

Preparing for a Post-Assad Middle East: Hezbollah's Syrian Dilemma

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In the spring of 2011, everything seemed to be going right for Hezbollah (“the Party of God”) in Lebanon. Five years after the war with Israel, its forces in the south of the country were not only reorganized, but also reinforced. In Beirut, the new government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati was distancing itself from the pro-western agenda that had been promoted by the government of Sa’ad Hariri, temporarily relieving the pressure on Hezbollah with respect to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, charged with probing the 2005 killing of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Finally, the movement was creating a symbolic parallel between the “Arab Spring” and the Lebanese Shiite narrative of struggle by the oppressed against the powerful, of the impoverished against the dominant minority. Put simply, in the first few weeks of the “Arab Spring” Hezbollah found a beautiful opportunity to recall its own revolutionary origins.

Nevertheless, the current swing in Syria towards a civil war opposing the regime of Bashar al-Assad, historically a political and financial supporter of Hezbollah, has jostled the political strategy of the Lebanese movement and left it facing a crucial dilemma: In light of the disturbing violence in Syria, the question is how far can Hezbollah support Assad’s regime and preserve an important regional alliance without eroding its image as a social force struggling on behalf of the oppressed?

Hezbollah’s Strategic Debt towards the Syrian Regime

As a result of the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1983, Hezbollah emerged from Lebanon’s Shi’a community in the span of just three decades to become one of the most powerful non-state organizations in the world, both politically and militarily. Hezbollah was able to grow thanks to its relations with two regional allies who play key roles in the often turbulent politics of Lebanon - Iran and Syria. The movement modelled itself from the start on the Iranian revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini, who wished to see it spread to Lebanon. However, Hezbollah showed itself to be more pragmatic after the civil war of the 1990s so as not to become alienated from the Lebanese political scene.

Hezbollah’s current leader, Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah, is the political craftsman responsible for the “Lebanonization” of the movement. At 51 years of age, Nasrallah has embodied the Party since taking its reins in 1992 after the assassination of its previous Secretary General, Abbas Moussawi, at the hands of Israeli forces. A charismatic orator, Nasrallah quickly became an icon within the Arab community as the prow of the resistance against Israel. In 2006, his armed forces even succeeded in inflicting a level of damage upon Israel that no Arab army had done beforehand. [1]

During these years, the very political and military basis of Hezbollah was made possible thanks to a marriage of convenience with the Syrian regime, which has played a hand in making and unmaking governments in Beirut since its 1976 military intervention in Lebanon. Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current Syrian president, looked with suspicion not only at the Islamic rhetoric which adorned Hezbollah’s propaganda but also at the connections between the movement and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards. Although Hafez al Assad had allied himself with Khomeini’s Iran, he clearly indicated to Tehran that Lebanon remained within the Syrian sphere of influence. It is for this same reason that Hafez al-Assad maintained a certain distance with Hezbollah, despite having agreed to authorize the passage of Iranian supply convoys across Syrian territory to Lebanon. Indeed, numerous observers affirm that Assad met only twice with Hassan Nasrallah. [2]

The relationship between Hezbollah and Syria changed substantially when Bashar al-Assad became head of the Syrian nation in June 2000. Nasrallah became a regular visitor to Damascus and the new Syrian president did not hesitate to be seen publicly with him. The Syrian regime cast aside the elder Assad’s restraint and developed the idea of an anti-imperialist axis represented by Syria, Hezbollah and Iran. As a sign of this evolution, the streets of Damascus and Homs were littered with flyers during the 2006 summer war between Israel and Hezbollah proclaiming the glory of the movement and Nasrallah in particular.

On top of this political support, Syria has lent considerable logistical support to the Party of God’s military structure, particularly by maintaining the supply corridors used by Iran to supply missiles and other arms to Hezbollah. If Hezbollah’s current missile strike force constitutes a real tool of dissuasion to the Jewish state rather than a simple nuisance to northern Israel, it is largely thanks to Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian

regime.

Hezbollah's Unwavering Support for Bashar al Assad?

On several occasions during the last decade, Hezbollah has assumed the risk of losing its popular base by supporting Bashar al-Assad. As early as 2005, the assassination of Rafiq Hariri unleashed a wave of protests against Damascus. The demonstrations only subsided with the departure of Syrian troops and the formation of a government based on an anti-Syrian political alliance. Throughout these events, Hassan Nasrallah never hesitated to express his unwavering support for Bashar al-Assad and Hezbollah oversaw multiple counter-demonstrations in Beirut, placing itself at risk of being accused of betraying Lebanon's national interests. Nasrallah's acrobatic politics, attempting to find a balance between Hezbollah's identity of resistance to external influence and political reliance on its regional allies, presented a potentially fatal challenge. Only the following summer's war against Israel offered Nasrallah an opportunity to overcome Lebanon's internal divisions by standing up to the Israeli Defense Force.

Now more so than in 2005, Hezbollah's strategy of "Lebanonization" finds itself at an impasse. During the first months of the Syrian crisis, Nasrallah and his close advisors preserved their traditional posture by offering full support to the Syrian regime. Before March 2012, many of the speeches given by the Hezbollah Secretary General concerning Syria denounced the predatory strategies of external powers (namely the United States and Israel) directed at the Syrian regime and increasingly diverted the attention of his audiences to the seemingly more urgent Palestinian cause. In other words, the movement developed a narrative of the crisis which was identical to that presented by the government of Bashar al-Assad. Meanwhile, the movement has consistently denied all implications stemming from certain media coverage, notably emanating from the opposition Free Syrian Army or Israeli sources, which has conjured up charges of Hezbollah's role as a logistical and military supporter of the Syrian repression (*Haaretz*, April 6; *Jerusalem Post*, May 30; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], February 8; *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 16; for denials, see *Daily Star* [Beirut], April 15; *NOW Lebanon*, April 14).

