers (that include all refugees be it Syrians, Palestinians, Ethiopian, etc), the marginalized, the oppressed, those who resist, those who need protection, those who resists, the resistance party, Hizbullah, real protestors, 8 March coalition, authentic communists, the authentic left, the Eastern bloc, China, Iran, Russia, Latin American left.

A sponsorship relationship based on similar gains and accumulation of capital through corruption is what connects the Lebanese elites to the international ones according to the newspaper. In “It is not a revolution in Lebanon, but...” (57) Assaad Abu Khalil (2019) explains that what happens in Lebanon is not even an uprising since the protestors are disregarding American interventionism. He generally accuses the corrupted ruling elites of a complete complicity with the Western/Americans but only blames 2 agents as the main responsible for the crisis, which are ex-prime minister Rafic Hariri and the central bank governor Riad Salameh. According to the author the two latter are directly linked to the United States: “The central bank governor (...) is the local agent of the American treasury with whom he invented the word “compliance with” to affirm his complete adherence to the Zionist lobby of the American treasury that aims to punish the Lebanese people”. According to the same logic, Abu Khalil states that “Rafic

Hariri was the ambassador of the internal powerful class and the external regressive powers (alluding to the US and Saudi Arabia) that insist on imposing a rentier exploitative economic system in Lebanon and end Hizbullah's resistance".

On the other hand, Al-Akhbar makes a link between the Lebanese lower and middle classes and the poor all over the world from Latin America to the Middle East. The outlet bases this connection on the socio-economic status of the people and on their need to be protected from a common enemy, which is the United States and Israel, that threatens their livelihoods and subjugate them to harsh living conditions. The newspaper succeeds in drawing the linkages between the poor around the world by showing the detrimental effects of the neoliberal politics (especially in terms of austerity measures) imposed on many countries by the United States and its international financial institutions such as the world bank and the IMF. Throughout this, the newspaper recreates the sense of internationalism that is essential in the configuration of leftist movements (or parties or collectives or discourses) that aims to forge a unity between workers to topple the neoliberal exploitative system that instigates economic and political instability.

In "Neoliberalism: political and theoretical roots (part 1)" (64) Ziad Hafiz (2020) explains that the Taif accord transformed the country into a financial services heaven which is a neoliberal strategy imagined for the country after the civil war. According to Hafez, this Western political and economic choice imposed on Lebanon that was moving out from a war, impeded any chance of development in Lebanon. The writer argues that these measures are always implemented after conflicts or crisis "in the region; in Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, Lybia, Syria, to name just a few".

In "The Argentine Left Triumphs: Goodbye to the Era of Misery" (44), Ali Farhat (2020)

argues that the rightist politics that were implemented in Argentina since 2015 made the country miserable because they were dictated by the West that imposed open markets system, austerity measures and loans in dollars in the country. Farhat points out that people's celebrations of the leftist parties' victories in Latin America today, is a huge indicator that the left opposes the US and that the people whose rights are guaranteed by the left, are also against the US. The writer notes: "in the end, most of the expert agree that the Latin right is in a governmental crisis as it did not benefit from the left's mistakes and implemented unjust ferocious economic models that robbed the country from its sovereignty and were not aligned with the people's needs (...) it is clear now that the interest of the poor and the destitute in Latin America do not intersect with the interests of the colonial US".

Since the newspaper constructs the people in terms of socio-economic terms that include different sects, nationalities, ethnicities, etc., it makes it easy to capitalize on the homogeneity of this category, in terms of its demands: if all the people from the Middle East to Latin America are poor and their poverty is inflicted by the US than their demand is obviously to abolish the entity that impoverishes them. Consequently, the poorest that want to change their socio-economic conditions have to unite in the project that resists the American and Zionist expansionism. Naturally, for a resistance to stand against an international project, it has to transcend territoriality and join forces of the people from all over the world. According to Al-Akhbar, the alternative project of neoliberalism uniting the workers around the world is led by the Eastern giant China, and its national alliances in each country. In Lebanon, this alliance means Hizbullah, or the 8 March coalition led by this party. In "Moving East and looking for commercial exchanges in the Lebanese lira – Nasrallah: we will respond to the fence" (26) the editorial board writes

that Nasrallah is providing the “alternative step” against the American sanctions because he is the resistance leader that has a weight in the international political sphere. The editorial board see in Nasrallah the head of the anti-neoliberal movement and anti-dollarization: “As a part of an international camp, Nasrallah speaks against the war of dollars and against the American sanctions on enemies and friends (from Venezuela to Germany), through his invitation to go East and collaborate with countries willing to stop the famine in Lebanon like China and Iran and other countries”. The article continues that Hizbullah’s accepts the sanctions to spare the people and he has very close ties with the Chinese who already have plans of investments and ready-made projects for Lebanon if the people were allowed to collaborate with them.

This alliance reduces the project that aims to resist neoliberalism to Hizbullah’s specific opposition as the party belonging to the international Eastern alternative camp. In other terms, resistance is no longer equal to the fight against all sorts of oppression no matter the party exercising this oppression, and this becomes problematic. For leftist populism to be a democratic project, its empty signifier (resistance) necessarily has to be an umbrella term that is not fixated with one specific meaning. If indeed the newspaper articulates resistance as the international leftist project, it shouldn’t be related to one specific and well-defined agenda such as Hizbullah’s resistance. On the contrary, resistance should be the fight of the Lebanese residents against their regime and their oppressors, which includes all the following claims raised in the protests without hierarchy: their fight against the banking system and its governor; against the neoliberal and sectarian rentier economy and the sectarian parties who sustain it; against Hizbullah and their illegal weapons; against the unfair taxes inflicted by the government; against patriarchy and the sectarian and religious entity who benefit from it; against Western

interventionism and the US sanctions and austerity measures; against Iranian interventions in the country's politics, etc. This resistance against the regime should acknowledge the complexities of all the above-mentioned grievances without conditionality or hierarchy. And if Hizbullah is aligned with some of these demands such as anti-American interventionism and anti-neoliberal policies imposed by the IMF and World Bank, that does not mean that the support of the party guarantees the success of all the other demands. In other terms, a resistance project that comes in favor of the people will simultaneously demand to end the American sanctions and interventions and Hizbullah's agenda that favors a different interventionist camp in Lebanon.

Articulating an international leftist project came with very few benefits such as showing some similar consequences of neoliberalism that are shared by many countries around the globe. In addition to exposing the relationship between the elites, the banking sector, the foreign sponsorship that impoverishes the people. This helped identify the target categories to lobby against, a category that was rarely articulated this way in times of crisis in Lebanon. In "Contribution to the analysis of the ruling class structure in Lebanon" (90) Yazan Zoureik (2020) argues that the creation of a ruling class that guarantees business men and big depositors' interests started since the independence when a bank sponsored president Bechara El Khoury with the only condition to preserve the rights of the rich. Ever since, Lebanon was transformed from a productive agricultural country to a services country and the relationship between politicians and banks tightened as each of the formers started owning their own bank to facilitate their political agendas. Zoureik argues that the Lebanese neoliberalism is guaranteed by the combination of mafia and sectarianism in an "implicit division of power to protect the interests of the ruling elites". The writer continues that this system is closed and is

empowered in crisis, therefore the necessity of infiltrating this system with new political parties and politicians is the only opportunity to break this system and create change. Zoureik's article is an example of how the focus on class struggle and the division of society between poor and elites was able to expose the dynamics of the parties in rule. It also presents an interesting dimension in breaking the system which is trying to bring voices from outside to change it. But as we'll see the outlet does not perceive Hizbullah's resistance as part of the elites and hence disregarded the legitimate claim of the people in ending the party's presence to achieve change, as Zoureik explains as well.

Similarly, Hicham Safieddine (2019) in "The Lebanese governor's Central Bank: Authority and domination" (31), argues that media played the role of a gatekeeper for the banking system and established its hegemony that was built on lies regarding the currency exchange rate and the viability of the services and loans system. Safieddine explains that "the state with the banks made a deal with the press under the president Charles Helou's supervision to impose censorship on media coverage of banking news", he adds that even "As-Safir" newspaper that was considered a leftist leaning media then, was implicated in the banking propaganda and accepted the delegation to publish a book that praises the governor as the "golden guarantee" of the state's stability". The writer argues that only Al-Akhbar resisted the attempts of the governor in bribing it and tried to "defy the neoliberal hegemony and expose the contradictions of the banking sector especially the central bank". As shown in the 2 above-examples Al-Akhbar's leftist populist division of the socio-political was a framework that allowed people to be more aware of some dimensions in the neoliberal dynamics. The outlet insisted that the weak and the poor are not those who have to pay the price and bear the distribution of losses. Instead, some measures can be taken to make the big depositors, the commercial banks



and the ruling elites pay the price of the illegal accumulation of capital they benefitted from over the years. The outlet suggests for example, that capital control can be one solution only if it was implemented on big depositors and not the lower and middle classes as it was initially programmed in the Lebanese government's emergency plan.

However, Al-Akhbar's stance came with many shortcomings that are authoritarian, anti-revolutionary and anti-democratic positions that did not create the actual possibilities for change. Believing that China is the world alternative and describing Hizbullah's resistance project as the empty signifier that combines the international poor people's interests gave primacy to the international fight against neoliberalism over the national one. Additionally, it eliminated dialectics between national and international actors' overlapping roles in maintaining the status quo and reproducing the same regime. In fact, the outlet favors an absolutist conditionality whereby the feasibility of any local claim or demand to change the status quo can't be achieved unless the international and unique goal of the resistance axis is pulled off. In "it is not a revolution in Lebanon, but..." (57) Assaad Abu Kkahlil argues that if the revolution in Lebanon will not give primacy to the fight against the US and Israel, and if it will not stop holding slogans against Hizbullah, it is doomed to fail. Abu Khalil argues that corruption in the Lebanese regime is inflicted by Western sponsorship and hence the fight to end corruption is necessarily "a fight against the country's western-backed foreign policy and the US and Israel".

