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Enchanted by the AK-47: Contingency of body and the weapon among Hezbollah militants

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Abstract

The constant presence of various forms and makes of firearm has turned it into an everyday item among some Lebanese. For Hezbollah militants, the AK-47 is an object of humour and fun despite its lethal potential. The weapon is saturated with representative qualities – both material and semiotic, so the author explores its materiality as a crucial nodal point from which to sketch the difficult terrain of subject–object relationship in the life of Lebanese Shi'i Hezbollah militants. He seeks to identify the material culture of a weapon that consolidates myths, reifies identities, stages propaganda and advertises threats. With this in view, the author follows the AK-47 to explore its 'enchancing' qualities and speak of the relationship it forms with a militant's body. He locates the body of militants between three questions: what does the AK-47 signify, how does it arrive at that signification, and finally, how have its materiality and dynamic physicality made it the weapon of choice?

Keywords

embodiment, Hezbollah, intensity, material semiosis, subjectivity, weapon

Nothing was more profitable ... the AK-47, or Kalashnikov. It's the world's most popular assault rifle. *A weapon all fighters love*. An elegantly simple 9-pound amalgamation of forged steel and plywood. It doesn't break, jam, or overheat. It'll shoot whether it's covered in mud or filled with sand. It's so easy, even a child can use it; and they do. The Soviets put the gun on a coin. Mozambique put it on their flag. Since the end of the Cold War, the Kalashnikov has

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become the Russian people's greatest export. After that comes vodka, caviar, and suicidal novelists. (*Lord of War*, 2005, emphasis added)¹

The life of the weapon attracted my attention to *Harb Tammuz*, the war of summer 2006, between Hezbollah and Israel. The war concluded with the destruction of Beirut's suburbs and an exchange of prisoners. Samir Kuntar was one of the prisoners on whose return Hezbollah insisted. As part of the celebration for his return to the resistance movement, Samir was gifted a weapon by Hassan Nasrallah, the current leader of Hezbollah. He opened the gift and kissed the weapon in front of journalists to indicate his jubilant return to the resistance against the enemy. Later in 2010, Nasrallah also presented a weapon to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during the latter's diplomatic visit to Lebanon. Ahmadinejad was given a grand welcome and the Hezbollah leader gave him a weapon that he claimed was a trophy of the war. I begin with these examples to point out how the weapon is appropriated as an essential icon in the life of the Hezbollah resistance movement in all its generality and particularity – not to mention the abundance of weapons in the everyday life of the Lebanese who do not support Hezbollah.

The weapons are more than an object in the mayhem and chaos of wars, violence and transgression in Lebanon and the Middle East in general. They not only take part in the performance of what I call 'theatres of war' (Saramifar, 2015) but they are also the theatres' performing elements. The weapons find a life of their own during these performances and refuse to be merely a cold piece of metal. The constant presence of the weapons and their roles in ongoing theatres of wars bring me to question how the relationship between the weapons and militants contributes to the perpetuation of violence and the formation of the 'other'. However, I focus on the material culture that evolves around firearms via an ethnography of the AK-47 in the resistance movement to explain how the relationship between militants and an object associated with violence can highlight the boundaries that emerge around notions of life. In other words, I propose to approach the question of object–subject relationship through materiality to understand how the blurring borders of subject and object influence and orchestrate the ways of violence and militancy. My approach proceeds by seeking *the poetics of materiality* within the limits of object–subject relationship before asking what are the socially constructed meanings of an object for the subject. This approach concentrates on the ontological trajectory that the AK-47 forms with militants regardless of significations and histories that affiliate them with the weapon.

The ethnography presented here is the result of almost two years of fieldwork in Lebanon and specifically in the Hezbollah training camps in the southern regions of the country. My journey began among young Hezbollah militants living and training at two military compounds in northern and central provinces of Iran. The friendly warmth and jubilant soul of Haj Hassan Al-Laquis, who was assassinated later in 2013,² encouraged me to explore the life of Hezbollah militants in their homeland, Lebanon. However, warmth and friendliness did not at first gain me any access to training camps. I spent six months travelling between various Hezbollah networks in Beirut, Nabatieh, Mleeta, Sidon and Tebnine to strengthen my links and friendships that I had formed in Iran. My curiosity and the efforts I made did not bring me closer into the network of ideology and Shi'i militancy, but rather I discovered new aspects of my friends' life. They introduced

me to local gun dealers and marijuana growers who resisted Hezbollah's politics and ideology. My friends who were actively engaged with Hezbollah remained friendly with their marijuana-grower friends, despite the fact that Hezbollah constantly harassed marijuana growers across the southern regions.

I was immersed in a network of realities that revealed the contradictions that lived alongside each other. The contradictions coexisted as long as weapons remained in holsters and triggers remained untouched. I was able to find my way into the camps after I was wounded at a shooting range by a friend fooling around. As an apology, he introduced me to some people of higher rank who assessed my intentions and allegiances. Their trust in me has remained constant until today, as I have not written a single line without checking it with them and they have remained anonymous and will vanish into the affective unsaid of my anthropologic-self.³ I have pursued my questions not only by way of observation but also by learning how to use some of the weapons as well as by attending religious ceremonies exclusive to the trainees and militants.

