At the beginning of the 21st century, Hizbullah, the Lebanese Shi’ite ‘Party of God’ has emerged as the most powerful political party in Lebanon, having transformed itself from a radical, clandestine armed Islamist militia to a ‘moderate, mainstream political party with a resistance wing’ (Palmer Harik 2007: 1) in a little over two decades. The movement’s evolution is often discussed as a sequence of gradual stages of development with each stage depending and building on the one preceding it, pointing to the group’s ability to adapt its rhetoric and image with changing political and historical circumstances. None of these stages has been more significant to Hizbullah’s shifting image than the 2006 July war with Israel which served to enhance the group’s credibility and standing in the Arab and Muslim worlds and cement its position within the Lebanese political scene. The war started on July 12, 2006, when Hizbullah militants fired rockets at Israeli border towns as a diversion for an anti-tank missile attack on two armored vehicles on the Israeli side of the border fence and following the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers. Israel retaliated with air strikes and ground attacks, damaging vital infrastructure across the south, but also including the international airport in the capital Beirut and parts of the southern suburb of the city. More than 1,000 people, most Lebanese civilians, were killed and almost a million displaced as a result of the war which ended on August 14, 2006 with a ceasefire agreement that was brokered by the United Nations. Though it is not clear how badly Hizbullah’s arsenal had suffered in the war, Hizbullah
built on what it proclaimed as a ‘Divine Victory’ and its popular image as a defender of Lebanese sovereignty against Israel and its allies and mounted a campaign of ‘civil disobedience’ along with other Lebanese groups forming the Opposition Bloc. The campaign culminated in the worst sectarian violence since the end of the civil war in May 2008 when Hizbullah-backed armed supporters took control of parts of west Beirut and fought opponents in other parts of Lebanon. An Arab-mediated political deal was reached on May 21, 2008, paving the way for the election of a new president and the cessation of armed hostilities.

This chapter focuses on two key constituents of Hizbullah’s political communication strategies during the July War: The mediated charisma of its leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and the religious-political discourse of his normally widely televised and reported speeches. Both these elements, it suggests, are examples of what Wedeen (2008) calls ‘performative political practices’ that incorporate historically-significant and meaningful discourses, signs and symbols drawn from a shared cultural repertoire and adapted to the particular historical context to summon and construct the intended audience as subjects. Practices, as Lisa Wedeen argues, tend to be intelligible to others in context-dependent ways, but their importance ‘...does not reside simply in the meanings they signify to their practitioners, but also in the ways in which they constitute the self (of the politician or ideologue) through [...] performance as an explicitly national person in the absence of a strong state or an institutionalized, procedural democracy’ (Wedeen 2008: 15). Drawing on this understanding, this chapter suggests that performative political practices constitute what Foucault calls ‘the meticulous rituals’, or ‘the micro-physics of power’ (Foucault 1977: 27) which define ordinary peoples’ lives on many levels, but which are also largely intentional, managed and schemed out. Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to find out exactly how people’s lives are defined, it is possible to assess the ways in which performative political practices can appeal to what Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999: 33) call ‘a symbolic realm of operation in which identities are defined, destinies articulated, and the sense of purpose in life and of meaning in the world [is] suggested and legitimated’. This suggestion

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3 These strategies are continuous, but this chapter focuses on that event alone.