This stance enabled the newspaper to hide any implication of its endorsed project -Hizbullah's resistance- in sustaining the country's system and proved that its role in this regime is marginal, justified, or to say the least, inexistant. Barely in two articles do we see writers admitting the inference of Hizbullah in the Lebanese political and economic

system but every time this implication is mentioned, the party is shown as the victim that is not as powerful as the enemy. In “Only the negative temporary lasts” (63), SaadAllah Mizraani (2020) argues that Washington benefits from the military strength and the economic strategies’ weakness of the resistance in Lebanon to accuse it of being the main reason behind the crisis in the country and in Syria. However, and in this same article, the writer explains that “Hizbullah’s strategy in Lebanon is harmonious with the ruling class and it maintained it especially via approving the election laws and opposing constitutional reforms since 1989”. Mizraani justifies this complicity of the resistance with the system as a strategy to avoid conflict and wars in Lebanon, making the party a savior. The stance that Al-Akhbar takes justifying Hizbullah’s implication in reproducing the same electoral system is far from creating any change in the country. This justification does not at all resonate with the above-mentioned argument of Zoureik saying that any attempts to change the Lebanese mafia and sectarian system will not be achieved unless new politicians have the opportunity to be elected through a different system.

Al-Akhbar builds its case around Hizbullah as a party that does not belong to the ruling class, by always referring back to the circumstances that led to the formation of the party and the environment the party came from: the Shi’i most marginalized and poorest community. The newspaper uses this narrative to conflate the people with the resistance leader’s party allowing the latter to officially talk in the name of the people. In “On resistance, economy, and activism” (13), Mohammad Choukeir (2020) details all the 8 reasons that prove the party’s essential role in the country’s economy. Choukeir concludes by the end of the article that any attempt to “capitalize and exploit the dire economic situations to attack the resistance is similar to attacking the Lebanese people,

and this deviates the revolution from its goals, create a segregation in the protestors and leads to the failure of the revolution and accentuation of the economic crisis {...} Any attack on Hizbullah is an attack on the people, the poor and the uprising”.

Al-Akhabr’s definition of the people and the enemy is based on an a priori conception of who these categories should be and which roles they should play. Instead of being critical and deducing from the Lebanese protests how the people -the poor and oppressed- are forming, around which causes they are gathering and to how many groups they are divided, the newspaper homogenizes the people’s demands, reduces them to one category and spoke in their name.

The outlet’s view created a consensus around Hizbullah’s resistance to eradicate the plurality of grievances that exist among the protestors. This resulted in an authoritarian and policing stance that acts similarly to the regime: it silenced dissident voices and demonized any group that opposed Hizbullah and especially, other leftist dissident voices such as some leftist movements or students and youth of the Lebanese Communist Party. The newspaper articulates the “real” and “authentic” people as the poor against the US and automatically with Hizbullah, whereas all the other protestors on the streets demanding otherwise are traitors and directly aligned with the elites. In “For the sake of the original protest movement” (36), Ibrahim Al Ameen argues that in order to stop the confusion around the uprising’s goal we need to support those who carry “the real cause of the uprising” as they will lead the revolution to its success; and by real the author explicitly meant Hizbullah’s resistance. Al Ameen adds affirming that the people are “homogeneous in terms of social class and closer to a national identity and are all against western American interventions”. In “the uprising in the South: against the counter-revolution” (103) Amale Khalil explains that in the South, where Hizbullah has the

biggest and strongest popular base, protestors affirm that removing the resistance weapons is not at all a demand in the revolution. Khalil interviews many activists that only confirm its stance: “the ruling elites and the opposition related to this ruling elite are the ones that have anti-resistance sentiment that aims to frighten the people and prohibit them from going to the streets”. By this, the author frames the people against Hizbullah as “an opposition related to the ruling elites” and as “the counter-revolutionary” entity. Additionally, and attempting to belittle the revolutionaries against Hizbullah and the system this party belongs to, Ibrahim Al Ameen in “Embassy protestors” (43) argues that “in Lebanon, only some of the people refuse the resistance and its weapons and these are not even a majority. They are a minority incapable of causing any disruption”. Al Ameen describes these protestors as the enemy: those who are funded from American embassy to “distort” the revolution from its essential and authentic goals.

Another example of the newspaper’s mobilization of leftist populist categories for legitimizing Hizbullah is the outlet’s stances regarding the LCP. The newspaper praises the Lebanese Communist Party whenever it leads the protests against the banking sector and publishes some vague statements in which the party reminds of the necessity of the resistance against Israel and against neoliberal policies. Nonetheless, when the LCP pointed out at the complicity of Hizbullah with the ruling elites -a stance that did not last long- the newspaper harshly condemned and demonized the party. Not only does Al-Akhbar criticize the Lebanese left but it blames most leftist coalitions and parties for failing to liberate the Arab countries from Israel. A strategy to remind the people that some leftist resistance projects that oppose Hizbullah’s resistance are not valid, and cannot lead change because their history proves that they cannot fulfill their promises. The newspaper consecrates long features to explain the reasons why people cannot trust

communist parties anymore. In “Why the left failed to resist Israel” (58), Nohad Hachico argues that the party faces many internal challenges related to its organization, funding and ideology which weakened its influence on the Lebanese politics and in resisting Israel and liberating Lebanon and the south specifically. Hachico argues that all these factors reveal that the LCP now can only sustain the resistance project symbolically and cannot lead a liberation project. In “the previous communist party” (62), Ibrahim Al Ameen bashes leftist movements and mainly the LCP whenever they criticize Hizbullah explicitly and focus more on the national and international dimensions of politics. The author argues that this heavy focus on the internal politics is not acceptable because it disregards the real fight that is against imperialism and neoliberalism and that happens on the international sphere: “the communists do not see the relationship of Lebanon and its inclusion in the international neoliberal system, and since they only focus on internal factors of the crisis and its solutions and can’t acknowledge the resistance as the strategical weapon to stop the dependency from foreign countries, they’ll only swipe some dirt under the rug”.

Al-Akhbar’s authoritarian position is more explicit when its discourse shows how Nasrallah embodies the people. In “will Hizbullah draw the economic lines of the conflict with the internal and external enemies?” (73), Sadek Nabulsi argues that the Lebanese people are in a fight against corruption and the resistance leader embodies this fight himself as corruption is what hurts him on personal level: “when thinking about corruption pre and post elections, Nasrallah expressed personal and national sufferings about his personal pain as a leader and as someone from the Lebanese people. Fighting corruption is one of his many constant occupations”. Al-Akhbar does not only conflate the leader with the people but it equates the people to countries and regimes. In a section

in the long feature “more resistance, less poverty: the geopolitics of bread” (89), Ahmad Hassan and Georges Salem explain that the people should be aware of the real enemy and the real goal of their resistance. They should focus all their anger against western imperialism and neoliberalism because the latter constantly create famine ticking bomb and kills people for profit. The authors, favouring the global South’s rising powers against the global North, ask “Who is more democratic in reality, the dictatorship in China that saved more than 500 million from poverty or the United States’ democracy that most of its citizens are very poor?”. This being said, we notice that the outlet does not even see the people in terms of citizens that it sometimes conflates with the leader, but it perceives them interchangeably with regime, with the regime and country it sees as alternative to the North’s hegemony, China. The two authors’ stance explicitly supports despotism if it can eradicate poverty, and links livelihood provision directly to democracy.

Similarly, in “After the western hegemony, why go East?” (79), Ahmad Hassan explains that today’s conflict is between the North and South and people have to position themselves with the new Chinese powers because the rise of this giant opposes ideological and practical western neoliberalism. Hassan argues that the alliance with China will lead to the liberation long awaited from the left: “the idea of heading East is an invitation to think of a world post-Israel as a total strategy that includes removing this occupier and envisioning the new possible world system and our position in it. We have to decide now our choices as resistant people if we are really insisting on a better future”. The author here shows that people have to ally with the Chinese regime and not Chinese people to live in a better world. This vision, in addition to depoliticizing the people creates a forked consciousness around the role of the Chinese regime in neoliberalism,

which we will elaborate on in chapter 2. In fact, the newspaper itself admits in only one article during the entire period examined, that China and Israel actually do collaborate together. However, this collaboration as the newspaper justifies is a tool to de-empower the US, as if the latter is not the first ally of Israel, a statement that the outlet always focuses on. In “Washington and Tel Aviv and the Chinese complex” (32), Walid Charara argues that China and Israel are significantly collaborating in economy and technology, but the writer seems enthusiastic about this collaboration because “it will increase China’s military powers that will threaten the United States and its allies”.

In brief, Al-Akhbar’s leftist populism only succeeded in exposing some alliances and power structures and defining the roots of the crisis in non-sectarian inclusive ways, bringing back class politics, and social welfare to the table. However, the outlet’s articulation of an international leftist populism failed in advancing a democratic project that takes into account people’s different and unique demands. As explained, the newspaper constructs the resistance project against neoliberalism as an international project that is not based on people’s grievances but on their enmity to the US neoliberal measures and financial institutions. When the newspaper exclusively connects this project to Hizbullah’s aims as a resistance axis, it took an authoritarian aim and eradicated the multiplicity and heterogeneity of people’s grievances and demands. The newspaper’s project then became one of the image media strategy tools that Hizbullah uses to legitimize its presence. Since the masses are against neoliberalism that is the root of their miseries, and since the newspaper cherishes the counter-hegemonic project at an international level, then it can speak in the people’s name and have power to represent them. But as the newspaper is not a political party that can be elected and represented in a government, it implicitly builds legitimacy to the entity, Hizbullah, that

can be elected in the Lebanese democratic system.