First, I will introduce the AK-47 and examine how its form, ergonomic and material configuration have turned it into the weapon of choice. Then, I briefly introduce Hezbollah and everyday life of firearms among Lebanese. Finally, I describe the contingency of militants' body and weapons through conversations and observations in the training camps to address how subject and object configure each other in the relationship embedded within the realm of materiality regardless of socio-political significations and historical meaning. By applying such notions, I highlight the people and their micro-histories, their ways of configuring subjectivity, enacting agencies and finally everyday realities that determine politics in different ways from semiotic impositions by ideologies and power apparatus. Therefore, I trace how militants craft their subjectivities within the material culture of militancy during their training regardless of histories that shape the AK-47's significations to find out how the signifier is imagined by militants and what are the micro-histories and relationships that inform the larger histories and shape the act of war. The relationship between the militant and the weapon *in itself* exposes how the material configuration of the AK-47 and its bond with the militant contribute to the perpetuation of violence, the making of 'the other' from enemies and the determination of whose life can be taken.

The hard metal thing!

It is not difficult to trace the regime of signification and symbolic qualities of the AK-47. Its semiotic quality extends from Russia to the corners of Africa. It features in the logo of its production company Kalashnikov Concern, formerly known as Izhmash, and also appears on the flag of the Republic of Mozambique. A monument in the shape of an AK-47 commemorates the soldiers who fell in the battle of Ismailia (1973) on the west bank of the Suez Canal in Egypt. The *Small Arms Survey* presents 'Central Asia Kalashnikov culture' by stating 'in these regions it simply would look odd for a man to be seen carrying anything other than a Kalashnikov' (Batchelor and Krause, 2002: 70). However, the survey predicted incorrectly that 'The Kalashnikov era is likely to end in the next few years, leading to a transition from the key types of small arms produced during the Soviet [era]' (p. 24).

There is another aspect to significations and symbolic standings. One should keep in mind that a militant/combatant/warrior/soldier is the consumer of the weapon, regardless of the significations and fables drawn around the AK-47. He relates to this work of genius and lethal object through a practical approach of consumption. It is not a coincidence, a worldwide conspiracy or merely an effect of the political economy of East–West blocks from the Cold War era that a particular weapon is used by almost every militia group. In addition, the AK-47 is not only an object elevated to the level of a Freudian ‘*das ding*’ or Lacanian ‘*objet petit a*’ (Lacan, 1998: 67–105); it is an assault rifle that privileges its user with certain ergonomic features. Militiamen prefer it to other weapons that might be issued to the militants, such as the M-4 carbine or the M-16. There are many other assault rifles in a similar price range to the AK-47 and to which access carries similar risks for the weapon suppliers in Lebanon and Syria. ‘The AK-47 is preferred’, Graves-Brown (2007: 299) states, because ‘the design and its various refinements, its simplicity, reliability and ease of maintenance have fitted [it] ... to all kinds of socio-cultural contexts.’

I shall explore this aspect briefly in order to elaborate on how the AK-47 reaches the network of signification beyond the category of Hezbollah militants. Militia and guerrilla fighters are known to be the (major) consumers of automatic rapid firearms, and their manners of consumption should also be taken into account. Militia fighters prefer the AK-47 because of its size, technical utility as a killing tool, reliability, ease of use, the vast market supply of ammunition and its mechanical simplicity, which makes it easy for its user to maintain and repair. This particular weapon was invented when the West was trying to take the lead in the nuclear arms race while Stalin’s USSR concentrated on the miniaturization of the rapid firearm. Through long experience, militia and guerrilla fighters have realized the capabilities of this assault rifle, forcing the enemy to recognize its importance, too. This recognition could be considered as acknowledging the credibility of the militia and guerrilla fighter in the eyes of the other. Such acknowledgment can be seen in the attempts of the opposing sides to design or buy a weapon for their armies that can match the AK-47 carried by the guerrillas. The AK-47’s capabilities have forced Western policy-makers and statesmen to ignore their patriotic stance against Soviet-designed weapons and purchase it for their own armed personnel. For example, the American police force signed its first contract for Siaga 12 – the improved model of the AK-47 for modern combat – with Kalashnikov Concern during the 2012 Shot Show, which is the largest professional shooting and outdoor trade show in the world.⁴

The AK-47’s ergonomics influences the intensity of its physical merging and union with the body of the combatant. First, one may note the weapon’s recoil force, popularly known as kick-back. It might be appropriate, for instance, to compare the attitude of trainees towards rapid firearms like Heckler and Koch’s G-3, the old-time rival of the AK-47, and the M-16, with the AK-47. The intensity of the kick-back of the G3 and the M-16 to the shoulders and elbows can be tolerated when bullets are fired one by one, but their kick-back is too painful to bear for more than a few minutes in the burst fire mode, when a complete magazine can be fired by a single touch of the trigger. In contrast, the AK-47 fires smoothly in both modes and is easier on the shooter’s upper body. Second, the AK-47’s length is designed to match arm length, which makes it a weapon that is more versatile to carry and manoeuvre than other automatic assault rifles. The weapon hangs in

line with the user's body and he can carry it comfortably, making it less of a burden. Thus, it also becomes possible to experience the weapon as a body-extension – ergonomically speaking – from which the militants can disconnect at will. These are two clear reasons for combatants to connect with the materiality of the weapon, regardless of the multitude of meanings and associated significations that I will describe in the next section.