In contrast to Hezbollah's expectations, the Syrian crisis has not subsided and, to the contrary, has progressively transformed into a civil war. Since February of 2012, the Syrian offensive on Homs has aroused international

approbation. More and more, protesters condemn the support of Hezbollah and videos have circulated on the internet showing Syrians accusing Nasrallah by name or burning the flag of Hezbollah. [3]

A notable shift in Nasrallah's approach to the Syrian question emerged during a March 15 speech ostensibly concerning Lebanon's educational system. For roughly ten minutes, Nasrallah turned to Syria and called, for the first time, for the regime and the opposition to take an approach that would peacefully resolve their differences (*An-Nahar* [Beirut], March 17; *As-Safir* [Beirut], March 19). In effect, Nasrallah's call for settlement suggested that there is an alternative party within the opposition that would be capable of negotiating with the Syrian regime. For the first time, the Hezbollah leader had placed the Syrian regime and its opposition on the same plane. Nasrallah went so far as to add that the government in Damascus must bring the truth about the months of confrontation to light, implying that the regime must recognize its accountability in the repression. Although some observers may hasten to see this as Nasrallah's total desertion of Assad, this speech is clearly an indicator of the Lebanese leader's support taken to the limits of his conscience.

During a May 12 ceremony in Beirut, Shaykh Nasrallah warned Syrians that their nation was on the brink of plunging into a state of sectarian violence reminiscent of the Iraqi insurgency: "We leave the answer to the Syrian people... either they go for the model of dialogue, reform, elections, participation or cooperation, or go for the model [of violence] being presented now..." Nasrallah added that his party was "increasingly convinced that there are some who want the downfall of Syria only because they want to get rid of the main supporter of Palestine and the resistance in Lebanon" (*Syrian Arab News Agency*, May 12; *Daily Star* [Beirut], May 12; *al-Bawaba* [Amman], May 12; *Guardian*, May 18).

Consequently, Hezbollah is today in a critical situation: maintaining its support for Assad, whose end may only be a matter of time, could alienate the party from a majority of the Lebanese population as well as the eventual successors of the regime in Damascus. The position held by Nasrallah seeks to reconcile support for the Syrian regime and recognition of the legitimate protests. This rhetorical change may nevertheless have arrived too late to allow Hezbollah to exit the Syrian crisis fully intact.

Hezbollah without the Assad Regime

If a regime change in Damascus were to have repercussions on the makeup of the Middle East, beginning with Lebanon, we should not fool ourselves with simplistic images, such as a domino effect that would quickly see the collapse of Hezbollah. If the rule of Bashar al-Assad were to come to an end, the Syrian supply routes between Iran and the Party of God would assuredly be affected. In fact, many Syrian opposition figures, such as Burhan Ghalioun, have made it known that the Damascus-Tehran alliance would be re-examined (*al-Hayat*, February 3). A realignment of post-Assad Syria may thus cut Iran's strategic access to the Middle East and may equally affect Hezbollah, which would lose a reliable ally, both militarily with regards to Israel and politically with regards to those who oppose the movement in Beirut. Hezbollah could find itself in a position of weakness considering the accusations made against its members by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. One has difficulty imagining that the government of Najib Mikati could survive in the face of such regional game changers.

For all that, a new Syrian regime would be unlikely to deprive Hezbollah of its military capabilities. In reality, the Party of God currently possesses an arsenal in the south of Lebanon that is sufficient to deter Israel or the movement's Lebanese rivals. According to Israeli military authorities, the movement has also been trained by Syrian advisors in matters of anti-air defense; allowing Hezbollah to defend itself against eventual Israeli strikes (*Haaretz*, March 18).

Nevertheless, in the absence of new avenues of resupply between Iran and Hezbollah – maritime routes being too vulnerable to Israeli attacks – this balance of power could degrade; tempting internal and external foes of Hezbollah to launch an offensive against the organization. For example, Israeli forces could attempt to conduct a quick full-scale operation to decapitate the movement by targeting its infrastructure in the south and its nerve centers in the suburbs of Beirut. Hezbollah could then respond by attempting to scale up the conflict vertically by launching rockets as well as short-range missiles on Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and horizontally by calling for a simultaneous front across the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. For the time being, this scenario remains unlikely, as Israel has adopted a prudent political approach since the triggering of events in Syria and is well aware of Hezbollah's ability to absorb a 2006-style military attack.

Nonetheless, the coming months will be decisive for the survival of Hezbollah. Whether or not Assad remains in power is no longer the central question: whether he remains or not, Hezbollah will have to make do with a decreasingly reliable regional ally. Tomorrow the true issue for the movement will be to preserve what remains of its long process of Lebanonization under Nasrallah's leadership in the 1990s, a process which has been weakened by the political crises of 2005, 2008, and those occurring today. In other words, Hezbollah's survival after a collapse of the Assad regime does not depend on its military strength – again sufficient enough to maintain the movement, even in the face of Israel or any Lebanese rival – but on its political support, and more particularly its future ability to defuse the impact of the Syrian crisis on the on-going Lebanese Sunni-Shi'a rivalry to avoid the movement's complete alienation from Beirut's political scene. Eventually this might require more than Nasrallah's recent displays of subtle rhetoric.

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Notes:

1. See Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and The Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy*, Washington, Strategic Studies Institute, 2008; Avi Kober, "The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War: Why the Poor Performance?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31(1), February 2008, pp.3-40.
2. Among others, see: Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty Year Struggle against Israel*, New York, 2011; Emile El-Hokayem, "Hizballah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship", *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2007, pp.35-52.
3. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBw6E8NtA0A>