In Lebanon, dominated by the political parties' sectarian populist discourse that fuels conflicts and hampers the construction of a state (Salamey & Tabar, 2012), the leftist populism that Al-Akhbar supports and that shed light on class struggle, was not different. Al-Akhbar's leftist populist discourse produced anti-democratic, authoritarian narrative against the legitimate demands of the people and in favor of Hizbullah, a sectarian party participating in the sectarian power-sharing system. Not only did Al-Akhbar's leftist project conflate people with authoritarian regimes and leaders, but it also distorted their reality by claiming that the Eastern alliance is an alternative where it is not, which we will examine in chapter 4.



## CHAPTER IV

### LEFTIST ALTERNATIVES: DISINFORMATION IN DISGUISE

The leftist discourse that Al-Akhbar mobilizes is fueled by two main antagonisms: neoliberalism and Western imperialism. These two main causes, in addition to anti-confessionalism, were central to leftists' collectives and activists' actions since the 1990s (AbiYaghi, 2013). My intention in this chapter is to present a critique Al-Akhbar's articulation of the above-mentioned concepts in the context of the political and economic crisis in Lebanon and show how the newspaper's articulation and interpretation of the crisis deceive the audience and distort their world view. Disinformation is the intended deceptive misleading information that has specific political goals: harm, profit, ideological changes, etc. It is dangerous because it causes creates misconceptions that reinforce certain power structures based on inequality and oppression (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). In fact, in her book "Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life", Bok (1978) explains that political deception is an intrinsic element in the distribution of power in societies and she explains that "lies, add to the power of the liar and reduce the power of those who have been deceived by altering their choices" (Bok in Brennen, 2017). The dissemination of misleading content distorts recipients' worldviews and hampers their abilities to make decisions, consequently challenging democracy (Freelon & Wells2020; Hameleers, & Brosius, 2022; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The study of disinformation becomes really crucial as it deals with the ways the public comes to accept policies and ideologies (Kuon and Marwick, 2020) transcending the mere assessment of what is false or true.

Al-Akhbar's way of pointing out at some of the most strident flaws and impacts of the national and international neoliberal hegemonic system, was at the cost of masking the many present interpretations of the actual situation in Lebanon and internationally. Al-Akhbar's extremely partisan leftist interpretation hid the multiple elements implicated in the system's working dynamics, and the multiple struggles that are unique and different but at the same time interlaced. The outlet only blindly defended a one-sided alternative to neoliberalism which is the alliance with the Eastern bloc led by China internationally consolidating "the parties of *faits accomplis*" (*kiwa al amr al wake*'), that are part of the hegemonic neoliberal order, hiding the implication of China in neoliberalism and neoliberalism new dynamics in this era, hence inhibiting the actual multiple possibilities for change.

I do not deny that some facts, investigations and reports disseminated by the newspaper indeed delegitimized some processes and elements at the root of the Lebanese crisis, but this flawed articulation of neoliberalism and the Eastern alternative led to the reproduction and strengthening of the hegemonic system it claimed to challenge. In this section I argue that the leftist alternatives endorsed by Al-Akhbar that suggest allying with Eastern giants such as the BRICS and Iran, considered as non-neoliberal and non-imperialist cannot break the current system's hegemony, not even change it. These alternatives configures the crisis as one of leadership instead of structural and hence only distort the power balances within the system itself. For example, Al-Akhbar supports the idea to get more loans from China and be indebted to it but not from the US because it perceives the former to be more "human" and less violent than the latter. Whereas the actual problem lies in the debt system itself, not the party providing the loans.

I start this section by explaining the usefulness of disinformation in this context, then I present how the alternatives are articulated in Al-Akhbar showing what makes them problematic.

### **A. Similarity between alternatives and disinformation**

The study on fake news recently became a buzz in the academia after the US presidential elections and UK Brexit in 2016. This buzz was caused by the rise of rightist politics and the fallacies and conspiracies spread by right wing media, organizations and politicians (Kreis, 2020). In fact, many studies that were made after 2016 focused on the reception of fake news among participants on social media and argued that right wing participants have a higher tendency to accept fake news that validate their beliefs and to share conspiracy content. Whereas the left-wing participants resorted more to fact checked media and were less likely to believe in fake news. Nevertheless, left-wing participants were also skeptical of news that is not compatible with their beliefs (Kreis, 2020; Baptista, Correia, Alves, & Piñeiro-Naval, 2021). However, despite the heavy focus on the right-wing politics in the studies on fake news and its impact, Freelon, Marwick and Kreiss (2020) argue that it is more interesting to study fake news on the left political spectrum. According to the three authors, studying disinformation on the left today can tell us a lot about the political relations these politics hide or produce and show us how political relations “operate; who is most at risk and how serious the problem is”. My analysis of disinformation in Al-Akhbar’s articulation of the crisis and its solutions, is inspired by the latter concerns.

Since there is a difference between misinformation, disinformation and propaganda but they are often used interchangeably (Freelon and Wells, 2020), I chose to

focus on disinformation for more accuracy as it is more relevant to this thesis especially as it deals with intent. I picked two of the most relevant definitions of disinformation that I will be referring to and that I think are the most explanatory in disinformation and show that the phenomenon goes beyond only intentional untruthful communication. The first one is by the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation of the European Commission (2018) that articulates disinformation as “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit”, such as increasing revenues or gain ideological support by discrediting and delegitimizing opposing views. The second one is by Faris et al. (2017) who explain that disinformation is “misleading information (...) that mix bits and pieces of facts, often anchored in partial readings of concrete documents that lend validity to the claims with false insinuations, leaps of logic and flat-out false statements”. Whatever the definition was, almost all scholars understand disinformation as misleading information that is intended to deceive (Tucker et al., 2018; Faris et al., 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Freelon & Lokot, 2020; Freelon & Wells 2020; Guess & Lyons, 2020), with deception in the context of truth telling and journalism, as “a person, news report, or video that intentionally deflects, withholds, or distorts information” (Brennen, 2017).

Due to the blame and responsibility that the term disinformation carries, one would be careful while using specially when the main criteria of disinformation that is intentionality, cannot really be measured or identified. Trying to resolve this matter Robertson & Mourão (2020) suggest that one can compare between the initial self-presentation of an outlet (the way the outlet presents and describes itself to the audience; the way it wants to be seen/perceived) and the actual materials that are actually being produced to assess if there is disinformation. Robertson Mourão (2020) and referring to

Ghanem and Selber (2009) argue that the self-expression can be “indicators of where outlets are trying to position themselves vis-a-vis the market and the audience and can provide insight into (epistemological) values, beliefs, and intended practices”. And it seems that this clash between the self-presentation of Al-Akhbar and its actual content produced during the uprising, is what led the authors to resign during this uprising few days after its beginning. They might have many different reasons to resign but there was surely one commonality mentioned in their statements: the disappointment they felt from its coverage of the uprising and the newspaper’s editorial line. It is true that almost all the Lebanese media outlets, most notably TV stations that were covering extensively the uprisings, received their share of bashing from the protestors. However, it seemed to me that the sentiment felt against Al-Akhbar specifically, was deception, in addition to the overall anger. And the resignations were the proof that my personal feeling was not so personal after all.

What follows, is a statement of Joy Slim, a journalist at the outlet who published an official resignation post on Facebook, 19 October 2019, in which she clearly expresses that the newspaper “disappointed” its readers and authors and “betrayed” what it claimed to support and advocate for:

“Today I submitted my resignation from Al-Akhbar after working at the newspaper for 5 years. The last days were decisive to me after I felt **disappointed** by the coverage of the Lebanese uprisings that Al-Akhbar worked for months (even years) to provide evidence proving its necessity (...) This resignation comes at a very critical phase in my life, but I chose to jump in the unknown rather than stay at a place that **betrayed** the people at such a critical moment, myself included”.

Similarly, Mohammad Zbeeb, economic journalist and founder of the “Capital” annex, presented his resignation and posted the following on Facebook:

“Today, the “Capital” annex is issued without me, Ghassan Diba and other colleagues who were the pioneers of this experience. And to avoid any ambiguity, I submitted my resignation from Al-Akhbar last week, objecting the editorial stances regarding the revolution and the schism that started imprinting its journey 8 years ago, with no remedy. Hence, I am no longer responsible for the “Capital” annex”.

The resignation stories I mentioned in this introduction are the first evidence of the clash between the self-presentation and the actual content that happened in the newspaper that led the writers to accuse it of intentionally producing deceiving content. The second evidence would be a fast comparison between the newspaper’s self-presentation on the website and its actual framing that will be discussed in the following. On the website, the newspaper claims that it is “left-leaning” “against oppression” and “provides alternatives”. The anti-revolutionary stance does not resonate with these aims and what follows will prove this discrepancy.

The two definitions I provided above indicate that disinformation does not mean fully fabricated or entirely false content. On the contrary, disinformation relies on a spectrum of facticity that has a specific goal and that can range between framing, manipulation, inaccuracy, decontextualization (Marwick & Lewis, 2017) and can “be based on misleading information, that is, the use of false context or false connection between facts” (Derakhshan & Wardle, 2017). And in this section, we are exactly dealing with levels of facticity that Al-Akhbar used in its disinformation communicative strategy. Recuero, Soares & Gruzd, (2020) summarize the 4 strategies used to alter the levels of facticity: The first one is the change of focus to highlight some aspects of the story over other ones (Van Dijk, 2006). The second one is biased framing that is based on false connections and false contexts (Derakhshan & Wardle, 2017; Mourão &

Robertson, 2019; Potthast et al., 2017; Van Dijk, 2006). The third one is the polarized ideological structure that discredits some actors and embitter the presentation of others Van Dijk (2006). The last strategy is a complete made-up story to discredit a certain narrative. The three strategies are more prevalent in Al-Akhbar's construction than the last one.