Exploring the materiality and physicality of the AK-47 assists us in recognizing the cognitive relationship that the combatant, as its user, has with the gun, beyond the symbolic order and any regime of signification. The weapon forms a relationship with the body – from the perspective of an unspecified body – which overwhelms the subject and challenges the corporeal borders of the self. These corporeal borders are realized every time the weapon connects and stimulates; the threat is accompanied by the realization, which is a reminder to maintain these borders and is part of the process of 'maintenance-through-transgression' (Ahmed, 2005: 102). Combatants maintain and re-remember their bodies through their reactions to the weapon's transgressions against them, such as stiffening muscles against the recoil force or finding a posture suitable to support the weight of the weapon. Such transgressions become constitutive within the corporeal subjectivity that a combatant configures while training. Every occurrence of a transgression stimulates that maintenance in the combatant, who re-remembers his corporeality alongside the weapon.

The recoil force of the weapon is the prime example of the stimulation of and transgression against the combatant's corporeality. I noticed, for example, that experienced combatants with rifle-training experience have a different bodily response to the command 'right dress'; a rifle-trained combatant senses the usual tension in the anterior head of the shoulder as well as the tension in the lateral part and in the long head of the triceps brachii muscles because of the weapon kick-back experienced during shooting training. Clearly, a body subjected to long and arduous systematic training tries to produce responses in line with past stimulations and transgressions. Similarly, Warnier (2001: 21) gives the example of a Liberian child soldier impacted by the Kalashnikov:

In daily bodily practices and motricity, he will be fused with his inventory of material culture ... The gun and the 4x4 Toyota we look at can be taken as signs ... [but] when they are in daily use for months on end ... they do not only make sense as signs, but rather as part and parcel of a [corporeal] subjectivity.

The materiality of the AK-47 and its open source design did not bring its designer financial prosperity, but its legendary status and its high symbolic potency that emerged from its specific materiality have played a role in the material culture of militancy and combats. Israel discontinued the use of the Belgian-made FN FAL rifles after the Six-Day War of 1967. It recognized the capabilities of the AK-47 in harsh climates and began the production of the Galil assault rifle, whose design is similar to the AK-47 with some slight modifications. Christopher Chivers (2010: 12) writes that the importance that this specific assault rifle has achieved in asymmetrical guerrilla warfare makes

arms-control specialists and students of conflict study look at the price of the AK-47 ... to determine the degree to which destabilised lands are awash in small arms and the state of risk.

When the prices rise, public anxiety is considered high. When they sink, the decline can indicate a conflict is ebbing.

My safety is always on

I never saw Labib without his sidearm. He was my first connection with Hezbollah militants and their recruitment process in Beirut. He had left training camps and begun working in the recruitment post because his body could not tolerate any more injuries or physical pressure. He carried a gun every day and everywhere because he could not imagine himself being a warrior for Hezbollah without it. Hezbollah is an officially registered political party that contests elections and participates in all democratic layers of the Lebanese state. However, it is not apologetic about its armed faction. Its leaders and spokespersons emphasize *muqawama* (resistance) and salute their armed fighters when they parade in the streets of Beirut. The constant presence of the weapon has turned it into an everyday image in the networks of realities that encircle Hezbollah and it even has an element of fun attached to it, despite its lethal potentialities. I could see the presence of that humour in the play on the word 'safety' that Labib used to avoid answering my questions about his sense of security. Whenever I asked what made him feel safe in the back allies of Beirut suburbs, Hezbollah or his weapon, he would say, 'My safety is always on', but it was never clear whether he meant the safety catch on his handgun was on or whether his sense of being safe was active.

The weapon extends itself in the everyday life of the Lebanese regardless of their age, creed or political allegiances. Celebratory gunfire has become a necessary part of religious and familial festivities, despite the frequent casualties.⁵ The weapon has been a constant fact of life in Lebanon since the civil war and today some capitalize on its iconic presence. Yousef Ibrahim opened a restaurant in one of the war-torn neighbourhoods of Beirut and named it 'Buns & Guns'. He serves 'terrorist meals' and 'RPG' and 'Kalashnikov' burgers are on his menu. The staff wear military uniform and sandbags fortify the entrance. An entrepreneur has ordered children's toys (from Chinese manufacturers) that are marked with Hezbollah's insignia and colourful images of *muqawama*. The toy box contains a collection of firearms, mortars and figurines of resistance fighters. The weapon has become not only a marketing idea for business but also an accepted part of a man's attire, even in places of worship. I grew up and have lived among Shi'i believers but I was amazed to see well-groomed young men line up for prayers in Al-Husseini mosque with the bulge of their handguns under their clothes clearly visible. A curious observation and continuous counting showed the popularity of the Colt handgun among them. And it is not only Shi'i youths hanging out in Hezbollah neighbourhoods who open-carry their weapons. Maronite Christians also carry their Glocks to church, although concealed, while Shi'i youths generally open-carry their Colts when they line up for prayers in the southern suburbs.

