

14<sup>th</sup> SeSaMO Conference

**PATHS OF RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

University of Turin (Italy)

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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITLE: Trajectories of 'resistance': Iran, Syria and Hezbollah in the Syrian battlefield**

**CONVENOR(S):** - Aurora Sottimano

**ABSTRACT:**

This panel seeks to explain the resilience of the so-called 'resistance front' alliance (grouping Iran, Syria and Hezbollah) and its paradoxical trajectory from a revisionist force to a counterinsurgency alliance projecting power in the broader Middle East. We will discuss the changing notions of revolution (*thawra*) and resistance (*muqawama* and *mumana'a*) as constitutive elements of both nation states and non-state actors and pillars of popular mobilisation, as well as the ongoing transformation of the 'resistance front' and the anti-imperialist camp after the launch of the war on terrorism in the Levant. To understand such transformation, we will assess the present power configuration within the 'resistance' partners against the backdrop of an ongoing re-articulation of the ideological makeup of the region.

The importance of such study is manifold: first, it allows us to map autochthonous (but hardly autonomous) form of resistance, which are neither fully independent expressions of 'civil society' nor mere imposition of a hegemonic power. This in turn leads to a problematisation of the opposition between subaltern and authoritarian actors, and calls for a deeper analysis of both the 'public sphere' and the resilience of alignments in the Levant. Moreover, the panel aims at contributing to a nuanced understanding of how the intertwined dynamics of ideological and power reconfiguration shape an emerging order in the Middle East

The general aim is to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the formation, strength and duration of regional alignments and how these dynamics shape an emerging order in the Middle East.

**CONVENORS ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

**Aurora Sottimano** is a Visiting Researcher at the Centre of International Studies (CEI-IUL), Lisbon and a Senior Fellow of the Centre for Syrian Studies, St Andrews University (UK). She taught at Leiden University (Netherlands) and at the British University in Egypt. Her research focuses on Syrian politics and regional relations in the Levant.

**PAPERS:**

## **1. 'The Other', and 'The Other, Other': Hezbollah and Iran as Forces of Resistance and Counter-Terrorism?**

**Ian Nelson**

### **ABSTRACT:**

Within the mainstream language of many western academic, political, diplomatic and media outlets, Hezbollah (the Lebanese political and Shi'ite religious Party of God) is typically categorised as a terrorist movement, and Iran as its primary military, financial, and spiritual sponsor. In the region and beyond, however, the group is often viewed through many varied lenses, notably among the global Shia communities, and the Palestinians (a majority Sunni people), many of whom consider its activities a legitimate form of resistance to the expansionism and military prowess of Israel, and its sponsor, the United States.

Hezbollah's success in forcing Tel-Aviv to withdraw from southern Lebanon in 2000 — ending a near twenty-year occupation— and ability to reduce Israel to a military stand-off in the 2006 war, have enhanced its resistance credentials. Recent events in war-torn Syria, amid Washington's unilateral shredding of the Iranian nuclear agreement, have placed Hezbollah and its allies under international scrutiny as the 'Shia arch' (Lebanon, Assad in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Bahrain) is increasingly perceived as a challenge to Saudi-Sunni hegemony and Western interests.

These manoeuvres have not gone unobserved in Beijing. With its common experience of western imperialism-colonialism, the problems of West Asia are frequently viewed in a somewhat different light. This paper explores the internal adversaries and external agents shaping the practices of regional and foreign powers, including China, with a view to evaluating whether an historical analysis can tell us anything about the likely nature and future trajectories of resistance.

### **ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

Dr **Ian Nelson** is an Assistant Professor in Transnational History and Politics, School of International Studies, The University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China. He was awarded a PhD at Durham University (Ustinov College), School of Government and International Affairs, the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies.

## **2. Trajectories of 'resistance': anti-imperialism and counter-revolutionary in Syrian domestic and international politics**

**Aurora Sottimano**

### **ABSTRACT:**

The remarkable resilience of the so-called 'resistance front' alliance (grouping Iran, Syria and Hezbollah) have been decisive in the trajectory of the Syrian uprising and projecting power in the broader Middle East. This paper will assess the paradoxical trajectory of the 'resistance front' from a revisionist force to a counterinsurgency alliance. We will focus on the changing notions of revolution and resistance, terrorism and imperialism as well as the role of state and non state actors and the dwindling voice of Syrian citizens in the ongoing conflict.

By problematising the notion of 'resistance', the artificial dichotomy between domestic and foreign policy making and the allegedly 'realist' focus on state-centered security dilemmas, the paper aims at contributing to a nuanced understanding of the intertwined dynamics of ideological and power reconfiguration that are shaping the emergent Middle East 'order'.

#### **ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

**Aurora Sottimano** is a Visiting Researcher at the Centre of International Studies (CEI-IUL), Lisbon and a Senior Fellow of the Centre for Syrian Studies, St Andrews University (UK). She taught at Leiden University (Netherlands) and at the British University in Egypt. Her research focuses on Syrian politics and regional relations in the Levant.

### **3. The suspended lives of Lebanese and Iranian Shi'i militants: Shi'i Revolutionary Subjectivity between Fear and Hope**

**Younes Saramifar**

Tracing the power configuration of the resistance partnership between Iranian regime and Lebanese Hezbollah from below demands two questions: first, how *insan ul thawra* (revolutionary human) is configured within the Shi'i resistance front and second, how *ummat ul thawra* (revolutionary nation) is envisioned. These questions lead to mapping the everyday of citizenship and temporal perceptions of Shi'i believers. These believers support armed resistance and they offer their lives and wealth for the changes that they don't foresee its coming in their life time. However, they yet believe they should resist the forces of evil- whatever that maybe-generation and after generation till the fruition of their hopes. Therefore, I ask how can anthropology account for the Shi'i resistance and desire for the revolution through the notion of fear (khauf) and hope (Rajâ).

First, I follow how the suspended life between hope and fear configures autochthonous (but hardly autonomous) forms of resistance through reconciliation hopelessness for the present time and hopefulness for a messianic future.

Second, I elaborate how such certain notion of hope shapes the everyday experiences of citizenship and militancy for those Shia believers who profess adherence to political Islam and guardianship of the Shi'i jurist.

Owing to these questions, I share the tales of my fieldwork and conversation with Iranian and Lebanese Shia militants who are active or in training to join the resistance fronts. My conversations focus how the idea of revolutionary nation has reshaped the perspective of recruited militants on nationhood and citizenry. I explain they hold different temporal and spatial approaches to revolution and accordingly how they cultivate a revolutionary subjectivity. I stress how resistance and the suspended life between fear and hope are interwoven to enact Shi'i revolutionary subjectivity and therefore, militants faithfully remain at service of the imagined revolutionary nation that awaits the messiah.