

ISSN: 2788-8037

Publication details, including guidelines for submissions:

<https://rowaq.cihrs.org/submissions/?lang=en>

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To cite this article: Toti, Amal, and Saraa Saleh. 2026. "Hezbollah and Political Alignment in Arab Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar." *Rowaq Arabi* 31 (1): 57-74.

<https://doi.org/10.53833/UVAD1465>.

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Hezbollah and Political Alignment in Arab Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar

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Abstract

This article examines how Hezbollah was represented by Al-Jazeera Arabic and Al-Akhbar Arabic during two key conflicts: the 2006 Lebanon War and the 2013 Siege of Al-Qusayr. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis, the study examines a corpus of sixteen articles to investigate how both outlets constructed Hezbollah's role, actions, and legitimacy through language, framing, and narrative strategies. The findings show that in 2006 both newspapers presented Hezbollah within resistance narratives against Israel, reinforcing its legitimacy. By 2013, however, a clear divergence emerged: Al-Jazeera adopted a more critical framing shaped by its opposition to the Assad regime, while Al-Akhbar maintained supportive coverage aligned with its pro-Assad stance. These discursive shifts illustrate how Arab media outlets can reproduce competing ideological positions in times of conflict. In the cases examined, such representations may influence political legitimacy, contribute to the sectarianisation of conflict, and shape how rights and violence are framed within regional political debates.

Keywords: Hezbollah; Media Discourse; Critical Discourse Analysis; Political legitimacy; Media Framing

Introduction

Media outlets in the Arab region have become an increasingly contested space, where news coverage can be shaped not only by journalistic norms but also by political interests, ideological alignments, and financial dependency. Media organisations may be influenced by regional rivalries and can contribute to the discursive shaping of sectarian tension, legitimacy, and identity, particularly in contexts where conflict is sectarianised.¹ Hezbollah, a Shi'i Lebanese political and military movement, occupies a central position in regional politics. For this reason, examining its portrayal offers a critical case study for analysing the construction of narratives in Arab media.

Hezbollah emerged in 1982 in the context of Israel's occupation of Lebanon, developing into an umbrella organisation rooted in Shi'i Islamist ideology while also drawing on strands of Lebanese and Arab nationalism. It publicly announced its existence in 1985 through an open letter framing its mission as resistance to occupation, emphasising armed struggle against Israeli presence in Lebanon and support for the Palestinian cause.² In 1992, Hezbollah entered formal Lebanese politics by participating in the first post-war parliamentary elections, a shift that coexisted with its continued self-presentation as a resistance actor.³ Alongside its political and military roles, Hezbollah has also cultivated support through extensive welfare provision, including financial assistance, healthcare, and social services.⁴ This combination of armed activity, political institutionalisation, and social governance complicates how Hezbollah should be categorised both analytically and legally. As Catherine Bloom argues in relation to the 2006 Lebanon war, Hezbollah does not fit neatly into conventional classifications under international humanitarian law, raising questions over whether it should be treated as a state-linked actor or a non-state armed group.⁵ Given this contested status, this article refers to Hezbollah as a 'movement,' a neutral descriptor encompassing its political and military roles.

This study analyses how Hezbollah was depicted by Al-Jazeera Arabic and Al-Akhbar Arabic during two pivotal conflicts: the 2006 Lebanon War and the 2013 Siege of Al-Qusayr in Syria. The corpus consists of sixteen articles: four from each outlet for each conflict. The analysis focuses on how Hezbollah's role, legitimacy, and actions were discursively constructed. The aim is to identify how linguistic choices, narrative strategies, and topic selection reflect broader ideological alignments in shifting political contexts. To this end, it employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing particularly on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model. The research addresses the following question: How did Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar represent Hezbollah during the 2006 Lebanon War and the 2013 Siege of Al-Qusayr, and what do these representations reveal about the relationship between media discourse and political alignment in the Arab region?

The two media outlets studied offer contrasting perspectives that reflect different political and ideological orientations. Al-Jazeera has often been associated with Qatari state interests and with pan-Arab and Sunni-oriented framings. Al-Akhbar, in contrast, is noted for its leftist orientation and pro-Assad stance. Comparing these two outlets, therefore, provides insights into how media institutions with divergent ideological commitments can construct and contest Hezbollah's legitimacy. Instead of seeking to represent a representative account of Arab media as a whole, which is outside the scope of this article, this study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study.

The two conflicts were specifically chosen because they marked critical turning points in Hezbollah's political and symbolic standing. As discussed above, Hezbollah's status in the Arab public sphere has long been the subject of debate. During the 2006 Lebanon War, following Hezbollah's capture of two Israeli soldiers near the border village of Zarit on 12 July, Israel launched a large-scale military campaign against Lebanon.⁶ The conflict lasted thirty-three days, with Hezbollah presenting itself as victorious.⁷ The movement's popularity expanded significantly due to its perceived military performance, including among Sunni communities across the Arab region.⁸ After the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, however, regional perception of

Hezbollah shifted substantially.⁹ Hezbollah initially denied any involvement in order to protect its identity as a resistance movement, whose *raison d'être* revolves around countering Israel's occupying presence.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Hezbollah's leading role in the 2013 siege and capture of Al-Qusayr in Syria rendered their military presence undeniable.¹¹ This intervention challenged its prior image as a transnational resistance movement understood to be acting on behalf of the oppressed, leading to a decrease in its support.¹² While acknowledging that the 2006 Lebanon war and the Syrian conflict differ fundamentally in their political and moral configurations, this contrast is not examined as a matter of conflict typology. Rather the focus here is on how media discourse rearticulates legitimacy in response to changing regional alignments.