The firearm is saturated with representative qualities – both material and semiotic. It is a crucial nodal point within an extensive regime of signification disseminated by Hezbollah and its allies, whether the Lebanese Free Patriotic Movement or some international entities. The regime consolidates myths, reifies identities, stages propaganda and advertises threats. With that in view, I follow the AK-47 to explore its 'enchanted'

qualities and speak of the relationship it forms with the militant's body. Mikhail Kalashnikov's product of genius is the weapon that Hezbollah issues to its armed personnel and I try to unmask the signification and symbolism of the AK-47 with regard to its meaning-making and materiality. I deliberately stress its materiality without focusing on the politics that has made the AK-47 the weapon of choice for many resistance movements across the world. This is not to dismiss the larger histories that are infused into the signifier under discussion here, but a choice to look at the specific interactions that subjects form with an object, regardless of its histories.

The fundamental step in the relationship between militants and the AK-47 is embedded in the materiality that emerges during the training. At the early stage of training, militants form a bond with their weapon without any knowledge of the histories of the Cold War era that made Soviet-made weapons easily available in the Middle East and the Central Asia. The histories and socio-political significations remain added embellishments and tales that compete with the bond that is formed between body and weapon. In addition, one should consider that the AK-47 has proved its capabilities via a material configuration that is able to become contingent to militants' bodies despite other weapons available to them. The habits, physical comfort and ease of use of the AK-47 barely imply any socio-political history but rather they bring forward materiality and the ontological trajectory of the subject-object relationship to our attention. Therefore, I trace this relationship without including larger histories to make explicit how individual subjectivities constitute the perpetuation of violence and craft poetics around objects regardless of the politics that delivered the objects to them. I ask what the AK-47 signifies, *how* it has achieved such signification in the camps and finally, how its materiality and dynamic physicality have made it the weapon of choice. These questions are not framed to discern any construct but rather to elicit how a selected point of inquiry – the AK-47 – yoyos between the questions and how it is 'enacted into being' (Mackenzie et al., 2007).

The AK-47 becomes enacted and performative in the realm of militants' subjectivity not necessarily by adding intentionality in that realm but rather by intensifying specific aspects of their subjectivity; the weapon intensifies their display of othering and their pleasures of violence and influences the contours of their existence. I point out here that my inquiry into the materiality and material culture associated with the AK-47 is limited to what I learnt about it from the militants and the classes I attended alongside them in the training camps. I restrict myself within the material imaginaries that they configure around the weapon, which contribute to their experiences of the AK-47's materiality. I have done so in order to trace the material semiotics of the AK-47 according to a specific platform, not to reach a generalizing principle about militancy and militants' behaviour. However, my approach may also inform the larger question of the subject-object relationship and how it contributes to perpetuation violence. Graves-Brown (2007: 291) draws a larger picture of material culture associated with the Kalashnikov by way of the history of warfare and 'technological lineage of the machine gun'. I limit the ontology of the weapon to information and histories that Hezbollah militants offered me during my ethnographic fieldwork in the camps. I make this choice despite the risk of inaccuracy of information because I intend to limit the material culture of the AK-47 to modes and

manners that are articulated and imagined through its materiality in the everyday life of Hezbollah militants.

The AK-47 is a vehicle by which to enter the realm of performativity and probe its presence as a constituting element of militants' everyday life practices. The performance of the AK-47 enacts what John Law (2009: 151) suggests are 'a set of practices that make a more or less precarious reality'. Such a reality has evolved around Hezbollah's militia and its followers to a large extent. The proposed questions are investigated alongside an ethnographic journey to the Hezbollah training camps and observation of the everyday life of militants-to-be.

I gave attention to three constituting elements of the training camps: speech, enemy and weapon during my fieldwork. It is noteworthy that I only focus on the material semiotics of the weapon in this article and refer readers interested in pursuing the subject further to my book (Saramifar 2015). These three elements are conceptually entangled because they are components of an 'enchanted assemblage of performance, control, omnipotence, pleasure and fear' (Springwood, 2014: 452). In other words, speech introduces the weapon and the weapon determines the enemy who has to be *killed*. Hence, allow me to explain the 'enchanted assemblage' that emerges from the association of the weapon with its user's body in order to better portray the subject-object relationship.

The camps and governance of death

Hezbollah propagates *mujtama'at al-muqawama* (the society of resistance) and *hala Islamiyya* (Islamic sphere) across its constituencies and particularly in its stronghold, the southern suburbs of Beirut. Volunteers, recruits and those interested in picking up arms for the 'Party of God' emerge from various nooks and crannies of the society of resistance and subscribe to the Islamic sphere in different ways. However, the training camps, especially advance training camps, are not much concerned with Islam but rather with the *imposed* regime of signification of the society of resistance. The significations are reinforced and consolidated through drills and training and, most importantly, the acceptance of the weapon comes into effect because of the comprehensive influence the camps have over trainees' lives.

The camps are designed to form a sovereign, secluded and autonomous space disconnected from social and conventional life. This overarching sovereignty and separation present as a rebellion against life in societal spaces. Ordinary qualities, habits and acculturation turn life into an intervening force, a disturbing concept that disrupts the cyclical transmutation of civilians into combatants who are capable of killing and may even enjoy the act of taking life. Consequently, the drill instructor (DI) sees life as a threat to the governing principle of death that is the fundamental principle of doctrine training camps.