These above-mentioned strategies for disinformation are exactly what made scholars see an interconnectedness between disinformation and the content of allegedly alternative news outlets. Robertson & Mourão (2020) drew a parallel between literature on alternative journalism sites and fake news sites and concluded that both of them, by claiming to present different viewpoints of the truth are partisan in terms of being very much committed to their ideology; usually attack mainstream media and accuse it of hiding the truth; and are biased. The authors found that these similarities allowed some fake news websites to be regarded as alternative outlets when their real work is only spreading conspiracies and vice versa. This interconnectedness between disinformation and alternatives pushed me to examine how and where Al-Akhbar falls into this trap. I show how the newspaper articulates the crisis and alternatives solutions that are unfortunately based on strategies of disinformation.

The newspaper uses leftist polarized ideological structure that is based on the dichotomous a priori fixed construction of the world (China/US; poor/wealthy) as a base for its analysis hiding the contingency of these political identities and their interconnectedness. This strategy goes hand in hand with creating false contexts and false connections between elements and actors: such as the Chinese alternative system will change the neoliberalism. In addition to removing completely the focus on Hizbullah's implication in the neoliberal system to hide this story and to only shed the

light on the implication of other elements. Throughout these connections made in the newspaper, I argue that the alternatives the latter promotes is deceiving and false. These alternatives do not show the possibilities beyond neoliberalism and do not capture how neoliberalism is really working after the cold war. The newspaper only delegitimizes the US and its internal allies' neoliberal project to legitimize other leaders of this system, China and its allies.

## **B. Articulating the crisis**

In 2018, Al-Akhbar created an annex entitled “Capital” that aimed to produce alternative ways to configure, read and understand the political economy in the country and to a wider extent the world. And truth is that this experience can be thought of as avant-gardist in the contemporary Lebanese and international mass media sphere. Two main reasons made the annex a pioneering experience: the first one is the accessible content that Al-Akhbar's political economist journalists produced in an easy jargon. The content is an in-depth analysis of the ways numbers and policies impact our daily lives in addition to exposing economic plans by the government made initially to enrich the politicians in rule. Economic and political leftist debates were usually very elitist in terms of the jargon used, and the “Capital” made these issues more accessible to the masses explaining the dynamics of the country's political economy and its impact on citizens' livelihoods.

The second reason, is the ability of Al-Akhbar to tackle and present readings of the current crisis that champion state social welfare and oppose neoliberalism, imperialism, colonialism, and austerity measures, in a media and political environment that rarely targets the elites and barely criticizes the neoliberal measures. In fact, in some



studies on TV coverages and structural bias during financial and austerity crisis, the Glasgow University Media Group found that media coverage is mostly in favor of the elites in terms of breadth and type of coverage and in terms of richness in context and details (Blackburn, 2018). And it seems that this favoritism of elites and neoliberalism was relevant for more than four decades in the media (Blackburn, 2018) which was an interesting factor in reproducing neoliberalism (Fuchs and Mosco, 2016; Hoops et al., 2016). Media discourses often illustrate how foundational neoliberalism is for the development of the countries. Illustrating this trend, Shahin (2022) studied the media discourse on capitalism in four countries US, Britain, India and Pakistan and found that in the first two countries, media focused on the foundational role of capitalism in keeping the nations wealthy, rich and strong. In the last two developing countries, the author found that media focused on how the implementation of austerity measures and the IMF policies are the only ticket to wealth and development. Recently, Yiannis Mylonas (2014; 2015) studied the coverage of the Greek crisis in the mainstream media and showed to what extent their discourse reproduces hegemonic frames of the crisis by supporting the “There Is No Alternative” narrative and austerity measures as the ways to get out of the crisis. The author also shows how media framed the crisis in culturalist and moralist terms focusing on who is to blame and not how does the system work. Media blamed the Greek people for their own crisis and pictured them as the sick body in the European family. In this broad context, Al-Akhbar seems to play an interesting role in trying to challenge the pro-neoliberal narratives nationally and internationally. But despite its attempt to explicitly oppose debt and austerity measures, Al-Akhbar does not really provide new lens to look at the status quo and defy it.

In the article entitled “Why are the Lebanese protesting” (96) produced by the

editorial board of the newspaper, we can find an enumeration of the many struggles that Lebanon is facing, among which are: “inflation”, “low salaries”, “high education fees”, “high costs of communication”, “lack of infrastructure and lack of medical coverages”, “rentier economy”, etc. The newspaper did not only tackle these issues in a general manner but it delved deeper into each issue through many reports, to track the mismanaged public budget and exposed what led to this situation. The causes of the crisis are articulated on many instances. In “where are the 48.9 milliard dollars from the central bank? Dissecting the monetary crisis” (3), the financial expert Tawfic Kaspar, argues that the monetary crisis has 3 pillars: 1. The financial engineering of the central bank which relies on being indebted to local banks with high interest rates. In addition to the fixation of the currency exchange rate that did not reflect the value of the currency and escaped the market supply and demand rule. 2. The inexistant public budget of the government that resulted in a public fiscal deficit and revenues decline. 3. The excessive governmental loans and the lack of internal investments to support especially the agricultural sector and the industries and to increase imports. Al-Akhbar focuses on the monetary and financial causes of the crisis to highlight the class struggle as its loyalty to leftist narratives. Whenever politicians issue measures to fight the crisis, the newspaper dissects these documents and warns the people of what awaits them with the implementation of such measures. In “Government decisions: eliminating all chances of survival” (5) Mohammad Zbeeb analyzes the policy paper that prime minister Saad Hariri declared one week after the uprising, to convince the protestors and lead them to believe that the government plan to deal with the crisis is going to save them and spare them losses. In the document, Hariri mentions that privatizing state’s assets and selling them; getting more urgent loans and accumulating more debts; in addition to increasing

taxes on citizens will reduce the effect of the collapse and calibrate back the economy. However, Zbeeb explains that these measures are neoliberal policies that can only enrich and empower the elites and will allow them to sustain their hegemony. Zbeeb argues that privatizing state's assets for example will allow the sectarian elites to buy them at the cheapest rates, to escape taxes on their wealth and hence control all the state's sectors and impose more austerity measures on the citizens. Hence, there will be no fair distribution of losses and the citizens will have to bear this consequence that should be the responsibility of those who accumulated wealth illegally over the years. Zbeeb's article among others, emphasizes that the neoliberal model and policies in Lebanon induce more poverty in the country.

Interestingly, and especially after the resignation of Zbeeb, Al-Akhbar specifically mentions that the Western American neoliberal model in Lebanon, and not neoliberalism in general, is the cause of collapse in the country. This makes it necessary to delve deeper in how the articulation of neoliberalism in Al-Akhbar allowed the outlet to appeal to the left and to promote supposedly leftist alternatives that are eventually enlisted in the same system.

In "the political and theoretical roots of neoliberalism (part 8)" (68) Ziad Hafez explains that neoliberalism mainly inhibits the state's role and has one accomplishment which is the distribution of wealth, in favor of the rich. He argues that the state in neoliberalism has the power to protect the ruling elites through tax evasion, the shrinkage of the welfare services for the citizens and the exploitation of the latter's resources. The author points out that neoliberalism advanced by the United States exploits crisis to regenerate its policies and accumulate more capital through some these procedures: "neoliberal politics are rentier (...) and transform the state into a tool for dispossession

instead of production through: 1- privatization 2- financialization 3- Consecration of the role of debt 4- redistribution of wealth to a specific section of society (the wealthy)”.

The main agents that execute this US neoliberal model according to Al-Akhbar are the IMF, the World Bank and the multinational corporations, where the first two spread their financial grip over almost all the developing countries of the South and impose the hegemony of the dollar and the free markets. In article (83) entitled “Dependence on foreign policies”, Ziad Hafez, explains the dangers of the international financial institutions notably the IMF and World Bank. He argues that once these institutions take over a country’s economy, the banks retain all the power which makes society only consumerist without any capability to produce and be proactive and get back on its feet. This makes a country falls indeterminably in the non-ending vicious circle of debt. The author points out that these institutions impose severe economic conditions on a country that have detrimental social effects: “the World Bank imposes more taxes that do not affect the rich but only the poor. And it aims at decreasing government expenditure that is reflected in less social services for the poor in health and educational sectors”. As mentioned in chapter 1, these international elements are assisted by the national agents in Lebanon that are a troika constituted of the banks, the ruling elites and the army. More specifically Al-Akhbar puts all the responsibility for the collapse on ex-prime minister Rafic Hariri and his son, ex-prime minister Saad Hariri, along with the governor Riad Salameh who are considered the “engineers” of this crisis since 1993. These two parties -ruling elites and banks- are protected by the Lebanese army that receives all its funds from the US, to sustain this status quo and abolish the resistance party. Al-Akhbar shows that the ruling elites and the banks refuse to pay the price for the crisis they manufactured and aim to let the citizens pay the price. Needless to remind

here that when we say ruling elites, we mean Hariri family and Salameh or in other terms March 14, whereas March 8, Hizbullah and its allies are automatically ruled out.

Al-Akhbar's articulation of US neoliberalism shows that this system grows through abolishing the role of the state in general (in terms of distribution of wealth, putting the financial and monetary plan, being independent and sovereign from international powers) and in specific its intrinsic role in protecting the citizens from the destructive logic of the capitalist market that only wishes to expand capital accumulation disregarding the people's rights and dignity. In article (67) entitled "the political and theoretical roots of neoliberalism (part 7)", Ziad Hafez argues that the personal freedom valued in neoliberalism results in taking away the state's role in providing social services and relegate it to private companies giving individuals the illusion of choice and making their rights way too expensive.