This article is divided into four parts. The next section outlines the CDA framework used in the analysis. This is followed by a literature review of scholarship on Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar. The third section provides the discourse analysis of the selected articles. The final section discusses the findings in relation to the shifting legitimacy of Hezbollah.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the theoretical lens guiding this article's examination of media representations of Hezbollah. As a form of critical language theory, it is rooted in the understanding that language is not neutral but rather a form of social practice. As such, language both reflects and helps shape social structures, power relations, and cultural norms. CDA is particularly concerned with social relations that are unequal or discriminatory in nature.¹³ This section outlines the theoretical foundations, analytical model, and methodology that guide the analysis of media representations of Hezbollah.

This article adopts Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, which enables a multi-layered examination of discourse. These dimensions are textual analysis (concerned with the linguistic features of the text), discursive practice (analysis of the production, distribution, and consumption of the text), and social practice (ideological and institutional contexts).¹⁴ These dimensions correspond to the analytical stages of description, interpretation, and explanation.¹⁵ By applying this model, the analysis connects textual strategies with broader sociopolitical developments, allowing for a critical examination of how Hezbollah is portrayed by Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar.

To operationalise this framework in the analysis of media texts, the study draws on analytical approaches developed by John Richardson and Teun van Dijk. In doing so, four key analytical tools are employed. Richardson contributes concrete tools for analysing news discourse at the textual and discursive levels. These include lexical choices and labelling, intertextuality, topic and narrative foregrounding. While Richardson's framework offers a broader range of analytical tools, this study focuses on those most relevant to the research questions and the nature of the corpus. The level of social practice is assessed through van Dijk's concept of the ideological square, which uncovers strategies of polarisation. Through this combined framework, the analysis attends to the

underlying objectives, linguistic strategies, and ideological narratives embedded in media representations of Hezbollah.

The first dimension, textual analysis, examines how language is used strategically to construct meaning. Richardson refers to the tools of textual analysis as naming and referencing, which are treated here as part of a broader focus on lexical choice and labelling. Specifically, lexical choices play a central role in shaping how social actors and events are represented and understood.¹⁶ Equally important is the careful selections of evaluative terms used to label these actors.¹⁷ Through these linguistic choices, news articles can shape specific identities and moral evaluations. A textual analysis can, therefore, uncover the specific linguistic strategies used to portray Hezbollah.

The second dimension, discursive practice, explores the underlying process of news making and reading. While producers embed intended meanings, readers actively interpret these texts through their own knowledge, perspectives, and social context.¹⁸ As Richardson notes, reading is not passive as audiences may accept, resist, or misinterpret messages based on their background and trust in the media source. Likewise, journalists often shape content with audience's expectations in mind.¹⁹ Two key analytical tools are intertextuality and topic and narrative foregrounding.

Fairclough defines intertextuality as the incorporation of elements from other texts into a new one.²⁰ A news report can include a range of intertextual source materials, such as official statements, quotations, contextual background information, and evaluative commentary.²¹ Richardson articulates this amalgamation through the term 'reported speech.'²² Intertextuality is an important element in CDA because it allows for a study of how existing discourse is reproduced or altered. By analysing intertextual references, CDA can clarify whether discourse reinforces or transforms established meaning across different contexts.²³

Richardson treats topic selection and news narratives separately as distinct analytical stages. In this study, however, both are examined simultaneously as topic and narrative foregrounding. This is because the concepts overlap in their focus on which aspects of an event or actor are foregrounded. Topic selection determines what is considered significant and newsworthy, and thus plays a key ideological role.²⁴ Narrative foregrounding then highlights certain aspects of an event or actors while de-emphasising others, reflecting implicit ideological orientations about what is considered important or newsworthy.²⁵ Rather than being neutral, decisions about which topics to emphasise and how events are narrated reflect underlying ideological priorities, elevating certain actors or events while marginalising others. By merging topic selection and narrative structure, the analysis identifies which aspects of Hezbollah are prioritised and how media outlets shape meaning by highlighting certain narratives.

The third dimension, social practice, situates discourse within broader ideological and institutional contexts.²⁶ Van Dijk's concept of the ideological square is particularly instructive here. It explains how discourse systematically emphasises the positive qualities of the in-group while highlighting the negative traits of the out-group. At the same time, it involves downplaying or mitigating the negative traits of the in-group and minimising the positive aspects of the out-group.²⁷

Fairclough argues that the dimension of social practice must address how discourse contributes to the reproduction of power relations, the construction of social identities, and the dissemination of ideological effects.²⁸ Van Dijk's ideological square provides a systematic tool to uncover such ideological structuring within discourse. By making mechanisms of polarisation explicit, the model helps reveal how news texts contribute to broader processes of dominance, exclusion, or legitimisation, thus aligning closely with Fairclough's conceptualisation of discourse as social practice.

