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## **From Frontline to Borderscape: The Hizbullah Memorial Museum in South of Lebanon**

During a hot day of the spring 2010 in Lebanon, the Arabic newspaper *Al-Akhbar* titled about a major social event that was taking place on a hilltop of the Southern part of the country named Mleeta. That day, on 22 May, Noam Chomsky, the famous American social scientist well known for its criticism of US imperialism, was inaugurating a brand new memorial museum built by the powerful Islamist Shi'ite party Hizbullah. In the following days, reporters and visitors were quite surprised to be given the opportunity to enter a Museum built by the most secretive party in Lebanon. In the meantime, few of them insisted on its spatial characteristic: its location on the former frontline of the Israeli occupied zone in South Lebanon. How was such a major transformation of the southern landscape made possible? And why would Hizbullah, an armed resistance group operating in great secrecy against Israel expose its power in such a way?

Several explanations have been given to the powerful position the party has reached on the Lebanese political scene since its inception in 1982 or its strategy to deploy a "resistant society" among its Shi'i constituency (Harb and Deeb, 2013). It is also possible to shift the perspective and raise the question of South Lebanon's space as a vantage ground for Hizbullah's political goals (Meier, 2015). Among them, Mleeta, as a specific aspect of its cultural policy, is blurring the boundaries between tourism, ideology and architecture as it provides a "landmark" that articulates heritage, memory, and leisure with politics, education and morality.

Mleeta can be conceived as a "borderscape", following a literature on that notion and the precise theoretical framework of Brambilla (2014) as it reformulates a distinct vision on space, territoriality, sovereignty and identity from the one provided by the Lebanese state. Different forms of cultural production that are observable on the site and explained by local designers constitute borderscaping practices. Mleeta works as an illustration of an alternative imaginary border shaped by a politicised sectarian group, a "community" in the sense of Rajaram & Grundy-Warr (2007) two authors that already

used the borderscape analysis – as well as other researchers of the Euborderscapes research project. It is thus underlining the normative dimension of bordering as well as the changing location of the border. Following the borderscapes conceptual framework, borderscaping practices are constructing (bordering) deconstructing (de-bordering) and reconstructing (re-bordering) the border which shed a light on how a frontline like Mleeta has been reinvested and set up as a memorial museum. At the nexus of politics and aesthetics, the memorial museum of Mleeta constitutes a border experience connected with a border representation: the resistance experience is here transformed into a narrative and a memory to commemorate, inscribe on the land and provide symbols in the perspective of tourism/leisure as well as education. The transformed landscape site of Mleeta works as a marker of belonging and a place of becoming thanks to its every day bordering process when thousands of people are touring the site every week.

In order to delve into the process of bordering at stake in Mleeta, two main questions may be of interest. First of all, one will need to understand how the transformation of South Lebanon's frontline into a borderscape did occur. This genealogy of the site and its deep political history should explain the relationship Hizbullah has with this land. But it also raises the issue of what the aspects inscribing Mleeta as a borderscape are, and how Mleeta links politics and aesthetics, a focus that needs to follow a more in-depth on site investigation. In the following lines, I will contend firstly that the major shift of the borderland into a borderscape was rendered possible because of the transformation of South Lebanon into a Hizbullah's military stronghold (starting end of the 1980s and followed by the Israeli withdrawal in 2000) and thanks to a new political trade-off after the Syrian withdrawal of Lebanon (2005) that confirmed its influence over the Lebanese political game. Secondly, I will show that Mleeta provides with a powerful narrative about resistance and memory thanks to its location on the former frontline of the occupied zone and an architectural vision that shapes the landscape. Both are linking education and leisure within a broader cultural policy adopted by Hizbullah that result in borderscaping practices in South of Lebanon.

This research is based on extensive fieldwork in Lebanon and particularly in Mleeta since its opening in 2010. I will draw upon ethnographic data, observations, interviews

and material collected on the site and upon other informants, researchers and secondary sources available on Hizbullah's cultural policy. To sustain my main hypothesis, I will examine in a first part the geographical and political origins of the site as part of South of Lebanon. This will require to shed light on the cultural dimension of Hizbullah's identity and to understand how the party elaborates an Islamic sphere of influence that spans over a large spectrum of its Shi'ite constituency and the related territories where they live in Beirut but most of all in South of Lebanon. Then I will provide a description of the site, its key aspects, its architectural argument and symbolic meanings that mix leisure with politics, and tourism with education. This should give a better picture of the transformation of this battlefield landscape into a memorial borderscape.