According to the newspaper, the neoliberal system's hegemony main facilitator is the use of violence that ranges from imposing harsh economic conditions, interfering in national politics and sovereignty, to inciting wars, crisis and fake revolutions. Consequently, fueling wars is what guarantees the expansion of international financial capital (materialized as local and international banks but also the international financial institutions). Based on this, the newspaper's definition of imperialism is only in military terms and political alliances not directly related to the neoliberal process as an accumulation strategy. In article (84) "neoliberalism versus China, the ways capital is produced", Ali Kadiri explains that imperialism "is the continuous state of wars and the eradication of development" and it is the US strategy to accumulate capital. Kadiri explains then that China unlike the United States does not use violence in its expansionism but focuses on developing the country's infrastructure and induce stability

in the country. The author argues that the Chinese peaceful model can be a real alternative to the American violent accumulation of capital.

To change the American neoliberal model at the root of perpetual crisis, Al-Akhbar configures the necessity of resistance by reinforcing the state's sovereignty, and its role in protecting the land and the citizens against the market. The protective role of the state, includes its ownership of the means of production; its independence in creating and implementing economic and political strategies and measures; its control on monetization plans and on the work and profits of the MNC (Multinational Corporations). The entire logic in the crisis' identification of causes, consequences (parties and dynamics) and alternatives, was a fertile site for disinformation in Al-Akhbar. The logic that it articulates, depicts the world as a dichotomous camp where rigid giants have two separate projects: on the one hand, there is the US-led alliance with the destructive neoliberal imperial project that maintains its hegemony through international institutions and wars and increases its wealth. On the other hand, there is the Chinese-led alliance that incites a peaceful project that aims at developing all the countries and strengthening the state in favor of the lower and middle classes. This view does not only relate to international actors, but directly affects national systems as the newspaper already sees the dynamics between the two fields throughout direct alliances and sponsorships. The alternatives the newspaper suggests based on these views are not only deceiving, but they legitimize the Chinese model that is neoliberal and authoritarian.

### **C. How are these alternatives fallacious and how do they reproduce the status quo?**

A leftist alternative in Al-Akhbar has clear and defined elements, structures and parties and reflects directly Hizbullah's economic and political strategy that Nasrallah voiced few weeks after the uprising which is: "Heading East" or building an alliance with Eastern powers. Since the root of the crisis as articulated by the outlet as the US led neoliberal model that has its allies and institutions in Lebanon, then the alternative is constructed as the present forces that go against it which are: the Chinese-Iranian led (supposedly) anti-neoliberal rejectionist axis, or the Eastern choice and their ally Hizbullah. In article (76) entitled "Reformist economic developmental project in Lebanon: Heading East", Ziad Hafiz lays out the solutions that should be implemented in Lebanon and that will reform the system and stop the collapse which all can happen when building alliances with Eastern powers, getting loans from them and accepting their investments and infrastructure projects, and dealing with their new banks. Hafez argues that embarking on a new reformist project "necessitates taking many political decisions that ends the dependency on the West and its rentier model and international institutions such as the IMF and World Bank. This requires new policies that promote networking with Arab and regional countries like Iran and Turkey and International ones like Eurasia and Latin America". The author then claims that "this economic reformist developmental project for Lebanon has only one name: direction to the East". This direction will be lucrative and effective, according to Hafez, Eastern funds and expertise will initiate planning and productive projects and then relegate the projects to the state. These projects will allow the state "to reconstruct the debt; extract the gaz and oil; and build an effective infrastructure".

**1. *Protectionism against the neoliberal market: hiding Hizbullah's implication in the neoliberal laissez-faire Lebanese system***

The “Heading East” alternative articulated against US neoliberalism and imperialism according to Al-Akhbar is based on two main concepts: the first one is state centrism and protectionism (most importantly protection from foreign interventionism whether military through wars; politically through influence on decision making and interference in local politics; pro-market economy through dollarization, sanctions and international financial institutions). The second one is development, as the opposite of capitalism’s destructive effect. It is the state centrism that allowed the outlet to “sound” leftist, as for more than a century, it was a powerful characteristic of leftist socialist regimes and especially in China. Protecting the citizens is the role of the state, but when the state is already weak, this role has to be relegated to a powerful entity capable of assuming it. Al-Akhbar links this protective role to Hizbullah as it has proved to be powerful in protecting the citizens during the 2006 war and way before. In order to legitimize and highlight this important role of Hizbullah, AL-Akhbar shows that credibility in assuming the role of protection is key. In article (14) entitled “Looking for socialism”, Amer Mohsin explains that in the nineties, socialism that was prevalent in China and Europe, was the state’s guarantee to protect the citizens from the market. However, after years of schism in socialist ideals and between what socialism preached and the reality on the ground, socialist regimes and parties could not allow the state to assume its protective role anymore. The schism, Mohsin argues, led the people to believe in the inefficiency of socialism as it failed them. The author builds on this experience to affirm that people do not only believe slogans but only believe “those who fight, martyrize, and sacrifice for its liberation, not those who have a dogma or ideology”



alluding here to the credible role of Hizbullah in protecting the citizens from a twofold danger: an international market that manipulates their needs and a local one that monopolizes the essential goods and transforms them to unaffordable luxuries.

Anchoring more the credibility of Hizbullah in protecting the citizens, Amer Mohsin in another article entitled “Between two rounds” (59) stresses on the relationship between economic unrest, poverty, resistance and lack of security. He explains that the uprising in Lebanon could become dangerous for the people if they do not pay attention to the reality of a situation which is the American neoliberalism that threatens not only their land but their bread and livelihood. Mohsin explains that those who are protesting have to take into account these external threats because they are directly related to their livelihood problems. He argues that “in countries that face consistent wars, and personal and collective losses (as in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine) the concept of protection is taken into account when people assess political choices. “What is your plan to protect me? Is a question that every Arab will demand from a political project””. Linking poverty to the lack of protection and linking neoliberalism to the absence of state protection was the way the newspaper linked the fight against neoliberalism to Hizbullah’s protectionist claims and history of protecting the land and the citizens. This resulted in an extremely apologetic stance of Al-Akhbar towards Hizbullah’s strategies economic choices. Moreover, it resulted in a full denial of historical and current facts about the complicity between the party and the other ruling elites. Out of the 100 articles I focused on, only in one of them does Al-Akhbar admit that Hizbullah is implicated in the Lebanese system’s dynamics. Despite this acknowledgment, the newspaper was still apologetic to the party, showing that its participation in governance is only for a good purpose which is allowing the state to be functional. In article (47) “the resistance and

the internal socio-political change”, Walid Charara explains that Hizbullah is not at all part of the crisis and does not have anything to do with the neoliberal system due to the lack of collaboration or complicity with the Lebanese banks and the international financial institutions. He writes “the structural causes of the collapse are the neoliberal politics of the ruling parties from the civil war (...) while the resistance does not bear any sort of responsibility”. Charara continues to admit that the resistance “withdrew from the economic and socio-political decision-making to focus on the fight against Isarel”. However, and in the same article, Charara shyly admits that the party participated in the Lebanese political choices and actually approved Hariri’s neoliberal model with no opposition. The newspaper frames events in a way that polishes Hizbullah’s image and denies its responsibility and implication in the collapse.

The newspaper also falsifies contexts, draws false connections and shed light on only some parts of the story to hide the implication of the party. The first example would be the articulation of the workers’ union dissolution in the nineties. In article (57) entitled “It is not a revolution in Lebanon, but...” Assaad Abu Khalil argues that previous workers movements, coalitions and uprisings failed because of Hariri’s interventions and the Syrian oppression completely exempting Hizbullah. Abu Khalil tells “Hariri knew how to deal with the workers’ union, he used his ties with the powerful Syrian regime to suppress it (...) Hariri succeeded in ending the workers’ union and Nabih Berri was able to preside it and appoint a leader from his party. The end of this coalition was the last chance to have a true opposition to the deadly Hariri politics”. This is a fallacy, as Baumann (2016) in his article “Social protest and the political economy of sectarianism in Lebanon”, indicates that if Hariri directly repressed the workers’ protests and union with the use of the army, the other Christian and Muslim

parties tended to infiltrate the union and stop its revolution by winning votes and from internal infiltration. Similarly, Daher (2016) argues that Hizbullah played a complementary role to Hariri, Amal and some Syrian backed forces in subordinating all labor movements and coalitions to mobilize workers across sectarian lines from the 1993 until 2005. Still, Abu Khalil narrates the event accusing only Hariri, without coming across the responsibility of Hizbullah and his ties with the Syrian regime.

The second falsehood disseminated by Al-Akhbar is the negation of Hizbullah's implication in the neoliberal system only because it does not deal with the Lebanese banks that are allied with the US. Claims that the party's finances do not go through Lebanese banks might be true. However, the claims that the party is not implicated in the neoliberal laissez-faire economy, and do not protect the central banks' governor, are far-fetched. Recently, reports showed the implicit relations that exist between Hizbullah and the central bank's governor. A Reuters investigation shows that an exchange currency platform (CTEX) presided and founded by Hizbullah's former financial advisor Hassan Moukalled was legitimized in 2021 thanks to Riad Salameh who agreed on some financial gains and deals with Hizbullah. In return, Hizbullah will keep protecting Salameh and the economic decisions that he will implement (Bassam & Azhari & Donovan & Fincher, 2023). Additionally, in "Reassessing Hizbullah's Socioeconomic Policies in Lebanon", Joseph Daher (2016) argues that Hizbullah is directly implicated in the neoliberal Lebanese politics throughout the decisions taken by its think tank, the Consultative Center for Studies and Documentation (*al-Markaz al-Istishari li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Tawthiq*, hereafter CCSD). The think tank always defends private property and "the monetary and financial objectives of the state". Daher also echoes Roger Nasnas' argument (2007) which states that the party is inherently embracing neoliberal policies

and internally it has so many inequalities and is divided among classes: “Hizbullah itself has continued to advance the interests of large landowners and powerful clans from which it draws political and client support. As a result, inequalities among farmers have continued to be very large: in 2007, the five percent of farmers that owned the largest land plots possessed 47% of total cultivated land in the country, while the half with the smallest plots only controlled 8%”.