Building on the theoretical framework above, this study applies CDA to a qualitative study of sixteen news articles published by Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar. The analysis focuses on written news texts as they provide a comparable corpus suitable for close examination of lexical choices, narrative construction, and ideological framing. While broadcast and spoken media offer valuable insights, they fall outside the scope of this article.

For each conflict, four articles were selected from each outlet, resulting in a total corpus of sixteen texts. The selection was guided by qualitative rather than the quantitative nature of this study. In line with CDA's emphasis on depth and interpretative rigor, the aim was not to achieve representativeness, but to identify recurring discursive patterns across ideologically contrasting news outlets.

The articles were identified through searches on the official websites of Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar using Arabic keywords such as *Hizb Allah*, *Ḥarb Tamūz*, *Al-Qusayr*, and *Naṣrallah*. Only articles directly reporting on Hezbollah in the context of the two conflicts were included. To ensure analytical rigor, the corpus was subjected to systematic reading aimed at identifying recurring discursive patterns rather than relying on impressionistic readings of individual texts. The final corpus was translated into English to facilitate the systematic application of CDA and to provide transparency and accessibility for an international academic readership. Particular care was taken in the translation process to ensure preservation of contextual meaning rather than producing literal translations.

Literature Review of Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar

Since its establishment in 1996, Al-Jazeera has attracted significant scholarly attention for its rapid rise and enduring influence in the Arab region. Many observers attribute the network's influence to its relative autonomy, its willingness to challenge government corruption and entrenched elites, and its engagement with issues long considered taboo.²⁹ Some scholars highlight Al-Jazeera's ability to amplify existing public opinion rather than shape it, while others emphasise its role in mobilising Arab publics, thereby securing its position as a major actor in global journalism.³⁰ Building on these perspectives, Philip Seib introduced the concept of the 'Al-Jazeera effect,' arguing that transnational media have acquired unprecedented capacity to influence international politics by reshaping political debates and public opinion.³¹

A substantial body of scholarship situates Al-Jazeera within broader discussions of pan-Arab identity. Khalil Rinnawi credits the network with pioneering a new form of media-driven pan-

Arabism in the 1990s through its transnational production model.³² This was facilitated by employing journalists from across the Arab region and engaging with issues shared across national boundaries.³³ Mohamed Zayani further argues that Al-Jazeera constructs a ‘pan-Arab imagined community,’ in which geographically dispersed audiences are united through shared language and mediated experience.³⁴ At the same time, the channel is also associated with a distinct Islamist orientation, most notably through programmes such as *Al-Sharī‘a wa-l-Ḥayāt* (Islamic Law and Life), hosted by Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, which framed religious guidance within a Sunni interpretive tradition.³⁵

Despite its reputation for independence and pan-Arab appeal, Al-Jazeera has faced sustained criticism, particularly concerning its coverage of the Arab Spring uprisings. While its extensive reporting during this period enhanced its profile as a trusted information source, it also exposed the limits of its political neutrality.³⁶ The network’s enthusiastic coverage of protests in Egypt and Libya contrasted sharply with its more restrained reporting on Bahrain and its strong opposition to the Syrian regime, prompting accusations of selective partisanship.³⁷ Kristian Ulrichsen argues that Qatar’s foreign policy priorities significantly shaped these editorial choices.³⁸

This debate cannot be separated from Al-Jazeera’s well-documented institutional relationship with the Qatari state.³⁹ According to Ehab Galal, the Qatari government initially intended Al-Jazeera to become privately funded within five years of its establishment. However, despite generating part of its revenue through advertising, Al-Jazeera appears to remain financially supported by the Qatari government.⁴⁰ The channel’s financial dependence on government funding has enabled its expansive reach while simultaneously constraining its capacity to critique Qatari politics.⁴¹ Scholars further argue that Qatar has strategically deployed Al-Jazeera as an instrument of public diplomacy.⁴² For Shawn Powers, the network exemplifies how communication technologies have reconfigured diplomacy and redistributed geopolitical influence.⁴³ Al-Jazeera thus remains both a celebrated platform for Arab voices and a deeply contested actor whose political autonomy continues to be debated.