The AK-47 is issued to trainees in the second week of training after they sign for it and memorize the number engraved on it, but no ammunition is handed out and magazines must be kept empty until training in the shooting range. Both basic and senior DIs constantly refer to the importance of the weapon during initial training and even shame undisciplined trainees by forbidding them to carry it. Walking around armed in the training camp is so prestigious that the DI tries to humiliate recalcitrant trainees by forcing them to carry a stick (instead of a gun) and they are even ordered to stand guard in front

of the toilets with it. Such a trainee is commanded to treat the stick like a gun until he becomes worthy of the weapon. The basic DI focuses mostly on hard-core training with harsh and aggressive discipline, while the senior DI explains the value and symbolism of the weapon using a kind fatherly approach similar to a clergyman. I was fascinated to see how Mostaqbel, the senior DI, combined gestures, kind words and voice intonation to speak to trainees. He forced his hand into a sandbag and began pouring the dust out slowly in front of the trainees. Then he said:

Do you know what this is, brothers? I am sure you know, because it is only due to this soil that you are here, but there is a meaning and an affiliation beyond the soil and the cedar for us – for us as Shi’as of Lebanon, for us as children of *muqwama* ... You have not been given the weapon in order to feel strong and masculine by hunting Jews or wiping Israel off the map of the earth. You have been offered the gun to defend yourself – the self that has come into existence only because of the faith that is your everyday life beyond any habits ... The weapon you carry is not the best weapon in the militia world but it is the weapon most *shahids* [martyrs] carried to the field. I want you to think of your weapon as *Sha’er* [symbols] and as *Zakariyat* [remembrance]. Your weapon is your connection to *shahids*.

Speeches like this are repeated in every conceivable way to reduce the tension of training and the harsh physical reality of the weapon. The gun changes in character from being a piece of machinery and is enacted to be a bridge between the trainees and the martyrs. It engulfs the trainee’s noumenal realm and makes him and his weapon a sentient being *together*, but I shall explain further why, on the day when Mostaqbel spoke, trainees were yet to prove themselves worthy.

I would like to clarify that my disregard of the trainees’ subjectivity at this stage is based on the short duration of basic training camps. The following paragraphs may thus appear inattentive to the notion of agency and imply that the training is a mode of inculcation and indoctrination. My concentration on the disciplinary system and training doctrine does not imply ignorance of the resistance and reactions against impositions and modulations. Basic training teaches trainees to believe that they are distinct from other defence forces, be it the Israel Defence Forces or the Lebanese National Army. The trainees are led into a different gallery of imaginaries: a soldier in the military and defence forces is trained to be an entity capable of violence in defence or offence. Emotions become consequences of the act of violence for military personnel, but Hezbollah’s training method enables the guerrilla militants emotionally. This method displaces emotions with regard to the act of violence; emotion precedes the act. They are enabled in order to secure their commitment to violence and then, in the later stage, the act of ‘defence’ emerges. The basic training is the womb in which trainees are reborn to align with and adjust to new modes of embodiment – modes that become operative through a signifier that connects them to the martyrs, who epitomize the Islamic sphere and society of resistance.

The trainees receive three months of intense physical and military training, which allows very little opportunity for reflectivity or the eruption of subjectivity. For instance, some of the trainees personalize their weapon, despite the direct order that forbids them to do so. Ahmad wrapped a leather strap over his AK-47 handle and wrote on it: ‘Allah created all but Kalashnikov made us equal.’ I asked him if he ever had heard the phrase,

‘God created men but Sam Colt made them all equal.’ He was amused and replied, ‘No, but the world of gun-lovers is small and similar.’ This is the initial phase of union between the body and the weapon. The trainees display a militant subjectivity that emerges in reaction *to* the weapon at the end of their basic training. The weapon is *yet* an enchanting object as well as a disgusting beauty that kicks back and is difficult to tame. The militants respond to the weapon with both attraction and rejection simultaneously.

After the initial fascination for the weapon fades, the process of accepting the weapon is not immediate, despite the crucial role that it plays in the camp and in the lives of militants on the battlefield. Qarib, a 42-year-old Beiruti telecoms engineer, was punished and his Ramadan holidays were cancelled because he had neglected his weapon when he was on duty at the surveillance tower: around sunrise he was preoccupied with reciting Quranic verses before morning prayers. The patrol supervisor reported this mistake and punishment was advised by the DI. Qarib appealed against the holiday cancellation to his unit commander on the grounds that ‘A communications engineer is not a combat fighter and should not be forced to carry a weapon on watch.’ However, he later remarked to a friendly group of engineers during noon chow:⁶ ‘I cannot get over the fact that the thing that I have to carry over my shoulder has taken many lives. I seek shelter in prayers when I am forced to be alone with it.’ Interestingly he does not even give the weapon a name and prefers to say ‘it’.

Qarib’s story is not about rejection of the weapon but about the process of easing into proximity with it and being reconciled to its significations. Qarib was a recruit just like the others, who had entered the realm of the weapon of his own free will; thus, he had already conceded to the idea of the weapon. His participation does not in itself ensure that he will embrace the allure of the weapon or even form a corporeal union with it at the initial stage. However, the material culture associated with the AK-47 that is embedded in the training and everyday life of the camp and is constantly reinforced by the DI draws him in. By the time I left the camp, Qarib had grown familiar and relaxed with his weapon.