### **Emergence of Mleeta as a borderscape**

In order to understand how South Lebanon's borderland became a borderscape, one has to focus on the political history of South of Lebanon and on the process by which Hizbullah took the control of this part of the country, politically but also culturally and ideologically. But first of all, in a snapshot, the Southern border of Lebanon underwent many changes in its bordering process as it faced several military occupations since 1978. The reign of militias and the interventions of foreign states on its soil undermined the Lebanese state power to re-deploy its authority in the South, even after the Israeli withdrawal of 2000. It is only in the aftermath of the July 2006 war, and thanks to an international re-investment – with extended troops of UNIFIL – that the Lebanese army was able to patrol the South after 28 years of absence. In sum, the relationship of the state with its southern borderland is marked by a clear weakness and an original disdain for this region far from Beirut. Historically the South of the country was perceived as gathering a poor and rural population of minor political interest as their Shi'ite confession was stigmatised among the Sunni Muslim majority. Things changed with a process of Shi'a self consciousness and politicisation that started during the 1960s under the lead of an Iranian cleric Musa Sadr that tended to widen the gap between the southerners' claim for more social justice and a Lebanese state dominated by Christian Maronite leaders. The disruption with any central authority happened with the concomitant breakdown of the state, when the civil war erupted, and the transformation of the South by the Palestinian Resistance into a sanctuary (Brynen, 1990).

Hizbullah was able to grab the southern borderland and use it for its own political profit because of a strong presence of the Sh'ia in this part of the country that came to be part of its constituency and also because of the political violence that has marked the region, between brutal military occupations and strong armed resistance. In 1985, the Israeli army pulled back its troops on a "security belt" along the international border line with a 10-15 km depth on the Lebanese territory. Few month later, Hizbullah, backed by Iran, founded an agreement with Damascus to monopolize armed operations towards Israel in controlling the access to this newly created Israeli "security zone", in fact an occupied strip of land along the border of 850sq/km. The process primarily intended not to win a war against the occupants but to control the military movement and actions within the borderland by eradicating any other rival resistant group. Henk Van Houtum and Ton Van Naerssen (2002) are inspiring when they remind what ordering an area requires: "the making of a place must hence be understood as an act of purification, as it is arbitrarily searching for a justifiable, bounded cohesion of people and their activities in space". In this perspective, Hizbullah tried to implant itself more deeply in this borderland area and to enrol the population of every village in the military struggle through a re-organisation of tasks and division of work/territory (village guard units, liaison officers, informants, etc). It also spread its influence over Shi'i inhabitants of South Lebanon (the majority of the population there) whose values and cultural references fitted well with the religious-political message of Hizbullah. This message is marked by its strong affiliation with the Khomeiny ideology of *wilayat al-faqih* (the leadership of the jurisprudent) and provides with a strong religious external support and coherence.

In so doing, it tended to erect a community, defining a group bound by common perceptions of a reality, culturally, religiously and politically. Researchers identified the process over two decades as the building of an Islamic sphere (*hala islamiyya*). It is a cognitive matrix that produces a collective consciousness and common beliefs incorporated by many Shi'a of Lebanon, in the southern suburb of Beirut and in the South of Lebanon. This creates a sense of belonging, everyday performed through norms, values, behaviours (Harb, 2010) that are continually spread through resistance (*jihâd*), martyrdom and commemorations. Among these, the Ashura demonstration that

mimics the battle between Hussein, the grandson of Ali, founder of the Shi'ites, and Yazid, the Sunni caliph took a powerful position. Its ritual was reshaped by a Shi'i cleric Musa Sadr during the 1960s to celebrate a Shi'i pride instead of commemorating a defeat and a feeling of guilt. In nowadays demonstrations, Hizbullah has transformed Ashura into a political demonstration (Deeb, 2006) to mobilise the Shi'i population against any type of oppressor for the Shi'a. For Hizbullah, the character of Hussein is an ideal type that each Muslim should follow as it shows the spirit of martyrdom. Other demonstrations have been added to the calendar of mobilisation (Day of the martyr, Adha, Ramadan, Day of Jerusalem, Liberation of South Lebanon, Prophet's birthday, etc.) to sanctify a collective memory and Shi'i contemporary political history. In sum, all these demonstrations help the Party to add more symbolic capital<sup>1</sup> and promote the idea of resistance as a collective destiny.