Al-Akhbar, founded in 2006 by Joseph Samaha and Ibrahim Al-Amin, emerged as a leftist Lebanese daily challenging U.S. influence, Zionist narratives, and anti-Syrian currents in the region.⁴⁴ Financially backed by Lebanese businessmen, some with ties to Hezbollah, the newspaper positioned itself as a counter-hegemonic voice while maintaining an ambiguous relationship with the movement.⁴⁵ Although Hassan Nasrallah denied any formal affiliation, the paper rarely criticised him directly, even when occasionally scrutinising Hezbollah-affiliated actors.⁴⁶ Sarah El-Richani further questions the newspaper’s opaque connections with the movement.⁴⁷

The Syrian uprising in 2011 exposed internal divisions within Al-Akhbar. Co-editor Khalid Saghieh and several journalists resigned in protest of the newspaper’s pro-Assad stance.⁴⁸ As the conflict intensified, Al-Akhbar’s increasingly pro-regime position undermined its emancipatory rhetoric by prioritising political stability over democratic aspirations.⁴⁹ The loss of Qatari financial support further hardened its editorial line and was followed by overt criticism of Doha.⁵⁰

Taken together, the literature suggests that both Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar present themselves as challengers of dominant narratives, yet their editorial lines are shaped by political and financial affiliations: Qatar in the case of Al-Jazeera, and Hezbollah and Syrian-aligned actors in the case of Al-Akhbar. This dual positioning complicates their claims to independence and neutral reporting.

While Al-Jazeera has received extensive scholarly attention, Al-Akhbar remains relatively understudied, particularly in comparative research. Al-Akhbar faced persistent financial and structural limitations. Its English-language e-edition (2011-2015) closed within a few years, and efforts to expand regionally were curtailed by political tensions surrounding Syria.⁵¹ This limited reach may partly explain the relative scarcity of academic research on Al-Akhbar, especially compared to Al-Jazeera, which possesses extensive bureaus, international correspondents, and programming. Moreover, with coverage focused largely on Lebanon and neighbouring countries, Al-Akhbar has maintained a narrower audience. Yet this limited scholarly engagement simultaneously renders the newspaper an important case for examining media practice in Lebanon and the entanglement of journalism, politics, and ideology.

Existing comparative studies on Al-Jazeera often focus on its relationship with Western outlets such as CNN or the BBC, or with major regional competitors such as Al-Arabiya and BBC Arabic. This study addresses this gap by applying CDA to the coverage of both Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar during the 2006 Lebanon War and the Siege of Al-Qusayr. In doing so, it examines how each outlet's reporting reflects broader ideological alignments and practices of political communication.

Critical Discourse Analysis of the Corpus

This section outlines the results of the CDA conducted on articles from Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar. The texts were examined using four analytical tools: lexical choices and labelling, intertextuality, topic and narrative foregrounding, and the ideological square. As the corpus covers two distinct political moments, the analysis is organised into two subsections. First, the CDA findings from the eight articles on the 2006 Lebanon War are presented. This is followed by an analysis of the articles concerning the Siege of Al-Qusayr in 2013.

The 2006 Lebanon War

The textual analysis reveals that both Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar establish a clear dichotomy between Hezbollah and Israel within the analysed texts. Hezbollah and its members are routinely referred to as 'the resistance' or 'resistance fighters,' while Israel is labelled as 'the enemy.' This naming frames Hezbollah as actively opposing an unjust authority and conveys a struggle against oppression and injustice.

Al-Jazeera also differentiates casualties lexically: Israeli losses are reported as 'deaths' or 'killings,' whereas Hezbollah casualties are described as 'martyrs.' These terms elevate Hezbollah's status by linking fighters to sacrifice and moral legitimacy. For example, one report states: 'It suffered seven deaths...compared to three martyrs for the resistance.'⁵² The same article

further notes that ‘the enemy’s entry into Maroun al-Ras did not affect the performance and movement of the resistance.’⁵³ Similarly, Al-Akhbar writes of efforts ‘to make way for the resistance fighters to wage a war...to destroy the ground force of the occupying army.’⁵⁴

In its labelling practices, Al-Jazeera frequently characterises Hezbollah as the ‘Islamic resistance’ or the ‘Lebanese party.’ For instance, reports highlight Israeli strikes on the residences of ‘officials in the Islamic Resistance.’⁵⁵ Such phrasing situates Hezbollah within an Islamic ideological framework while also presenting it as a legitimate national actor. By contrast, Al-Akhbar rarely assigns ideological labels to Hezbollah but consistently denotes Israel as ‘the enemy government’ or ‘the occupying army.’ One article recounts that ‘the enemy government made an operational decision, at the request of the army and the Mossad, to directly assassinate Sayyid Nasrallah.’⁵⁶ By emphasising Israel’s status as an occupying force, Al-Akhbar implicitly legitimises Hezbollah’s actions as resistance.

Turning to the level of discursive practice, both outlets rely heavily on intertextuality to frame Hezbollah’s role for their audiences in line with their editorial stance. Although they differ in their choice of sources and emphasis, overall—excluding one Al-Akhbar article discussed below—their coverage conveys strong support for Hezbollah’s actions, constructing a victorious and legitimate image of the movement as a resistance force.

For instance, Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar both report on speeches by Hezbollah’s former Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, yet each outlet emphasises different elements of his discourse. Al-Jazeera foregrounds Nasrallah’s claims regarding Hezbollah’s post-war strength, with ‘more than twenty thousand missiles’ and describes Lebanon as having become a ‘superpower in the Middle East.’⁵⁷ The channel also highlights his condemnation of Arab political leaders, particularly his accusation that governments ‘beg for peace,’ and his claim that Arab armies are ‘capable of restoring Palestine from the river to the sea.’⁵⁸ This framing underscores not only Hezbollah’s victory and military capacity but also Al-Jazeera’s willingness to platform criticism of Arab political elites, as noted in the literature review.