The DI expects hesitation about the weapon but he attempts to break it because it may prolong the process of embodiment between the trainees and the weapon. The DI improvises training by encouraging activities that make the trainees more familiar with the AK-47’s mechanism. Mostaqbel arranged an afternoon activity when he was told some trainees had been careless with their weapons. He proposed an afternoon break from the usual routine, when trainees could show off their unconventional skills with the weapon, such as reassembling the rifle with their eyes closed, shooting two targets with one bullet or performing martial art moves while shooting at the target. This innovation and departure from the usual training was aimed at bringing about the required union and encouraging embodiment – the bond between an object, the AK-47, and a subject, the Hezbollah militant. This bond is not merely technical or purely mechanical but also comprises emotional qualities that constitute the poetics of materiality.

The trainees must be reconciled to a messy world of symbols and imposed significations that go against their own subjectivity, which makes their training an intense cognitive exercise. They are told to become perfect soldiers and charge at the enemy for victory while at the same time being encouraged to embrace martyrdom as a state of grace. The principle taught to them is that martyrdom is not achieved by combat and

waging war but by embracing the Creator's will. Such fatalism diminishes the fighting spirit and militants accept death rather than fighting to survive and defeat the enemy. Thus, martyrdom becomes an ideology that disables the war machine rather than enabling it because dead soldiers cannot win the war. Martyrdom is a technical conundrum for the DI, who has to train the militants despite the contradictory connotations.

A banner that was installed above the ammunition bunker had become a constant reminder of martyrdom in the camps. The banner showed a beautiful abstract design (representing paradise) and stated: 'You must remember, my brother, when you pick up the weapon that your determination is not to fail but to accept the nectar of martyrdom.'⁷ Hanni, the junior DI, debated a few times with Mostaqbel and requested its removal. Hanni apparently found it against the spirit of military training and saw it as self-defeating. He smirked at the sign:

Even if we inflict *tahqeer* (humiliation) on Israel a thousand times, we are still guerrillas and are not recognized as professionals or even as proper prisoners of war if captured. So, one should not blame the guys who talk like gods when they carry weapons.

He added unexpectedly:

Because of the AK-47, death becomes so ordinary that martyrdom does not mean what it meant when *muqawama* began. Martyrdom is just another kind of death at the end of the day; they just pronounce it differently.

Me, myself and the AK-47

Some of the trainees are allowed to enrol in advanced and specialized training. Marksmanship is one of the elite specializations because the members of this unit can enter into the command structure and even join Hezbollah's *Lijan al-Amn*.⁸ This unit develops a specific relationship with the weapon and their DI is mindful of maintaining the symbolic value of the AK-47. Marksmanship training follows after the completion of closed quarters combat training and mastery of handling the rifle. The sniper unit receives reconnaissance training called *Oyun*, literally 'eyes' or 'spies'. They take pride in the fact that Muhammad (the prophet of Islam) used to train such forces for intelligence gathering. The use of this term is an effort to historicize and legitimize commands because spying is associated with shame and moral perversion by anyone who claims to be an Arab in the Mediterranean region. Chehab (2007) also notes a similar trend amongst Palestinian activists associated with various political factions in his account of Hamas militancy and Palestinians who are caught between Israel and the gaze of Hamas. *Oyun* training is an important prerequisite for becoming a marksman, but trainees may also choose to stay with the *Oyun* unit and perfect their skills in reconnaissance. Their intelligence feeds the snipers' operations, which has made the saying 'snipers sit on the shoulders of *Oyuns*' popular among the militia.

The marksmen are assigned SVD, a sniper model of a Dragunov which is incorrectly assumed to be a variation of the AK-47 because of its similarity in feature and appearance, and if they pass the training successfully then it is replaced with a Steyr sniper rifle

(SSG 69). However, the Steyr has proved unfriendly and difficult to operate because bullets tend to jam in the bolt mechanism of the rifle. The marksman has to oil the bullet and insert it manually instead of the usual discharge of the bullet which springs from the magazine into the main body of the rifle. This challenge has proved difficult for trainees to the extent that they refused the Steyr rifles and asked for the old SVD despite the improved optical capabilities of the Steyr.

Most marksmen found the challenge to be an interruption in the process of becoming one with the weapon. Abu Abbas explained the unpleasant experience by reminding me of the intimate relationship that he and his weapon need to form in order to shoot perfectly. He said:

There is a specific sensation when you slow down breathing and focus into the optic. You don't feel the weapon anymore; as if it is your hand that shoots not the weapon, as if the bullet just appears out of nowhere but you feel a gentle nudge at the end to say I am here when the weapon recoils ... But there is a lot of work to be done with the Steyr as if you need to beg the rifle to shoot.

The challenge sensed by the marksmen because of the technical shortcomings of the Steyr forced Hezbollah to keep using the SVD for a long time despite the difficulty of supplying, repairing and maintaining the old rifles. However, the central command of Hezbollah is replacing the SVD with the K14 rifle (a Korean sniper rifle inspired by Winchester Model 70 and Remington M700) that has become popular in the region because of the good experience of Iraqi marksmen in the current war against ISIS.