In 1990, a new political agreement between Teheran and Damascus allowed Hizbullah to keep its weapons while other militias had to disband following the *pax syriana* that marked the end of the civil war that year. This left Hizbullah with a full political cover for its armed resistance in South Lebanon and the continuation of its military harassment of the Israeli troops along the frontline of their occupied zone. The 1990s were marked by constant skirmishes eventually turning into a war in 1993 and 1996 that affected hundred of thousands of southerners. This deadly game ended with a unilateral withdrawal of the Israeli army in May 2000. At this very moment, the Lebanese state through the voice of its President stated that the Lebanese Army would not deploy its troops along the international border for two reasons: first because of the unilateral and incomplete withdrawal of the Israeli army and second as the Lebanese state did not want to acknowledge this withdrawal by moving back to the South (Picard, 2000). In consequence, the liberated southern part of the country fell into a vacuum of power that Hizbullah immediately filled with its troops, organised and militarised.

In the meantime, Hizbullah developed borderscape practices with cultural investments in the southern borderland and through the shaping of the landscape with the initial transformation of the Khiam detention centre into a museum. Such practices translate

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<sup>1</sup> In the sense that it is a sort of self-affirmation of legitimacy through which the power makes itself known and acknowledged (Bourdieu 1980).

the broader meaning of culture (*thaqafa*) the party refers to and its clear linkage to politics. More largely it corresponds to a new market demand for Islamic entertainment that was emerging at the time. In this perspective, Mleeta that appeared in 2010 “reflects the grassroots success of the efforts of Lebanese Shi’i religious and political leaders (...) since the 1920s to forge a sectarian community consolidated around specific moral norms” (Harb and Deeb, 2011, p. 14). It is also an indirect result of closer sociability developed in the aftermath of the civil war, the city itself being divided alongside new sectarian lines long after the end of the war thus maintaining people in their own sectarian areas. The emergence of a new generation of young Shi’ites in Lebanon who grew up within such an Islamic milieu and the growing religious and political tourism industry incorporating visits to cultural Islamic sites in their tour of Lebanon (Hazbun, 2008) are also part of the development of the tourism policy of Hizbullah.

A changing balance of power occurred in 2005 when the Syrian army had to pull back and leave Lebanon under international and local pressure after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. The political investment Hizbullah made with two ministers in the first post-Syrian Council of Minister was done with the intention of securing its internal position as an armed resistance. Its military prowess during the July war in 2006 when resisting the Israeli attack reinforced its will to develop its global communication strategy to give its testimony about what had happened during that war. Two memorials appeared in Beirut southern suburb during the fall of 2006 and in Nabatiyeh (South Lebanon) in the spring of 2008. They both prefigured Mleeta in exhibiting pictures of the battlefield and destroyed Israeli weapons. But this war also shifted the balance in South of Lebanon as the UN resolution 1701 empowered UNIFIL with up to 15,000 troops for patrolling the southern borderland alongside the Lebanese army to enforce the banning of any non-state weapons. Both these events confirmed Hizbullah in its new political orientation that targeted primarily the state while the party organised its military redeployment northward of the UNIFIL influence zone (Pierre, 2008).

Mleeta as a borderscape has conditions of production that condense previous narrative attempts, an aesthetic vision and a strong sense of communication in order to spread a

sort of everyday discourse, a counter-narrative towards the 2006 war. In this strategic perspective, the location chosen to build the museum is a key aspect of its identity and of the message. As Johnson (1995) reminded, the geographic location of a museum or memorial has a direct link with the message this site is providing. This dimension is clearly confirmed by one of the public relation officers in Mleeta appointed by Hizbullah:

‘We decided to build it (Mleeta) here so it appeared far more credible as a resistance museum: the visitors are immediately confronted with reality, embedded in the original context of war zone. It is much closer to the real thing’ (Rami Hasan, April 2012).