In perceiving an alternative to the current system, the newspaper naturalizes sectarianism and only perceives religious regimes and parties as solely primordial affiliation, not structural not tools of instrumentalization for political purposes. And this is only done to disregard an alternative that is promoted by secular Marxists and communists and to legitimize a “religious” more culturally proximate system. In fact, in “interpreting the pandemic and the ideological usefulness” (53) Mohammad Choukeir explains that the pandemic incited people to rethink the neoliberal system and the Marxist and socialist alternatives that tried to change it. The author argues that the two latter western frameworks that are not religious and that promote secularism, did not lead to change and were not able to counter neoliberalism throughout the years. Hence, he argues that more than ever today the countries in the Middle East have to consider other alternatives that are more culturally proximate to the region and more credible, such as the Iranian resistance model. The author argues that even if the Iranian model of resistance has a religious framework, the country was able to fight the “North” and implement more social justice policies: “some religious modern experiences show that some resistance parties that have a religious reference have a more prominent role in liberation. In addition, they can lead a transnational project for more justice in regards to the poor, weak and oppressed”. Choukeir’s perception of Marxist and socialists’ ideas as

purely imported from the West is fallacious as these issues and ideas were already tackled in the Middle East especially in Cairo, Alexandria and Beirut since the early nineties (Khuri-Makdessi, 2013). The intellectuals in these regions through pamphlets and thanks to the migration movements were always shaping learning and reshaping socialist and Marxists issues in different terms (Khuri-Makdessi, 2013). However, Choukeir's aim fits into the broader narrative of the newspaper that disregards other alternatives which don't intersect with the resistance axis. Tackling religious regimes only in primordial means, removes any accountability of these regimes and parties like Hizbullah in the sectarian and neoliberal power sharing system. Building on Choukeir's argument, in article (18) entitled "the resistance economy: Iran from producing jugs to Nano technology", Sadek AlNabilsa argues that the Iranian model that is not western, is a scientific methodology that can improve a country's economy and can disentangle it from foreign dependency. For AlNabilsa, resistance economy is definitely an alternative model to look up to:

"Resistance economy is the link between the scientific rules in the economic field and the principles of social justice. It focuses on the country's potentials internally but it is not completely disconnected from the international sphere. It tends to reform the structural foundations of a system to make an economy steady in order to face the challenges locally and internationally (...) The most important parts of the resistant economy are the immunity of the economy from external interventions and its ability to face the challenges internally and internationally".

The resistance economy as described above can indeed offer possibilities to change and can develop the economy because it focuses on strengthening and improving human resources, building a sustainable internal economy based on industries, agriculture, innovation and technology; in addition to dealing with foreign countries without the burden of sanctions and foreign subjugation. However, resistance economy as described according to this model, to achieve its potential and goals, must be

democratic by allowing many horizontal cooperations to form and especially workers coalitions and it must be maintained by political powers from outside the current status quo (Tariq, 2014) which is not the case in Iran; which might have been the case during the Khomeini's rule, but not anymore. Tariq (2014) argues that resistance economy can be a venture to explore and adopt but it can never "materialize within the existing political framework and its associated institutions and agreements. It necessarily requires the formation of alternative structures such as social movement, trade unions, women's societies, and professional committees, as well as the reform of the Palestinian National Movement so that it is unified and representative". However, the Iranian authoritarian model today that consecrates Shia elite parties' rule (in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria) that are already implicated in neoliberal models and that already shut down unions and protests and Palestinian resistance advocates (Mogannam, 2018), definitely cannot achieve this ambitious resistance economy model. Consequently, advocating for the Iranian model today based on what happened 30 years ago and without taking into account the dynamics of the regime today, distorts the perception of an alternative's potential. The justification of the Iranian resistance model that legitimizes indirectly Hizbullah's model is not also accurate as the party benefits directly from neoliberal politics that strengthen its clientelist network and its elites (Daher, 2016).

Islam, as a value reference in this resistance economy model is not economically problematic because economic justice and social welfare are prevalent values in the Quran, and militant Islamists based their fight against Israeli and US imperialism and warfare in the Middle East on Quranic justice values (Bayat, 2008). However, the religious value system becomes problematic, when we zoom in on the practices and dynamics of Islamic parties in specific countries, and not as Islamic values (Bayat,

2008). The questions become how does these Islamic parties challenge neoliberalism and imperialism and what does this challenge entail for the specific societies (Bayat, 2008). Following Bayat's reflection, I ask how does the anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal alternative of the resistance axis endorsed by Al-Akhbar materialize in political and economic choices and alliances in the society?

## 2. *China's unique model as a savior: different agent, same system*

The anti-imperialist stance of in Al-Akhbar is blindly and solely anti-American. This articulation of anti-imperialism is problematic for many reasons and one of them is its western centricity that denies all other non-western types of imperialism as deemed unworthy of study or not dangerous nor impactful. Reflecting on the Syrian revolution, Yassin Al-Haj Saleh (2017) argues that the American-centric anti-imperialist leftist rhetoric contributed to more oppression, authoritarianism and injustice towards the Syrian people. Al-Haj Saleh in his article "the Syrian cause and anti-imperialism" criticizes the majority of national and international leftists who supported Assad's regime because it claimed to be anti-neoliberal and anti-imperial instead of supporting the revolutionaries. Saleh (2017) explains that this anti-imperialist left "is devoid of people, individuals, or groups" and make the Syrian people's defiance of their oppressive regime, secondary, and unimportant compared to the "supposedly" international struggle against the Western (US, specifically) interventions. According to Saleh, this leftist anti-imperialism reproduced the real essence of imperialism, which is the denial of people's rights in revolutions; of their rights in knowledge production and of their agency in defining, advocating and advancing their righteous struggles. This strategic stance dominates the left worldwide but has nothing to do with what it could –and should- be in

terms of supporting people's rights or at least offering them new alternatives. In addition to being anti-democratic, this leftist stance that understands imperialism through international Western lens, is inherently orientalist and contributes to counter-revolution and to disinformation (Zeese, 2019). Zeese (2019) explains that this blind leftist anti-imperialism is called a pseudo anti-imperialism and happens on three levels: the first one is the assessment of only one perpetrator and one oppressor in any situation (usually it is the US); the second one is when the entity fiercely supports the Eastern bloc (Russia and China); and the third one happens when an entity is faced with accusations of tyranny and crimes, refuses criticism and blames other entities as imperialists. Al-Akhbar replicates this narrative of anti-imperialism contributing to more oppression on people and hiding the implication of this pseudo anti-imperialism in reproducing the same power dynamics it claims to challenge.

During the Iraqi uprising that was simultaneously happening with the Lebanese one, Al-Akhbar supported the Iraqi regime and incited hatred against the protestors who were demanding to topple their system, only because the regime prides itself to be anti-American. In "Iraq: Days of Conspiracy, Corruption, and Revolutionary Immaturity" (19) the editor in chief, Ibrahim Al Ameen, explains that the protests happening in Iraq are an American conspiracy to end the regime that resist it and that belongs to the rejectionist axis. The author states that "most of those who talk and write about this revolution today are not close to the people or the poor" and he invites the Iraqi protestors to stop the uprising and sharpen their focus on the international fight against US imperialism, as their regime is not to blame. A week later, an Iraqi writer, Alaa Allami, publishes in Al-Akhbar his article "Following Al Ameen and Abu Khalil's articles; The Iraqi event and its true context" (80), where he expresses his anger and



disappointment from the newspaper's coverage and accuses it of falsification of facts. Allami explicitly argues that Al-Akhbar's narrative is "inaccurate" and its authors present the reality based on "made-up sources" completely dismissing the Iraqi context and history. The author showed his deep shock that Al Ameen did not even show any solidarity with those killed by the regime while trying to defend their country from American and Iranian interventions simultaneously. He lastly clarified that both Iranians and Americans were complicit in the failure of reform initiatives in the Iraqi parliament, Allami writes: "on many occasions, Iranian and American consuls collaborated to end any Iraqi independent initiatives like the ones that happened during the parliamentary sit-in and aimed at dismantling the three presidential powers that are based on sectarian power sharing". This proves that the American anti-imperial framing that Al-Akhbar builds its entire discourse on and links it to emancipation, is fallacious and it consecrates oppressive systems in powers.

Al-Akhbar goes above and beyond to prove that the Eastern alliances China, Iran and Russia (and to a wider extent the BRICS), are not at all imperial. The outlet does not miss a chance to assert the innocence of the above-mentioned bloc and proves that this alliance brings prosperity and peace for the poor and the oppressed. Al-Akhbar exaggerates in humanizing the Chinese regime –not the people--, in opposition to the destructive and violent US regime. It even states that the Eastern giant and its allies are what the Southern people need for their true emancipation. The outlet consecrates 4 entire pages during the uprising to show the history of collaboration between Lebanon and China through people's testimonies, reflecting how much China is close to "our" people – the Lebanese - and "helps" it. In the articles in document (27) entitled "Chinese annex", Jamil Hodeib narrates his journey studying medicine in China and the

observation he made: “it is a socialist country that works relentlessly for people’s prosperity and better livelihood”. Hodeib prides himself that he studied in a country that has precious values in its foreign policies that aim to create a harmonious world full of peace, respect and prosperity. Hodeib says that these values are “mutual respect to sovereignty and unity of lands, no mutual attacks, no interference in internal affairs, equality, mutual benefits and peaceful coexistence”.