Al-Akhbar, by contrast, foregrounds Hezbollah’s national role and emphasises Nasrallah’s insistence on political unity rather than division. It reports his statement: ‘We want a state that preserves Lebanon, and we are looking for solidarity and coexistence, and we do not want to divide Lebanon,’ while accusing the United States of enabling one faction to dominate politically, thus intensifying internal tensions.⁵⁹ This framing aligns with Al-Akhbar’s broader effort to present Hezbollah as essential to maintaining Lebanon’s sovereignty and social cohesion.

Al-Jazeera further reinforces this discourse by incorporating reactions from several Islamic scholars who rejected a fatwa issued by Saudi cleric Abdullah Ibn Jibrin, which prohibited support for Hezbollah during the war. All the responses presented defend Hezbollah’s position. Figures such as Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, Muhammad Mahdi Akef, and Muhammad Habib cautioned against transforming the conflict into a sectarian confrontation. Akef argued that ‘some governments are trying to conceal their ability to support the resistance and to deflect attention from their alignment with Israeli aggression and American intransigence by inciting Sunni-Shi‘i tensions and claiming

that the Lebanese resistance serves Iran.’⁶⁰ This intertextual chain reframes the war as a struggle against occupation rather than a sectarian dispute.

Additionally, Al-Jazeera incorporates statements from political and intellectual figures, including Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, journalist Ibrahim Bayram, and Adnan Sayyed Hussein, a professor of international relations at the Lebanese University. These intertextual references reinforce the depiction of the conflict as a humanitarian catastrophe affecting civilians.⁶¹ For example, Hussein characterises Israeli military actions as ‘genocide’ due to the alleged use of prohibited weapons, thereby endowing the narrative of Lebanese victimhood with moral and legal authority.⁶²

Drawing on U.S. diplomatic cables, Al-Akhbar exposes Saudi Arabia’s early condemnation of Hezbollah during the conflict. One document states that ‘the time has come for these elements to bear full responsibility for their irresponsible actions,’ while the Saudi foreign minister complains that U.S. policy was ‘turning Hezbollah into heroes.’ Al-Akhbar counters this position by including reactions from religious scholar Sadiq Maliki and his students, who rejected the Saudi stance and argued that ‘Israel has overreacted.’⁶³ This sourcing reveals regional power struggles and challenges a Saudi-U.S. narrative that holds Hezbollah responsible for instability.

Al-Akhbar also features critical voices, such as Walid Jumblatt’s assertion that Hezbollah’s war ‘plunged Lebanon into the unknown.’⁶⁴ The inclusion of such criticism suggests an attempt to reflect a range of perspectives. Al-Jazeera, however, references Jumblatt through Nasrallah’s rebuttal, which demands an apology for comparing Hezbollah’s public presence to that of a totalitarian regime.⁶⁵

In terms of topic selection and narrative foregrounding, the abduction of the Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah and the subsequent outbreak of the 2006 Lebanon War were pivotal events that received extensive coverage by both Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar. A recurring pattern across the corpus is that both outlets foreground topics that sustain a resistance-centred narrative. Although both acknowledge that Israel’s military escalation followed Hezbollah’s capture of two Israeli soldiers, they consistently portray this response as unjustified and disproportionate. Al-Jazeera even presents it as premeditated, stating that ‘America and Israel took advantage of the capture of the two soldiers and launched their planned operation.’⁶⁶

Both outlets situate the war within a broader narrative of Israeli oppression and occupation rather than isolating it as a reaction to Hezbollah’s initial action. The conflict is therefore not framed solely through Hezbollah’s conduct but as part of a longer history of regional resistance. This perspective is reinforced through repeated emphasis on Israel’s use of excessive force, which in turn supports Hezbollah’s representation as a legitimate resistance movement. For example, Al-Jazeera reports that ‘the Lebanese people began to describe what was happening as terrorism similar to that practised by Israel in 1948 to displace Palestinians from their land.’⁶⁷

As discussed in the intertextuality section, Al-Jazeera further amplifies religious perspectives on the war by reporting statements from Islamic scholars, aligning the conflict with broader pan-Arab and Islamic discourses. Al-Akhbar, which places greater emphasis on exposing Western influence in the region, foregrounds geopolitical alignments through reports such as those based

on leaked Saudi documents. These articles present the war as part of a wider struggle against external domination and reaffirm a narrative of resistance to Western and regional intervention.

At the level of social practice, the ideological square is clearly visible in the analysis of both outlets, which polarise the conflict through the positive representation of Hezbollah and the negative portrayal of Israel. Consistent with the linguistic analysis, Hezbollah is cast as ‘the resistance’ while Israel is depicted as ‘the enemy’ or an ‘occupying force.’ Israeli actions are foregrounded as aggression, whereas Hezbollah’s counterattacks are framed as legitimate resistance.