The former front line on which Mleeta has been erected, for the purpose of its political message of resistance, belongs to a hidden or silenced border drowned in the big story of the nation-state after “the Liberation of the South” in 2000. Nowhere else than in Mleeta is the location of this former line separating the Lebanese state from the Israeli occupied zone so clearly known and highlighted. In other words, Hizbullah is providing there with a historical narrative – in a country that lacks any common and unified contemporary history – and is taking advantage of its political control over the South and its high legitimacy towards the local population to write an alternative history of South of Lebanon. According to Abu Mustapha, the Director of the site, the general framework of Mleeta found its motivation in the will to tell a story, the one of the Islamic resistance:

‘We have faced many criticisms with our armed resistance, some people arguing we are terrorists or thieves but all of them are writing and explaining reality from their own perspective and belief. Starting from there and after all the sacrifices we made, we decided to appear in another way, to show worldwide how we lived here, how we fought and died, in sum what resisting means. The world must know that’ (Abu Mustapha, July 2011).

The narration of Mleeta’s story starts with the slogan and the logo that everyone can see/read over the entrance gate and on the leaflet presenting the site: ‘Mleeta: where the Land speaks to the Heavens’ (*hikâyat al-‘ard lil-samâ*). It explains that the land here is full of narrations of fighting against the enemy (Israel) and tells the story to the

heavens where the martyrs of Mleeta are. In this sense, Mleeta could be defined as a sacred place because of the many lives that were taken away during its 15 years of resistance as a local stronghold for Hizbullah. Mleeta's logo represents the sparrow hawk, a local bird that symbolises the spirit of the fighters thanks to its steadfastness, its agility and resistance. In line with it, the catchphrase for Mleeta is "a touristic site on resistance" (*ma'lam siyahî an muqâwama*). The leaflet is clear about the former frontline location of the museum and stresses the key role Mleeta's location played in protecting the northern area from an Israeli further invasion. It also underlines the entrance point Mleeta was for fighters to access the occupied zone and mount armed operations against the occupiers, thus acting as a "particular school of faith and jihad". The presentation also explains the central role the site is playing in the promotion of tourism in South of Lebanon and the surrounding villages that suffer from a chronic lack of interest from the Lebanese State. Mleeta is also presented as acting for the promotion of a natural environment and for raising a concern for nature and its ecologic environment among visitors.

### **Aesthetic politics: the blurring boundaries of Mleeta**

The site of Mleeta is located in a mountainous landscape, east of Sidon, in the highlands of Iqlim al-Tuffah (altitude of approx 1,350 meters above sea level). The exhibition covers 60,000 square meters, mainly in the open air, of which only 4,500 square meters are built. The entrance stretches on a long climbing road with flags of Lebanon and Hizbullah on both sides until one reaches the 'Square' that allows people to gather in groups to start the visit under the lead of a guide in one of the multiple languages now available (Arabic, French, English, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, Farsi). Most of the time the visit starts with the viewing of two movies in a hall with approximately 150 seats. There usually is a first short movie that presents the building of the site of Mleeta with the voice of Hassan Nasrallah and a second movie narrating the history of Hizbullah's confrontation with Israel. Both are in Arabic, under titled in English.

### ***Fig. 1 should be put here***

Title: A destroyed tank in the 'Cemetery of the Israeli army'.