There are three levels of sniper: marksman (basic), sharpshooter (advanced) and expert (highly professional). They form an intense relationship with their weapon and the DI asks them to write about their feelings and note down their progress. These notes are an example of what Haraway (1997) calls 'sticky threads' to explain how the dynamics of subject and object present 'material-semiotic practices'. She emphasizes the union and blurred boundaries of subject and object with regard to the formation of new meaning. Haraway addresses material semiosis and the formation of meanings that appear through the experience of materiality between subjects and objects. Therefore, I read them through in conversation with marksmen to trace the process of enchantment and embodied union between the weapon and the militants. The embodiment and semiotic representation became tangible to me through the performativity and intensity displayed in the marksmen's everyday life.

Let me identify the performativity and intensity through Ayoub, a 70-year-old expert who trains snipers: I shared with him my surprise that, after several months of observing them, I was still trying to understand how to explain a marksman. He replied:

A sniper suffers most because of the constant pressure to be accurate and they touch death differently. He sees his target, then relates to it as an object and then sees blood oozing out. There is no gap between identifying the object and its death because the act of shooting is tremendously brief, precise and automatic in our mind. We have to divert our mind, refresh it and sharpen it to prevent an obsession with shooting straight and to decrease stress levels.

I replied, 'What happens if a marksman obsesses about shooting straight?' He smiled and said, 'He goes mad! Shooting straight must happen naturally rather than through trying.'

The object, the act of shooting, death, blood and the brief moment of discharging the bullet are the intensity of the materiality that a marksman assumes in relation to the weapon. For the marksman, the significance of these elements and the intensity that they deliver authenticate the performativity and the relationship with the object. In other words, he begins to believe in the material reality that is fabulated around him.

What makes the marksman's material realities more fascinating is the additional optic device affixed over the weapon that enables his vision and makes the hard cold metal more than a unit or a single object for the marksman. The weapon functions with all its cognitive charges, semiotic undercurrents and materiality, but the optic device, which has no lethal capability, becomes his eye; at the same time, it is disconnected from his eye and assembled on the weapon. Here, there are two modes of performativity – fabulation of material reality and embodiment – at work simultaneously. One mode may even be more intense than the other!

Emran was a highly motivated marksman who was popular for his faultless 'crowning' – shooting a target exactly between the eyebrows. Initially, and showing some poetic sensibility, he used to call his Styer a longing soul who responded to his touch, but later the tone became 'masculine'. He wrote aggressively, in clear straight lines, and drew on the gendered nature of Arabic by using more masculine adjectives instead of the feminine poetic similes he had used before. He began to see the weapon not as the extension of his eye but as his own eye, which was 'great in identifying those he must deprive of life'. He repeatedly used 'we' to refer to himself and the weapon. Once he wrote:

We watch the fall of the enemy by a single shot like leaves falling in the autumn ... God is not all about mercy, he has anger too and the sound of the bullet popping out of the gun is like hearing the footsteps of the guardians of hell coming for the one we are looking *at* through the optic device. I wish I could hear the sound of his [the enemy] dropping to the ground too. It's terrifying.

Emran had underlined the word 'at' to emphasize the clarity of sight he had jointly with the weapon through the optic device. The 'we' did not last very long for Emran, and he began using 'I' towards the end of his training. He wrote in his last note:

I am proud that I can shoot in the blink of an eye; I can imagine how unlucky the dog that appeared from nowhere in the middle of my shooting practice was. I shot so quickly that my instructor could not resist praising [me]. This is who I have become; the orphan from nowhere could prove he does not need to be from anywhere because he is good at doing things that many are not.

I hesitate to disentangle the strands of performance, fabulation of material reality and embodiment of the weapon and the militant because the shades and intensity of their entwinement change constantly as the militants employ a variety of imaginaries and textures through the various stages. The same Emran who indulges in the question of 'who he has become' used to say at the beginning of the training, 'My rifle reminds me of Hezbollah and tells me where I stand in the world. I feel we are the fathers many would like to have. We are the meaning of protection.' And he raised his hand to emphasise '*Only me and my rifle*'.

Bruno Latour (1999: 178) identifies what I call ‘entanglement’ as mediation between the material life of an object and a subject. He defines it in the form of ‘uncertainty, drift, invention [and] mediation’ between guns and citizens. This entangled link influences both sides of the mediation – on one side, the object and, on the other, the subject – because of ‘the creation of a link that did *not* exist before and that to some degree *modifies* the original two [the militant and the weapon]’ (emphases added). Latour observes the modification on both sides of the union, which supports my emphasis on the blurred texture of the answer to the question of what the AK-47 signifies. It is impossible to draw a subject–object map in this matter that points to an actant vis-à-vis an actor. Both the subject and the object tend to affect each other, the weapon through its materiality and signification impacts the militant, while the militant recognizes the weapon through perception and appropriation. Therefore, the relationship between the militant and the weapon is crafted in a subjection, which is two-way traffic between both sides of this relationship.

Looking at the gendered body and language of marksmen is another pathway that may take me closer to how the AK-47 acquires signification beyond training and propaganda. The marksmen borrow gender attributes, adjectives and similes to articulate feelings, sensations and ultimately their perception of the weapon’s allure and enchantment in language that can convey what is in their minds. For instance, Ehsan used to complain in a serious tone, ‘It is not funny that I think and dream that my rifle is like my wife’, then he would immediately laugh and add, ‘the only difference is that I have the control!’ Musa blamed his rifle for his bad performance, ‘If they had given me a new one like they did to many others then I may do better. A marksman’s rifle and cigarette packets are like a bride. You must break the seal.’