What remains consistently backgrounded in both newspapers is the extent of Lebanon’s internal political divisions and the social and economic costs of the war. Armed resistance is treated as self-evidently legitimate, while the humanitarian impact and reconstruction burden receive limited attention. This framing marginalises alternative narratives centred on domestic accountability and civilian suffering.

The Siege of Al-Qusayr

Compared to Al-Jazeera’s 2006 coverage, reporting on the Siege of Al-Qusayr reflects a noticeable shift in the framing of Hezbollah. In Al-Jazeera’s examined articles, Hezbollah is no longer consistently framed as ‘the resistance,’ but rather referred to by its official name, ‘Hezbollah’ or simply ‘the Party.’ One report states that ‘Hezbollah had announced its involvement in the battle alongside the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad against the Syrian armed opposition.’⁶⁸ Although using the official name of the movement may appear neutral, this shift is significant when contrasted with the 2006 discourse. It reflects a transition in representation from a resistance movement opposing occupation to a political-military actor engaged in a regional conflict in alliance with a repressive regime. This change signals the moral and political complexity surrounding Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria. Al-Akhbar, by contrast, continues to refer to Hezbollah as ‘the resistance.’ One article asserts that ‘anyone who claims to have supported the resistance until 2000 or even until Al-Qusayr is being deceptive.’⁶⁹

Moreover, both outlets refer to anti-Assad forces using the neutral term ‘the opposition.’ Al-Akhbar reports that ‘Hezbollah has maintained a cautious and gradual approach in the Syrian landscape, at times observing and at other times mediating between opposition groups and the regime.’ Likewise, both newspapers adopt a neutral descriptor for the state actor, commonly using the phrase ‘the Assad regime.’⁷⁰ Al-Jazeera notes that ‘Hezbollah had announced its involvement in the battle alongside the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad.’⁷¹

Unlike its 2006 coverage, Al-Jazeera avoids using the label ‘Islamic resistance.’ Instead, it emphasises Hezbollah’s national identity. One report recalls that ‘Al-Tufayli was elected as the first Secretary-General of Lebanese Hezbollah.’⁷² This situates the movement within a Lebanese political context rather than an Islamic ideological framework, suggesting scepticism toward Hezbollah’s claims of engaging in a transnational religious struggle. Similar to the 2006 corpus, Al-Akhbar relies less on explicit labelling strategies in its reporting on the Syrian war. References to Hezbollah remain largely descriptive and lack strong evaluative qualifiers.

In contrast to the intertextual framing of the 2006 war, the two outlets diverge markedly in their use of sources in covering the Siege of Al-Qusayr. While Al-Akhbar seeks to defend Hezbollah's intervention, Al-Jazeera emphasises exposing the scope of Hezbollah's involvement in support of the Assad regime. One Al-Jazeera article cites Jeffrey White, a specialist in military and security affairs in the Arab Levant and Iran, who reports that Hezbollah seized several Syrian sites, including religious shrines, and transformed them into command centres for planning and launching attacks against civilians and opposition fighters.⁷³

The network also draws extensively on external voices critical of Hezbollah's role in Syria. Former Secretary-General Subhi Al-Tufayli is quoted condemning the party's intervention, warning that Iran's influence risked turning the conflict into a sectarian war and eroding the foundations of resistance itself. In a Reuters interview cited by Al-Jazeera, he states: 'With this intervention, we are going to a disgraceful place.'⁷⁴ Similarly, Al-Jazeera features religious authorities such as Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, who at a rally in Qatar denounced Hezbollah as 'the party of Satan and a supporter of the tyrant.'⁷⁵ He further claimed that 'the Shiites deceived me' and accused the party of preparing 'massacres against Sunnis.'⁷⁶

Unlike Al-Jazeera's 2006 coverage, in which Al-Qaradawi presented Hezbollah as part of a broader resistance discourse, his 2013 statements frame the movement as sectarian and deceitful. Through these intertextual references, Al-Jazeera reconstructs Hezbollah's identity from that of a resistance movement into a sectarian militia. This discursive reversal is captured in a statement by Ibrahim Al-Ahmad, spokesperson for the Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria, quoted by Al-Jazeera: 'The greatest loss suffered by Hezbollah is not only in lives and equipment, but also in its reputation and prestige, because it was a resistance party and became a militia that killed the Syrian people.'⁷⁷

Alternatively, Al-Akhbar highlights sources that endorse Hezbollah's engagement. This position is reinforced through figures such as journalist Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, who argues that Hezbollah 'had to intervene in Al-Qusayr in Syria out of self-defence.'⁷⁸ Other reports rely on the testimonies of Hezbollah fighters, who insist that they were not fighting 'to support the brutal regime against the Syrian people,' but to defend 'the axis of resistance' and prevent Syria's collapse.⁷⁹ In this way, Al-Akhbar uses intertextuality to normalise Hezbollah's intervention by situating it within a broader narrative of regional struggle and strategic necessity.