Then the visit proper starts outside, in the middle of a wild nature, with the 'Abyss', a 3,500-square meter round art installation, few meters below the 'Square', showing Israeli tanks and jeeps or helicopters in a so called 'Cemetery of the Israeli army' (whose acronym letters are spelled out in Hebrew in large concrete blocks). The tour continues along a 250-meter 'Path' running up and down the hill, in the middle of trees, exhibiting life-size figures of combatants in their everyday activities on the front (with different weaponry, treating the wounded, carrying supplies). One can find spots along the trail marked with red flowers where a fighter died in martyrdom. Symbolically the 'Path' starts at a small place where Abbas Mussawi, the former General-Secretary of Hizbullah, used to sit and pray and ends with a spot where a fighter's story is narrated on a poster (translated in Farsi) to illustrate the devotion to the cause. In the middle of the "Path" one enters a handmade tunnel (named the 'Cave') dug by fighters over three years to protect from Israeli raids. Inside the "cave", several rooms open along the tunnel - a prayer room, a command centre with maps (and recordings of fighters' voices) and a kitchen. At the end of the tunnel, the visitors reach 'The lookout' that offers a surrounding panorama on the western side of the hill (to the Sea). This platform allows people to gather before climbing the 'Path' upway along the 'Line of fire' to the 'Sojouk Buncker' (sic) where a heavy machine gun points in the direction of a former Israeli position above a hill. Then comes the 'Liberation Field', a garden that showcases several types of weapons used by the Resistance during the 2006 war and a memorial place where one can listen to the Bint Jbeil speech that Hassan Nasrallah gave after the Liberation of the South in May 2000.

Then visitors find their way to the 'Exhibition center', a 350-square meter centre showcasing Israeli military equipment and devices won over by the fighters as well as billboards and posters on the walls exposing Hizbullah's knowledge of the structure of the Israeli army, detailing the chain of command, each IDF battalion, and with satellite imagery and topographic coordinates of potential military targets in Israel. To end the tour, the guide suggests to make a last effort (*jihâd*) and climb up the 'Martyrs Hill' to discover/enjoy a large floral landscape and a vantage point on the surrounding mountains, among them Mount Safi, a strategic rock held by Hizbullah and protected by Mleeta key location along the former front line.

Few significant evolutions and transformations have occurred on the site since its inauguration. Most of the efforts focused on providing visitors with some comfort with a growing choice of multilingual guides, the building of a huge parking space and a restaurant (in 2012) to face the massive number of visitors (an average of 47,000 per week in 2010) with a total of 1,2 million visitors after 18 months of opening<sup>2</sup>. Although the access to the site is quite uneasy– several indications have been put on roads to guide the tourists as roads are not all in good condition – many visitors from Lebanon and Arab countries, Iran as well as European countries and the US are coming, the first two categories representing approximately two-thirds of the total number of visitors<sup>3</sup>. The beginning of the war in Syria reduced the number of Iranian visitors that used to visit both Lebanon and Syria. In the perspective of an increase in visitors, Hizbullah succeeded in securing the classification of Mleeta as a site promoted by the ministry of Tourism and it was granted with its official label by mid-June 2011 as soon as the new Miqati government was appointed. It is worth noting that the new Minister of Culture visited Mleeta on 1 July and was received by a Hizbullah MP at the entrance of the site. The official label of the Ministry of Tourism appeared on the new leaflets available on the site that very summer and granted Mleeta with a state support although it is managed by Hizbullah only.

The memorial museum of Mleeta appears as a part of a general exhibition strategy that was set up at the time to spread Hizbullah's cultural narrative in the post-2006 war context and to reach the local youth as well as Lebanese citizens in general but also foreigners. As explained by Mleeta designers, they surveyed many different museums and memorials around the world and they claim their inspiration referred to the Resistance's own experience that led to a unique museum. This 'difference' is linked to the main objective of the museum, as explained by Mleeta's head architect: 'the aim was to build a unique museum that makes a strong impact on the visitor (Hajj Adil, quoted by Harb & Deeb, 2011: 24). In fact, Mleeta is part of a contemporary trend of memorial museums that tend to favour "minimalist and abstract design over the grandiose and authoritative; de-centered and incommensurable space over that which is central and iconic; bodily visitor experiences that are sensory and emotional rather than visual and

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<sup>2</sup> This number was available on the Mleeta website in 2012. See <<http://www.mleeta.com>> [Accessed 5 october 2014].

<sup>3</sup> Interview of Hizbullah's chief of public relations committee in Mleeta, April 2012.

impassive; interpretive strategies that utilize private, subjective testimony over official historical narratives; salt over stone” (Williams, 2007, p. 3).