The DI sometimes encouraged this kind of conversation and left unexpected notes on the marksmen’s bunks. One of the notes that remained popular said, ‘IDF soldiers live with their Uzis, sleep with their Uzis, bathe with their Uzis and die with them, so you should treat your rifle the same because it is going to put an end to their love affairs.’ The sexual charge in the language becomes more intense during operations and live-ammunition exercises. Hadi compared the pleasure of blasts and shooting to ejaculation:

When you shoot it is like a moment of confusion until it blasts the target, it is exactly as if you are on the edge of ejaculation; any picture could pop into your mind, even your mom, but you still discharge. Wow ... shooting is that amazing.

Philip Caputo (1977: 254) recalls similar sensations from the Vietnam War in his memoirs. He states that, after successfully killing an enemy, ‘An ache as profound as the ache of an orgasm passed through me.’ Such sensations and experiences confirm what Charles Springwood (2014) calls ‘enchanted assemblage’ to describe the embodiment of the link between the gun and its owner. Here, to be enchanted is ‘to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transferred, spellbound’ (Bennett, 2001: 5) and assemblage refers to the Deleuzian ‘commitment to understanding desire as productive energies that emerge through interactional relations’ (Springwood, 2014: 459).

Exploring desires, imaginaries and gendered language with regard to the body is not to reduce the link between the militant and the weapon to the Lacanian ‘going-through-fantasy’ (Lacan, 1998) because the AK-47 is not just the ever-lacking object of desire that configures the link. Treating the AK-47 as an ever-lacking object renders its materiality invisible and neglects the material culture observed by social scientists. I included what William Mazzarella (2010) has suggested as the ‘odd sensation’ by way of the AK-47 in order to show the challenging terrain of the subject–object relationship in an attempt to situate bodies in encounters with an object without its larger politics. I never observed any reference by Hezbollah militants to the larger political economy of the Soviet-made AK-47. Therefore, I have offered an account of enchantment with a weapon that is made available to militants and how the material character of that weapon facilitated the enchantment. In other words, the ‘implied destination is at once more innervated and more abstract than the “subject” whose coherent intentionality is the precondition [of considering larger histories]’ (p. 306).

I look for material characteristics and modes of the AK-47 that suggest a valid explanation for its enchanting qualities in order to highlight the vibrancy and intensity of an object, which are less noted in the debates on ideology, indoctrination and subjectification of the militants. We need to consider the fact that *the fluid terrain of semiosis and materiality is the meaning of the union* of the weapon and the marksmen in the stories referred to here. I believe the complexity of the union can be described through the ethnography of materiality but it cannot be explained only through interpretations and translation of the modes and characteristics into meanings.

The emerging life of materialities

I explored the material culture of the AK-47 in relation to the three questions set out at the beginning of this article: what does the AK-47 signify, how does it acquire such signification, and lastly, how does its materiality contribute to the signification? I have stressed the materiality of the AK-47 that emphasizes the opaque paradigmatic link between the weapon and the militant that in itself highlights the ‘shadows of knowability’ (Saramifar, 2017) rather than the absolute knowledge of the relationship. The blurred lines and opaque linkages show that a militant is not a mere ‘tool carrying a tool’ (Feldman, 1991: 10). We need to situate questions of violence and life in material culture to identify the opacity of the relationality. To understand militancy without the materiality of weapons, uniforms, flags, insignias, posters and their sacred objects (rosaries, prayer mats, etc.) is to neglect the larger question of what constitutes transgression, emergence of violence and life in networks influenced by elements other than socio-political ones. Veena Das (2007: 16) aptly suggests, ‘The blurring between what is human and what is not human shades into the blurring over what is life and what is not life.’ Therefore, after reconfiguring the subject–object relationship, we need to revisit our notions of life and hopefully keep in mind the trajectories of material culture instead of chasing rainbows in transcendence.

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Notes

1. *Lord of War* is a film released in 2005, directed by John Woo and starring John Travolta and Nicolas Cage.
2. Available at: http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/12/131204_103_hezbollah_assassinated (accessed 15 February 2016).
3. All the names are changed and strategic details of the camps are made ambiguous for the safety of informants as well as of the ethnographer. The names of those assassinated or deceased are not anonymized. However, the names may well not be correct because some of my Lebanese friends and familiars did not share their real names for a long time for security reasons.
4. Available at: <https://www.rt.com/business/kalashnikov-group-american-market-764/> (accessed 15 February 2016).
5. Available at: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/society/2016/7/18/lebanons-tradition-of-celebratory-gunshots-comes-under-fire> (accessed 21 July 2017).
6. Chow is military jargon for meals and food served to the personnel.
7. I have tried to remain faithful to the original phrase 'tazkar ya akhi, inda ekhtiyar alselah hatta tasmimakum laysa an tafshal walaken leqaboul rahiqa alshahadah'.
8. This branch can be seen as Special Apparatus Services. It does not just provide internal security but its operations extend to covert activities beyond the Lebanese border.

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