With regard to topical emphasis and narrative construction, Al-Jazeera consistently highlights Hezbollah's complicity in the Assad regime's suppression of protesters, presenting the movement as an active participant in state violence. For instance, one article cites the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights as stating that 'violent clashes took place...between regime forces supported by the Lebanese Hezbollah and opposition fighters in the countryside of Al-Qusayr.'⁸⁰ Another explicitly notes that 'Hezbollah's role has emerged as a supporter of the regime's forces since the beginning of the Syrian revolution,' adding that 'Syrian activists accused Hezbollah of participating in the suppression of peaceful protesters since March 2011.'⁸¹

Al-Jazeera also foregrounds the sectarian dimension of the conflict. It is notable that the network emphasised Yusuf Al-Qaradawi's speech calling out Hezbollah's involvement, not in

military or political terms, but through a sectarian lens. Al-Qaradawi, who had previously warned against inflaming sectarian tensions, framed the conflict within a Sunni-Shi'i divide. As a result, Hezbollah's Shi'i identity was foregrounded, in contrast to the 2006 coverage in which the movement was depicted primarily as an Islamic resistance actor opposing occupation. This shift not only widened the space for criticism of Hezbollah but also contributed to heightened antagonism toward Shi'i communities more broadly.

By contrast, Al-Akhbar constructs a counter-narrative that presents Hezbollah's intervention as both justified and necessary, situating it within a broader struggle to preserve regional stability and protect the axis of resistance. The newspaper repeatedly frames Hezbollah's involvement as a response to existential threats aimed at destabilising Syria. For instance, one article stresses that Hezbollah was protecting Shi'i shrines that had been destroyed in order to fabricate accusations against the movement of committing atrocity crimes.⁸² According to Al-Akhbar, Hezbollah fighters initially refrained from offensive action, even as members were killed while guarding these sites.⁸³ The outlet also asserts that Hezbollah was confronting the emergence of Al-Qaeda-linked cells in the region, portrayed as a threat not only to the party but to Lebanon as a whole.⁸⁴

Al-Akhbar further denounces what it describes as a double standard in the condemnation of Hezbollah's intervention. One article sarcastically remarks: 'Only Hezbollah violated Syria's sacred sovereignty.' It also broadens its critique to regional media, arguing that 'the media of the Syrian armed opposition and the March 14 camp in Lebanon waged war on Hezbollah before the party had officially taken a position on the Syrian events.' The outlet further insists that 'intervention, from both nationalist and internationalist perspectives, is not inherently immoral.'⁸⁵

Taken together, topic selection and narrative framing diverge sharply across the two outlets. While Al-Jazeera depicts Hezbollah primarily as an ally of the Assad regime and complicit in repression, Al-Akhbar portrays its involvement as reluctant but necessary, rooted in the defence of resistance and regional order.

These patterns at the textual analysis and discursive practice culminate in a reconfiguration of the ideological square at the level of social practice. In Al-Jazeera's coverage, emphasis is placed on Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict and the critical voices surrounding it. The reporting highlights accusations that Hezbollah functioned as an extension of Iranian influence and participated in suppressing legitimate protests, while offering limited space to perspectives defending its role. At the same time, violence committed by opposition forces receives relatively little attention. This selective focus reinforces a moral dichotomy in which Hezbollah is portrayed as the primary aggressor.

By contrast, Al-Akhbar's reporting frequently underscores what it presents as double standards in the criticism directed at Hezbollah, adopting a more explicitly defensive tone. Its discourse foregrounds Hezbollah's justifications while backgrounding the Syrian regime's violent response to civilian protests. In this way, the two outlets construct polarised representations: Hezbollah is negatively foregrounded in Al-Jazeera, whereas Al-Akhbar emphasises its defence and downplays critique of the regime.

Through these strategies of foregrounding and backgrounding, each outlet organises the conflict along clear ideological lines, reinforcing in-group and out-group distinctions consistent with van Dijk's ideological square.

Discussion of the Analysis

The analysis reveals a clear divergence in how Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar represent Hezbollah across the two conflicts. During the 2006 Lebanon War, both outlets predominantly framed Hezbollah positively as a legitimate resistance movement confronting Israeli aggression. The coverage situated Hezbollah within a broader struggle against occupation that extended beyond the immediate context of 2006. In this way, both outlets validated armed resistance as a justified and nationally meaningful response, particularly in light of Israel's disproportionate use of force. This framing changes markedly in coverage of the Siege of Al-Qusayr. Al-Jazeera no longer presents Hezbollah as a transnational Islamic resistance actor but rather as a military movement intervening on behalf of an authoritarian regime against civilian demonstrators. Its reporting foregrounds voices critical of Hezbollah and emphasises the party's role in state violence and civilian harm. Al-Akhbar, by contrast, sustains a legitimising frame, portraying Hezbollah's intervention as a necessary measure to preserve the 'axis of resistance' and avert regional collapse. Here, the discourse is not merely sympathetic but actively protective, reflecting the outlet's political alignment with Hezbollah's position. Van Dijk's ideological square illuminates this shift. In 2006, both outlets positioned Hezbollah within the category of 'us' and Israel within that of 'them,' producing a binary in which Hezbollah's actions appeared inherently justified. By 2013, however, Al-Jazeera reconfigures this alignment by placing Syrian civilians and opposition forces within the category of 'us' and relocating Hezbollah into the category of 'them.' Al-Akhbar, by contrast, preserves the earlier positioning, continuing to frame Hezbollah through a discourse of resistance and external threat.

