

Instrumental rhetoric and divergent interests: Hezbollah and the Sadrist Movement respond to the Charlie Hebdo attacks

The statements by Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary-General of Hezbollah, and Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Sadrist Movement, in reaction to the Charlie Hebdo shootings demonstrate as much Hezbollah's continued subversion of the Lebanese national interest to its resistance project as the Sadrist Movement's [alignment of interests with those of Iraq](#) as a nation-state.

When these two seemingly similar Shiite Islamist figureheads spoke about the attacks, each was talking on two distinct levels. Their statements concerned not only those specific and terrible events in faraway lands, but also their own very pressing political dilemmas. Those situations both informed their discourse and represented its secondary-level subject, the statements of each speaker being made in order to advance his interests with respect to those situations. When the rhetoric of Nasrallah and Sadr on the Charlie Hebdo shootings are juxtaposed against prior, seemingly inconsistent statements on other perceived insults to Islam, one can appreciate a striking similarity in how each uses its discourse as an instrument to advance its interests and a fundamental difference in what those specific interests actually are.

1. *Apparent inconsistencies*

The denunciation of the Charlie Hebdo attacks by Hassan Nasrallah, in a speech marking the anniversary of the birth of the prophet Muhammed, may have come as a surprise to some. In contending that the violent behaviour by *takfiri* groups represents the “[biggest threat to Islam, as a religion and as a message](#)”, far more so than the cartoons of the Prophet drawn by its “enemies”, Nasrallah seemed to imply that (perceived) insults to Islam and Muhammed should not be met with violence; indeed, that such violence does more harm than the initial insult. Contrasted against prior denunciations of cartoons of Muhammed in the Danish publication *Jyllands-Posten* in [2006](#) and [later in other publications](#), the 2012 US film *The innocence of Muslims*, a supposedly Islamophobic [Dutch production](#) in 2008 and continued outrage over [Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses](#) and the strident support for [violent defence of religious honor](#), Nasrallah's latest statements seem novel and unusual. Understood in a broader context of an 'anti-Islamophobia' trope in Hezbollah discourse, wherein statements and publications by Western actors which are critical of or insulting towards Islam are framed as [part and parcel of a US-Zionist plot](#) to engender and exacerbate the divide between Westerners and Muslims, and to isolate Islam and Muslims for special treatment, it appears to represent a startling change of course.

Whereas Nasrallah appeared to imply that however offensive something may be, it should not be met with violence, Muqtada al-Sadr criticised the violence of “[itinerant terrorists](#)” (the [same term](#) it uses for Islamic State fighters) whilst also allocating blame to the French government and to “radical Christians”. According to Sadr, there should be no absolute freedom of speech; rather, religion – all religion – should be subject to protection. In fact, in a separate document he went so far as to [demand](#) that European governments “write a charter on honor between religions... otherwise it will be the start of the end”. Notwithstanding the stridency of Sadr's discourse, which stemmed ultimately from a (mis)perception that this was a struggle between Christian and Muslims extremists (or at least his framing of the situation in this way), this was hardly a revolutionary post-Charlie position. It is certainly not striking in the way that the Hezbollah statement is, not least because it is in line with previous Sadrist positions on the Danish cartoons in [2006](#) and [2008](#) and [The innocence of Muslims](#), for example.

Yet it does stand in contrast to Sadr's [denunciation in late 2013](#) of the [beating of a British worker](#) who allegedly tore an image of Imam Hussein in the process of removing it from the Schlumberger plant on the Rumaila North oil field in Iraq. In this case, Sadr used the same logic as Nasrallah,

contending that the reaction of the aggrieved Muslims, his own supporters, was more of an offence to Islam and the Prophet Muhammed than the initial offence aggravation: “What he did was horrible, it is a crime, but the response of some of the Shia was, in my opinion, even worse and more horrible”.

So has Hezbollah changed tack? Is it seeking a rapprochement with the West, or, even, could this be indicative of some reinterpretation of the dictates of the Quran concerning how to respond to insults to the faith? Equally, what does this inconsistency mean for the Sadrists? What is one to make of Sadr's praise for the French “demonstrations against terrorism”, in complete denial of the fact that they were in fact protesting in favour of freedom of speech and in light of his support for limits to freedom of speech when it comes to religion?