In line with such a museographic trend that eases the combination of tourism with education, Hizbullah is able to define a personal vision of history and memory and it make it work as a principle of perception largely known and diffused as it refers to people’s relationship to their land in South of Lebanon. In an insightful reflection on bridging geography with anthropology inspired by the seminal work of Don Mitchell, Mona Harb and Lara Deeb (2011) suggest to see landscapes as built environments as well as representations. Following this theoretical framework, one can analyse the party’s action as constructing culture through and within space thanks to a production of landscape with materials, texts, sounds and symbols. It can disseminate its vision of the world and penetrate all “non-political” sectors of the society thanks to its understanding of culture and the specialised service of the Lebanese Association for the Arts (LAA), an association dedicated to Hizbullah’s conceptual cultural work.

LAA is playing a significant role in the ordering of the social and natural environment at the heart of the current process of codification of behaviour and values. It gathers designers, graphic artists and advertising specialists producing exhibitions and media coverage narrating the ideals of the “resistance society”. It contributes in shaping a myriad of signs within the environment of Hizbullah during meetings, celebrations or simply with regular billboards, flags or advertisements for social events along the subway in the Southern part of the country. This *mise en scène* of the legitimisation of the party also takes the form of multilingual leaflets, tour guides and the shaping of the landscape with works of architecture. One of the branches of the organisation is responsible for the building of large-scale structures such as the memorial garden in Marun al-Râs on the border and of course on the site of the memorial museum of Mleeta.

Among other aspects, the architecture of the buildings reveals a political discourse. The Mleeta online presentation underlines the concern of Hizbullah for the environment as the buildings fit quite well within the natural surroundings with their bunker-style low-rise concrete structures, their rather discrete look, as they are painted in natural colours, and their sharp lines and slanted roofs. They perfectly translate the military

ambiance, as explained by the head architect interviewed by Mona Harb and Lara Deeb (2011, p. 25):

‘(...) We brought in the military by using diagonal walls, tilted ceiling, irregular openings, deep windows... We wanted to show how architecture can challenge straight lines, just like resistance challenged the enemy’.

One of the LAA conceptors echoes this alternative aspect of the project when highlighting its anti-imperialistic narration:

‘You can control people by narrating a specific heritage and memory. This is what the Israelis do. We are fighting their culture by providing a counter-culture. We want to fix our memory through architectural and design language. Few people read books but many people come to visit a building, a museum or a heritage site’ (cited in Harb & Deeb, 2011: 29).

Symbols are also readable in the general orientation of the site which is in the direction of Mecca. In the East, the highest point (Martyrs Hill) is described as the sunrise of the Resistance while the West, the lowest point of Mleeta (The Abyss) designates the fading star of occupation and tyranny.

From the visitors’ viewpoint, Mleeta is mixing leisure and tourism with education and cultural references. In Mleeta, one can notice people gathering in groups, families as well as scout camps or school classes touring the site with a guide. Following one of them is a direct way to understand how leisure is taking place within the Hizbullah Islamic sphere (*halâ Islâmiyya*) that conveys narratives, values and education. The latter aspect was underlined by Mleeta’s Director as a key dimension of the site:

‘Mleeta is a school for the generations to come. We are actually writing History, reading History, preserving and keeping the memories of the combatants (*mujahidin*) serving as lessons for the future’ (Abu Mustapha, July 2011).

In this perspective, the two introductory movies that are presented to any visitor of the site are revealing clear shortcuts and the vision of the world they promote. While the first movie is just describing the effort made by thousands of people to build the

memorial museum of Mleeta, the second offers a striking vision of history through the lens of Hizbullah's resistance. In approximately seven minutes, this movie suggests several dates that appear as significant events. Symbols of oppression are first selected in the narration of history from the viewpoint of Hizbullah and not from South Lebanon's perspective: when 1948 is mentioned as Israel occupied Palestine, nothing is said or shown about the arrival of more than 100,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The calendar jumps up to 1978 – obviously avoiding 1967 Six-Day war and the Palestinian Resistance – to display images of the 'Litani Operation' Israel launched in South Lebanon to create a buffer zone, but again without any reference to the Palestinian guerrilla against which Israel was fighting. After the dark years of oppression with the two deadly Israeli military operations during the 1990s, the narration shifts to symbols of victory starting with the Israeli withdrawal in 2000. Prisoner release, celebrations and martial speeches towards Israel come together in a quick montage with recordings of bombings and missiles launched by Hizbullah's fighters. In fact, historical facts are distorted or incomplete as no mention is made in Mleeta of any other armed resistance, neither Lebanese (from the Communist one to the Shi'i Amal one), nor Palestinian (be they secular, Islamist, pro-Syrian or Arafatist). This hegemony intends to compete at a transnational level with other memories and history, namely the Zionist history supported by the US and it can be read as a response to holocaust museums.