Similarly, Walid Mousallem, the director of the National Conservatory who receives generous funds from China, explains in “the relationship between China and Lebanon: a glorious history of friendship, cooperation and mutual trust” (27’) that “the relationship between Lebanon and China is not only built on mutual interests but on mutual trust and respect”. Mousallem adds, “the silk road project enhances trust between people and citizens around the world and enhances collective human behaviour that leads to universal peace”.

The insistence on showing China and the BRICS as peaceful and not military feeds into the narrative that this bloc is the alternative to the US neoliberal imperial model. However, it disinforms the audience about the reality of the Eastern alternative which is not so peaceful, has expansionist interests, and aims to sustain neoliberalism because it directly benefits from it and contributes to its decision making. Interestingly, in “China in the Arab sea: Yemen on the Belt and road trail” (54), Lokman Abdullah explains that Beijing has been building a military base in Djibouti since 2017 to protect its interests and new resources in the region. The writer frames this move by explaining that Chinese power aims to increase “economic interests only” and to “work towards peace and relief responses in Somalia and Yemen”, and not for expansionist or military interests in the region.

All moonlight and roses narratives that the newspaper portrays about China, hide the unfair political and economic dynamics, oppression and class struggles implicated internally in the BRICS countries and in China specifically. Reflecting on the impact of the southern eastern rise on geopolitics, Prashad (2013) argues that China and more broadly the BRICS' projects "are by no means revolutionary. Economic growth in these countries has come at the expense of ordinary working people and the environment, and the BRICS elites are not seeking to overturn the existing system of global governance, but merely to join it". Additionally, and despite the growth in the GDP in the BRICS and especially China, rates of inequality and unemployment are spiking as well as civil and political rights violations, patriarchal and homophobic sentiments, protests' prohibition, socio-economic oppressions, and prosecution and torture of activists (Bond, 2013). Consequently, the direction to "Head East" as an alternative to the American choices and recipes for Lebanon, because China challenges the US and is more peaceful and helps the people, is incorrect. Al-Akhbar, by linking China to the oppressed people's demands in changing the system, to anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal claims acquits the country and hides how neoliberalism is rooted in it already. Instead of focusing of the redistribution of wealth, the inequalities and oppressions in China to expose neoliberalism's dynamics everywhere and create a consciousness beyond a party or a country, the newspaper's discourse was stuck in identity politics.

The conceptualization of anti-imperialism in terms of military forces, foreign policy and international relations is a reductionist perspective that cannot reveal how imperialism is interlaced with neoliberalism to empower elites everywhere (Bond, 2013). Zeese (2019) argues that this narrow view of imperialism as a war strategy to gain more territory, is a pre-Cold war era tactic that benefitted imperialist advantages back then, but

that is not valid today, as imperialism is necessary linked to global capitalism because the latter is no more restricted by state territory. Bond (2013) argues that the BRICS and mainly China are considered imperialists and he pins a new term for their imperialism to differentiate it from other imperialisms: sub-imperialists. The author argues that these countries are reinforcing neoliberalism by advancing policies of over-production and over consumption; destruction of the ecology; exploitation of domestic labor; mutual aid system all while holding on to their anti-imperialist claims that only serve their national elitist political growth and interests (Yeros & Moyo, 2011). Bond (2013) argues that contemporary imperialism, or sub-imperialism, has two main characteristics in addition to capital export and internal corporate monopolization, which are regional geopolitical stability and increased market access. And it is precisely those characteristics that Al-Akhbar capitalizes on when it promotes the anti-neoliberal and anti-imperial alternative developmental project of China (mainly the “belt and road” initiative). In “Chinese projects in Lebanon: revamping the infrastructure and a monetary hub for Chinese companies” (2), Firas Al Choufi explains that the Chinese projects promised for Lebanon are mostly related to infrastructure so that the country becomes independent and hence the country must not ignore the “Belt and Road” initiative because “it will lose an opportunity that might transform it into a financial haven and a transit to the Chinese transportation system and companies”. Al-Akhbar barely analyzes the dynamics of the “Belt and Road initiative” from a political economic perspective. It shallowly mentions that it is a project that will bring benefits to the country and that’s it. It does not show how these interests will benefit the ruling class and will help establish the system in power even more; it does not expose how this project is an extension of neoliberal politics for China as it relies on expanding its market access and exporting its capital.

The exculpation of the Chinese giant from the current system has an additional criterion that is the country's state control and ownership of the means of production and of most of the multinational companies who are coerced to provide their expertise and technology to the Chinese people. The newspaper argues that China is not neoliberal because the state -or the Chinese Communist Party in rule- has the firm grip on the production sectors and supervises the role of the private sector and multinational companies. In "neoliberalism versus China part 1: Socialism in Chinese criteria" (69) Ali Kadiri explains that the development in China is due to its special system "socialism with Chinese criteria" based on: self-sufficiency in agriculture and industry; promotion of knowledge economy especially in technology; in addition to a state regulated economy with public property and a controlled private property. Kadiri argues that the Chinese model or what he calls the "enemy of neoliberalism" model is unique and was capable of decreasing poverty, increasing the GDP and preserving the environment. The latter developments that Kadiri mentions might be contested, but they are proven not to be true in many articles among which the ones we mentioned previously. Moreover, China as the socialist country and "enemy of neoliberalism" is fallacious as today scholars are divided between those who argue that the Chinese system is not fully neoliberal yet and those who argue that it is completely neoliberal (Weber, 2018). But scholars from both camps do not see the country as socialist or not neoliberal. Against both scholarly arguments, Kutay (2022) argues that proving to what extent the Chinese system is neoliberal based on economic criteria such as state control and modes of production and the GDP, does not have any political and analytical value anymore. The writer suggests coupling the understanding of neoliberalism as a set of economic policies and the previous World Bank and IMF ideology towards the global South, with

neoliberalism as a form of governmentality or the rationalities that include a rhetoric of power relations, inequality, exploitation, and intertwinement between local and global elites within global capitalism (Kutay, 2022). In fact, the separation of these two approaches is what led the left on many instances to ignore structures of oppression and neoliberalism and take anti-revolutionary and anti-democratic stances, as it happened in Syria. But Kutay's thorough approach is more revolutionary as it exposes neoliberalism in its entirety and delegitimizes authoritarian and anti-democratic stances as normal outcomes for systems that provide decent livelihoods but are oppressive. According to this approach, what Al-Akhbar presents as the only alternative, the Chinese resistance axis, is nothing but a choice that will still benefit the elites without the excess of power in sanctions and wars emblematic for the US strategy. Kutay's framework also, ends the separation between military imperialism and economic imperialism and it shows that both are indeed interrelated. This separation benefitted Al-Akhbar in advancing its own project that is anti-American and that supports other rising powers. In "Challenges for the rising powers" (89A) Mouin Haddad explains that "the economic development of China and India in the world market during the last 10 years predicts that the western imperialism won't be able to monopolize the good effects of globalization". The writer argues:

"China and India have the capacity to stop the hegemony of the North in an economic world war that shows the economic power of the new Eastern Asian imperialism. However, the new imperialism is only economic and not political, and this means anything that China and India wish for is the economic expansion without trying to export their political and cultural model outside their borders".

What Haddad says is that the economic imperialism is normalized and accepted but not the political one without even conveying the difference between the two. In any case, his point is flawed as it shows that the newspaper already implicitly acknowledges the

imperialist expansionist ambitions of the BRICS but still wants to connect them to emancipation and change, to anti-imperialism and anti-neoliberalism. It also proves that justifying that the Chinese system is not neoliberal (as mentioned in Kadiri's article) does not really stand.

Within his approach, Kutay (2022) identifies a governmentality discourse that endorses and benefits neoliberalism. He argues that discourses that focus on defining governance styles as good/bad or not corrupted/corrupted enforce neoliberalism as they do not tackle structural issues and processes. Kutay (2022) argues that "such an approach serves as an ideological strategy to mask the content and implications of neoliberal policies, aligning the interests of global and local elites". It is interesting that this discourse is prevalent in Al-Akhbar in distributing blame and responsibilities for the crisis. In "Will Hizbullah draw new economic conflicts with internal and external enemies?" (73) Sadek AlNabulsi explains that corruption was present ever since the Lebanese state was born and it continued due to the Western and American policies and sponsorship. The author describes that the American sponsorship corrupt system was in the hands of Hariri and Salameh for 30 years and ending corruption means moving to different choices internally and externally that are the Eastern bloc and Hizbullah. Even the way Al-Akhbar talks about the crisis' main engineer reproduces a neoliberal narrative.

Al-Akhbar's acquittance of China and the BRICS reaches another level when the newspaper mentions on many instances that the country "deserves" to dominate the world. The newspaper's entire narrative was to challenge the monopoly the US has over the world, but through its articles, it turns out that Al-Akhbar does not mind even a world monopoly. In "Covid settles the matter: the international system is fragile" (10), Raed El

Masri argues that the virus uncovered American neoliberalism monstrous effects on planet earth, world economies and human beings and made it clear that “China deserves to lead the world scientifically, technologically, in terms of the system and institutionally to humanize international relations away from materialism”. This alternative and given everything we discussed looks surreal. Its reflection in the Lebanese context regarding especially the loan and debt issue is a decisive point that the newspaper completely lost any claim to create alternatives.