2. *Charlie Hebdo as a screen to project own situations*

The answers to these questions lie in the fact that the statements of Nasrallah and Sadr on the Charlie Hebdo affair are both informed by and seek to affect the political situation of each actor. They do not, therefore, represent solely statements of position on the issues surrounding Charlie Hebdo. Rather, they are also, and are perhaps primarily, instruments that have been deployed in order to serve an end – to advance the relative interests of Hezbollah and the Sadrist Movement. Both the Sadrist Movement and Hezbollah are engaged in fierce fighting against the Islamic State. Hezbollah sees the conflict as the latest front in the ongoing struggle between US-Zionist oppression and Islamic resistance, and its comments on Charlie Hebdo must be seen in this context. On the other hand, for the Sadrists the conflict is indicative of the weak institutions of an Iraqi state paralysed by sectarianism and extra-national loyalties and the statements of Sadr should be understood with this in mind.

As [Rola al-Husseini observes](#), whereas Hezbollah's earlier statements on previous insults against Islam sought to emphasise the threat posed by an enemy that oppressed all Muslims in both a material and ideological and rhetorical sense, to situate the group as a vanguard of the Islamic resistance and to engender a broad-based support for its aims, now Nasrallah's discourse “is geared toward a domestic audience in Lebanon, and possibly toward Sunni Muslims within the larger region... to demonize his enemies in Syria while appealing to moderate Muslims who are horrified that their religion has been hijacked by extremists”.

Yet it is also important to remember that Hezbollah discourse is part and parcel of its resistance efforts against the US-Zionist project for global hegemony. The war of words is no less important than the kinetic conflict, and its statement on the Charlie Hebdo attacks is aimed as much at the international audience as at the Lebanese and regional ones. It is true that, as Husseini argues, “during the past few years Hezbollah has attempted to balance broad claims about the perfidy of the West and the plight of the downtrodden against the reality of the organization's embroilment in sectarian conflicts.” Seen in this light, therefore, eroding support for the *takfiris* whilst simultaneously confusing and dividing 'the West' (a hitherto openly stated tactic) is quite a significant outcome. In fact, with Hezbollah even having [welcomed the potential benefits](#) of the convergence of US and Hezbollah interests in Syria, it can only help that some in the West are debating whether or not the movement has turned over a new leaf. Nasrallah's statement on the events in France was made in order to serve Hezbollah's interests in both its struggle against the Islamic State and its allies, and against the broader US-Zionist plot of which the war in Syria represents just the latest front.

Like Nasrallah, Sadr made his statements on the Charlie Hebdo attacks in order to advance his own interests, and thus the statement was also an instrument and very possibly not indicative of his authentic position. Yet there is a radically different calculus involved. In the case of the British

worker beaten in Iraq, Sadr's statements were aimed at re-assuring foreign investment in Iraq, thereby protecting the economy. This, in turn, helped ensure continued support for Sadr. In fact, that particular situation had the additional advantage of making him seem more of a statesman, both domestically and externally. Sadr's gain was Iraq's gain, and vice versa.

Sadr's statements on the Charlie Hebdo affair essentially replicated in France the situation in Iraq, with the French government and “radical Christians” playing the role of the Iraqi government and (non-Sadrist) Shiite militias, and the conflict emerging because of a clash between “a militant and a militant”, facilitated by poor policy on the part of the government. By framing the situation in this way, Sadr was able to also comment on the situation in Iraq. To many Western eyes, his statements might seem outrageous and incoherent: To identify “radical Christians” as playing a role seems not only anachronistic but also totally irrelevant to what is seen in the West as a conflict between liberal secularism and fundamentalist religion; to criticise the French government for not having permitted Shari'a to demand a charter for common honor between religions appears both completely unacceptable in the current climate and indeed to be an attitude that lies at the heart of the problem. But just as Nasrallah's statement was aimed at multiple audiences, so too was Sadr's. Whilst it was published in English for the world to read, the Arabic text was also aimed at Iraqi Shia and Sunnis alike. To Iraqi eyes reading in an Iraqi context, Sadr's response might seem measured, and strikingly relevant to their own dilemma. His statements appear to embody *wasatiyyah* (moderation), and seek to expel the extremists of both sides whilst correcting the government's initial follies, whilst emphasising a need for respect and tolerance between the moderates of both sides. For a figure who espouses a thoroughly (Islam-)nationalist identity and set of interests, and who stands to gain from nationalist, rather than sectarian narratives taking hold, emphasising Iraqi nationalist narratives and playing the statesman seems rather apparently to be a matter of self-interest.

In responding to the Charlie Hebdo massacre, neither Nasrallah nor Sadr are talking solely about the situation in France. Instead, each is referencing about their own political conflicts. Each is also making a play for moderates among the audience. The difference is that whilst Sadr's interests appear to overlap with those of an inclusive and peaceful Iraq, Hezbollah's seem to mean engaging Lebanon in endless resistance against the US-Zionist project. If the logic of that conflict fails to convince, these gains may very well not be gains at all.