On the exterior route nature itself seems part of a powerful organisation of signs and representations: the concern for the environment with the great value and care put in the building of the park-like ambiance is linked to the military actions that took place here, thanks to the symbolic value of the soil, a land that is defined as 'the cradles of the soldiers' and holding 'very precious memories'. Those terms are words used by Shaykh 'Ali Dahir, a Shi'i religious member of Hizbullah when he commented the physical and symbolic relationship between nature and *résistance* (Harb & Deeb, 2011: 27). Symbolic meanings are dispatched along the visit and are working as 'circuits of memory' (Akçali, 2010); physical and visual signs are stimulating people's imagination and conveying a collective identity. Although the abyss seems to display a quite clear message with the Hebrew letters in concrete blocks reading the acronym of the Israeli defence forces, 'Tsahal', the guide mentions that the pillars which support the path that turns around

the abyss look crooked and thus describe Israeli battalions' weakness. During the tour, the guide also comments the fact that 'the path around the Abyss symbolises a hurricane, the Resistance, and the Israeli army will be destroyed in the eye of the storm' (Mohammed, July, 2011). He details for visitors the meaning of an enemy tank stuck in a huge net that symbolises a spider web, a recurrent metaphor from the Coran used by the General-Secretary of Hizbullah, Hassan Nasrallah, in his speeches when he referred to Israeli power 'fragile as a spider web (*beit al-'anqabut*)'. In the cave, a prayer room used by mujahidins during the war is decorated with huge portraits of the Imam Khomeiny, the leader of the Shi'ite Revolution in Iran (1979) and with Ali Khamenei his successor. In such an environment, Shi'a believers as well as southerners are feeling like at home with references, weapons, place and resistance discourse towards Israel. It is not rare for people to come and visit the site several times as a meaningful touristic place that provides a familiar political message in an Islamic environment where a dress code is suggested at the entrance in order to behave within a moral Islamic order. For many visitors as well as for the organisation team, Mleeta works as a continuous narrative that can be renewed on a regular basis.

## **Conclusion**

In this attempt to decode the meaning of the memorial museum of Mleeta, the borderscape concept seemed to provide with a powerful analytical tool. It shed the light on the alternative narrative Mleeta propose about the southern borderland in Lebanon. Thanks to this tool, we have been conveyed to focus on the bordercaping practices that are underlying the process of transformation of space – de-bordering to re-bordering – as well as the form of its transformation. The aesthetic of the Mleeta project have thus been examined as a strong cultural production shaped by a well-built reflection and conceptualization linking ideology with architecture in the perspective of tourism as well as education. The alternative representation of the border has thus spanned symbols and narrative of 'resistance' that found physical translation inside the memorial/museum with the different locations and shows displayed along the tour. The narrative provided by Mleeta is providing with a local narrative of the struggle against occupation from the perspective of Hizbullah that obviously shaped and managed the whole process from its conceptualization to its building. One of the main goal the party

unveiled in Mleeta refers to its strong will to spread its vision of its 'resistance' to make people become familiar with its vision, feel and experience of belonging thanks to the tour and thus contribute to an everyday bordering process of south of Lebanon.

According to Williams, (2007) the issue for memorials is to deal with the expectation of being memorable, unique and iconic with some metaphorical visual ties to the event and at the same time to accommodate messages that support commemoration amongst the populace at large, 'which often means upholding conservative values of national tradition and religious salvation'. Mleeta fits in this description as it plays with the uniqueness of its location, including clear visual references and known events and values that refer to this "Islamic milieu" where the memory of martyr combatants (*shahid*) clearly refers to the land itself that tends to be sacralised. Beyond a conventional wisdom saying we should preserve markers of what was glorious and destroy evidence of what is reviled, memorial museums can blur the lines and play on both registers. In this sense, Mleeta provides with a spatial sense of memory, in other words, a borderscape.

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