Al-Akhbar’s stance when it comes to the loans in Lebanon was the following: when the leftist Marxist journalists such as Ghassan Deba and Mohammad Zbeeb were still writing in Al-Akhbar before their resignation, they mentioned that the international debt and aid system feeds neoliberalism and it is important to shy away from this model and to opt for strategies such as making the rich pay the prices, implementing policies for a fairer distribution of losses and a better distribution of resources and wealth, in addition to haircuts on big depositors and those who accumulated wealth illegitimately. However, after the many resignations and the newspaper’s clear stances in favor of the resistance axis, the direction was not to end the hegemonic international aid and loans system. On the contrary, the rhetoric changed and read that the loans from the IMF are bad whereas the ones from China are necessarily good and are reformist for the country. In fact, Al-Akhbar favors the latter loans because they allegedly do not interfere with the Lebanese political system, disregarding the role of these loans in empowering the ruling elites and maintaining the system. In “Chinese projects in Lebanon: revamping the infrastructure and a monetary hub for Chinese companies” (2), Firas Al Choufi supports the Chinese loans because “the loans are long term for 30 years and with low interest rates that do not exceed 1.5%”, the writer continues and explains that the funding for the development



projects can also be “through the BOT system and the partnership between the private and the public sector. And before Nasrallah’s speech, Chinese affirmed that they are ready for deals that are being studied and China wishes to have a financial centre and a bank for Chinese companies’ transactions”. Al Choufi briefly mentions that these projects are not charity work for Lebanon. And despite Lebanon’s benefits from this project because it focuses on all the infrastructure from the electricity sectors to roads and ports, this stance proves that the newspaper opposes economic measures coming from the US only and is apologetic to similar measures that come from -according to Al-Akhbar’s framing- a better, more “human” entity. Following the same logic regarding loans, we read in “So that we do not fall in the international institutions trap” (33), economist Georges Corm arguing that the international institutions’ measures and aids should not be the last resort for countries dealing with economic collapses and the Greek case is one vivid example of the detrimental effects of the intervention of these institutions in the economy. But Corm continues and states that an essential measure to change the system and end the collapse, is to change the sources of loans and accept those from China. He mentions this change in addition to other changes in the economic system such as taxation, different monetary strategies, industrialization and accountability measures on the central bank and commercial banks. On the contrary, Ghassan Deba who resigned beginning of November argues in “72 hours in the grand serial: the government reform paper deal” (104) that “fighting poverty is not supposed to be through getting more loans and accumulating debt, but through the acceptance that the rich must pay the price and accept to pay their taxes”. Comparing Deba and Corm’s approaches reveals that the newspaper’s alternative became a support for the Chinese neoliberal version of system, not anything more.

In brief, the alternatives that the newspaper advocates for are fallacious and construct a distorted world view on the parties' responsibilities, on the nature of the system and the potential change possibilities. The outlet has an already preconceived identity for the social actors: China is socialist and the US is neoliberal which was somehow true in the early nineties but is far from being accurate now. And projecting this old historical juncture in the present creates so many fallacies that are a threat to democracy as they trick the people into believing in what is good to them when it won't actually benefit them. Advocating for the China's axis, with its new banks and new currency and increased market access only helps the country gain a bigger share of, a higher voice on the multipolar neoliberal table (Memos, 2012). Al-Akhbar, by hiding the implications of China and Hizbullah in the neoliberal system, legitimizes their agendas as beneficial for the poor and oppressed, hence fails completely to produce a counter-hegemonic project that serves the oppressed and to fight inequalities and injustice. Worse, Al-Akhbar's narrative make it seem like the problem with neoliberalism is its current leadership (internally, Hariri and Salameh and internationally the US) not the structural and complex modes of governance and economic measures that are interrelated and that include simultaneously local and international elites.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Can we articulate alternatives? What kind of a counterhegemonic project does the left produce today? Will the left really resist neoliberalism, or are we always doomed to choose a lesser of two evils? As I found out through my thesis, a leftist narrative that is still haunted by ideological readings and alliances of a past conjuncture, and that is unable to acknowledge the antagonisms' contingency of the socio political, can't create change. On the contrary, it becomes a project lost in identity politics, polarizing society, contributing to more authoritarianism and disinformation, and impeding democracy that is essentially based on conflict and difference. According to my findings, the rejectionist left that Al-Akhbar constructs and promotes, reinforces binaries, identarian categories and produces disinformation. Al-Akhbar's articulation of leftist categories and conceptualizations seems unproductive in this conjuncture. In fact, what value is it for a leftist narrative that defends oppressive power structures and demonizes people and revolutions?

Al-Akhbar started as a leftist project to resist oppression and create alternative possibilities for change that the political elites and their mouthpieces wanted to hide. However, this outlet could not read the complexities of the revolutionary changes in the Arab world and most recently in Lebanon, except from one narrow, superficial and inaccurate resistance lens that is Hizbullah's. Consequently, the outlet's leftist project became no other than the same version of the status quo with different leaders: instead of the American version of neoliberalism with Hariri, Salameh and their allies as direct beneficiaries, Al-Akhbar

promotes a Chinese/BRICS version of neoliberalism that benefits Hezbollah. Instead of focusing on the redistribution of wealth and power, the outlet legitimized a party's political agenda at the expense of peoples' grievances. Instead of exposing how developmental policies and neoliberalism work in tacit ways to benefit the wealthy, Al-Akhbar drew a false picture of the world and wove an affective acceptance to alternative social agents that only aim to expand their shares from the current system. Al-Akhbar's leftist articulations reflect a broader leftist trend that transcends Lebanon and whose discourse was obvious during the Syrian uprising. This in fact coincides with, and is a result of years of ideological totality and stagnation of the left, in addition to its absence from the political field in Lebanon mainly, but also internationally.

I expose the danger of Al-Akhbar's articulatory logic because I believe that any revolutionary or emancipatory project today and especially in the Arab world, be it labelled leftist or not, has to take into account the multiple struggles of the many peoples in the "non-homogeneous temporalities interwoven with a variety of communal and political loyalties and which are imbricated in wider regional and international geopolitical landscapes (Bardawil, 2013). My thesis shows the necessity of studying the ways socio-economic and political issues are tackled and disseminated to the masses to understand how alternative spaces that claim to challenge structures of oppression reproduce them, and what can be done in this regard.

My thesis only examined one leftist discourse which is not indicative of all leftist alternatives present in Lebanon today, as leftist coalitions and discourses mushroomed in small spaces after the uprising. Nevertheless, the case study still has

value in leftist Lebanese and Arab thought. And it is important to note that leftist articulations in this newspaper can't escape the influence of wealthy entities and political parties to ensure the sustainability of the newspaper due to the scarcity of funding. That said, further studies could explore the role of the journalists in shaping Al-Akhbar's discourse to highlight what are the limits and potentials of the contestations of leftist meaning-making and to understand how the journalists were able to overcome the schisms in the construction of events. In fact, personal experiences of leftists are important in this context because focusing on the individual experiences allows us to understand debates and shifts within the left (Haugbolle, 2020) which is insightful when studying any leftist project. Other studies could also explore the reception of Al-Akhbar's discourse on left leaning individuals to understand how is this narrative received and interpreted in order to assess to what extent this articulation is adopted and how does it shape political views and actions. It would also be interesting to compare Al-Akhbar's narrative with other leftist alternative narratives such as the newly emerging platforms, Koufeyeh Hamra, The Public Source, Megaphone, Jadaliyya, Bidayat, and Sifr magazine to find similarities and differences between these platforms' discourses in order to gain more insights when building recommendations for new leftist projects.

Lastly, I would like to reflect on the discovery I recently made regarding the importance of a research project generally and the necessity of studying alternatives and counterhegemonic narratives specifically. At the beginning of this process, I could not find any meaning of what I am doing except to gain a master's degree. I also struggled to find any additional value in my analysis or presentation, until I travelled with the organization I worked with to Malaysia in December 2022, to

participate in founding an international movement for justice against extremism. There, I met scholars and students from all over the world: Germany, the UK, the US, Pakistan, Cuba, Mexico, Italy, South Africa, etc. During our discussions, interestingly, many leftist Pakistani and Cuban colleagues who have de-colonial studies backgrounds and understand Arabic, told me how much they highly think of Al-Akhbar as a leftist counterhegemonic project in the Middle East. I was astonished to know that they follow Al-Akhbar and its writers and they meet regularly with the latter during international webinars and conferences to talk about counterhegemonic discourses today. During our discussions, my colleagues' arguments on counter-hegemony were exactly aligned with Al-Akhbar's discourse. They reiterated the arguments raised in Al-Akhbar on fighting Americanization, allying with resistance forces such as Hamas, Hizbullah and with new rising anti-imperialist and socialist powers like China, because these are the steps in breaking the world's monopoly towards a new anti-neoliberal and anti-imperial, fairer world. And while listening to them I realized how much this discussion is timely and how my thesis could be valuable. I started explaining the context of the left in Lebanon and the rise of Al-Akhbar, then I shared why and how I find Al-Akhbar's claims, and hence the leftist project they (my colleagues) imagine, to be dangerous and to reproduce oppressive power structures. We then discussed how much the dichotomous view of society obstructs the understanding of the interrelation and simultaneity of causes and indeed proved to be undemocratic, and not really useful. This deep and interesting exchange made me realize -and it might sound a bit dubious- how small decisions and actions in one part of the world affect other parts of the world. I thought again about my role, right and responsibility as a global citizen in all fields: moral,

economic, political, cultural, etc. And I thought about the responsibility people working in the media and education sectors as mediators of this global citizenship. If the latter is broadly agreed on as the awareness and understanding of the wider world and the place one holds in it as active agent contributing to make the planet fairer, peaceful and sustainable (Oxfam GB| *What is global citizenship?*, n.d.), then media and education professionals are responsible to spread the tools and methodologies that allow the seekers to reach this awareness. Some of these tools would be: understanding of disinformation and fake news; understanding of the interconnectedness between and interdependence of local and global perspectives; respect of difference and heterogeneity, etc. And since people around the world were not driven by socialist or any ideological project to revolt but by “freedom and dignity” (Bardawil, 2013), it would be interesting to see a leftist project that could actually understand the previous left internationalism value only based on class, in terms of global citizenship, its challenges and its potential. New conjunctures, necessitate new articulations and new alternatives.

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