Rather than merely documenting divergent coverage, this qualitative analysis demonstrates how political and financial alignment becomes operationalised in media discourse through shifts in lexical labelling, intertextual sourcing, and narrative foregrounding across different political moments. In doing so, it shows how media institutions can actively participate in constructing and withdrawing legitimacy in response to changing geopolitical alignments. Specifically, Al-Akhbar's narrative continuity is consistent with its political affiliations and editorial milieu. As discussed in the literature review, the newspaper's editor and some of its reported financial backers are associated with pro-Hezbollah and pro-Assad positions. However, the limited academic research on Al-Akhbar suggests that further empirical work is necessary to clarify the precise nature of its institutional links with Hezbollah. Al-Jazeera's shift, in contrast, parallels changes in Qatari foreign policy. During the 2006 conflict, Qatar adopted a supportive stance toward Hezbollah, proposing diplomatic initiatives after the conflict and providing humanitarian and financial assistance to Lebanon, while criticising Israeli military action, including during its term on the UN Security Council.⁸⁶ This support reoriented after Hezbollah's involvement in Syria.

Qatar aligned itself with the opposition, advocating against the Assad regime and condemning its use of force, particularly after allegations of chemical weapons deployment.⁸⁷ As Pinar Akpınar argues, Qatar's repositioning allowed it to present itself as a champion of humanitarian norms, contributing to its broader regional influence strategy.⁸⁸

Within the examined corpus, the sectarian framing in Al-Jazeera's Syrian coverage could carry significant human rights implications. By amplifying voices such as Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, who cast Hezbollah's involvement in overtly sectarian terms, the network can contribute to the elevation of sectarian identity as a primary interpretive frame. This discursive move risks reinforcing stereotyping and social exclusion, particularly vis-à-vis Shi'i communities in predominantly Sunni contexts. Rather than merely reflecting sectarian tensions, media can become a site in which they are reconstituted, shaping perceptions of vulnerability, legitimacy, and belonging. At the same time, Al-Akhbar's reporting exhibits its own form of selectivity. In defending Hezbollah, the outlet largely marginalises the humanitarian consequences of the Syrian regime's repression and Hezbollah's participation in the conflict. Issues such as mass displacement, civilian deaths, and rights violations receive limited attention within the examined corpus. This omission reflects an alternative discursive bias whereby political justification takes precedence over humanitarian scrutiny. By extension, as Lilie Chouliaraki argues, mediated visibility shapes who is recognised as worthy of care and action.⁸⁹

In essence, these findings illustrate CDA's central insight: language is not neutral but actively involved in shaping social relations and political imaginaries. Media discourse does not merely report conflict; it can construct actors, assign legitimacy, and delineate moral boundaries. In doing so, it participates in defining whose lives are rendered visible, whose suffering is acknowledged, and whose political claims are validated.

Conclusion

The portrayal of Hezbollah underwent notable shifts between the 2006 Lebanon War and the Siege of Al-Qusayr. The Critical Discourse Analysis of articles from Al-Jazeera and Al-Akhbar demonstrates that narratives of Hezbollah's identity and legitimacy are not fixed but discursively renegotiated across changing geopolitical contexts. While coverage of the examined corpus framed Hezbollah as a legitimate resistance actor during the 2006 Lebanon War, representations diverged sharply following Hezbollah's intervention in Syria. This divergence produced competing constructions of Hezbollah: one sustaining its image as a defender of resistance and the other reframing it as a political-military actor aligned with an authoritarian regime. These findings are consistent with existing scholarship that identifies alignment between Al-Jazeera's editorial stance and Qatari foreign policy. Although Al-Akhbar remains comparatively under-researched, the articles examined reveal a clear pro-Hezbollah and pro-Assad orientation.

The analysis further underscores the normative implications of such discursive practices. Within the analysed corpus, Al-Jazeera's reporting increasingly framed Hezbollah's intervention in Syria through a sectarian register, incorporating voices that condemned not only the movement

itself but also Shi'i communities more broadly. At a moment of heightened regional tension, this framing can contribute to reinforcing divisions. Al-Akhbar, meanwhile, sustained its legitimising portrayal of Hezbollah as acting in the national and regional interest, while largely marginalising the humanitarian consequences of the Assad regime's repression and Hezbollah's involvement in violence against civilians.

Taken together, these findings highlight how media discourse can function as a site in which political legitimacy is constructed, contested, and withdrawn in response to shifting regional dynamics. Hezbollah's renewed military engagement during the 2023 Gaza war further underscores the relevance of this dynamic, as its resistance-centred narratives once again gained prominence. Future research examining media portrayals of Hezbollah during the Gaza conflict would therefore offer valuable insight into how news discourse can shape political meaning, ideological alignment, and identity formation over time in the Arab region.

AI Assistance Statement

ChatGPT was solely utilised to correct grammar and British English spelling prior to Rowaq Arabi's latest AI policy update. This AI tool did not generate any original text, contribute to the development of intellectual content, or assist with translation.

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