Stormy weather ahead for Hizbollah

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Created *21 Dec 2011 - 10:51am*

CommentHizbollah

To some observers in the West, the process of massive social and political unrest initiated by the so-called "Arab Spring" spells trouble: specifically, they see the rise of Islamist political parties across the Middle East - from Tunisia to Egypt - as a worrisome trend. In this context, it is assumed that the current shift in the region's political arena and the rise of political Islam will benefit the "resistance camp" in general and groups like Hamas and Hizbollah more specifically.

However, this type of analysis might well be overly simplistic, both minimising the differences between the local political processes and downplaying the singularity of the actors involved in the anti-Israeli "resistance axis."

In this sense, instead of adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, scholars and decision-makers alike would be better advised to take a step back and adopt a more focused, case-by-case approach when assessing the overall impact of the ongoing social and political changes in the Arab world.

Take Hizbollah. Since the initial outbreak of the protests in late 2010, the Lebanese-Shi'ite military and political organisation has been trying its best to shield itself from the process that has been redefining the balance of power and reshuffling the political cards in the region, focusing instead on consolidation and continuity. Similarly, Hizbollah has been trying very hard to convey the message that the ongoing political unrest has strengthened, rather than weakened it. However - despite Hizbollah's repeated reassurances to the contrary - it seems that the actual level of popular and political support for Hizbollah is not as solid as Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah's group would like us to believe.

An initial look at Hizbollah's strategic and security environment seems to confirm the notion that the group has not been shaken by the Arab Spring. Firstly - backed by its unshakable strategic partnership with Iran - Hizbollah remains the most sophisticated and powerful, non-state armed group in the Middle East.

Secondly, in addition to its military might, the organisation has spent the past few months repositioning itself at the centre of the Lebanese political arena, obtaining both the rise of a friendly government under Prime Minister Najib Mikati as well as the de facto marginalisation of its main political opponents, the "pro-Western", anti-Syrian, March 14 movement led by Saad Hariri.

What's more, as well as preserving its position of relative strength and slowly but surely increasing its direct control over Lebanese political life, Hizbollah has also been able to use the Arab Spring in its favour. It has done so by adopting a dual strategy of simultaneous selective endorsement of the revolutions and outright rejection of any political development that could threaten its political allies.

In this context, Hizbollah has been enthusiastically praising the protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain, while relying on the Arab Spring "to promote its military and political agenda by making an explicit connection between the social protests and its political aspirations. At the same time, the group has been highly critical of the demonstrations in Syria, betting on the survival of its long-time political partner and ally, President Bashar al-Assad.

Finally, Hizbollah has been able to withstand the blow delivered by the United Nation's Special Tribunal for Lebanon's issuance of indictments against four Hizbollah members, now formally accused of participating in the assassination of the then Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005. Thanks to an intensive domestic campaign to undermine the legitimacy of the tribunal, Nasrallah's group has managed to convince the backbone of its constituency - the Lebanese Shi'ite community - of their innocence, preserving their loyalty and support.

However, when taking a closer look at Hizbollah's current predicament, it appears obvious that the group's standing is not as solid as it may appear, and that its current success in dodging the bullets may well prove ephemeral.

From a political and ideological perspective, Hizbollah and its political discourse have not been a prominent feature in the Arab Spring. The protests failed to explicitly include the Arab-Israeli conflict among the list of main grievances, focusing instead on local economic, social and political demands. In addition, the contrast between the ethos of the protest movements - centred on rights and freedoms - and that of Hizbollah, paying lip-service to the importance of establishing a free society while strongly supporting political repression in Syria, is stark.

In this context, Nasrallah's continuing support for the Assad regime has been widely criticised, both within Lebanon as well as regionally. To use one example, in Syria, the anti-Assad forces have openly demonstrated against Hizbollah, burning the organisation's flags, and calling for Nasrallah to stop interfering in Syrian domestic politics. Likewise, political commentators and pundits - especially in Lebanon and within the Gulf - have publicly denounced Hizbollah's support for the Assad regime, accusing the group of applying a "double-standard," and of hypocrisy.

Hizbollah has strongly rejected such accusations, stating that Syria is substantially different from the other regimes hit by the Arab Spring, both due to its role in opposing US-Israeli interests in the region and the "effective" reforms adopted by Assad to redress existing grievances, as well as because of the "extensive" backing of the government. As such, Nasrallah adds, the Assad regime is infinitely more legitimate than the other authoritarian regimes in the region, and the continuing demonstrations are more a consequence of Assad's unwillingness to "bow" to US-Israeli interests than the result of concrete and unaddressed social and political grievances.

Hizbollah's defence has failed to placate the critics of the organisation, domestically as well as regionally. With time, this may translate into a progressive decline of the group's appeal within the Arab world. Put simply by the pro-March 14 newspaper Now Lebanon: "Any ally of a dictator is an enemy of the Arab street."

Moreover, Hizbollah's bet on the stability of the Assad regime may also backfire, as the ongoing escalation in the brutality of the regime has left Assad increasingly more isolated, both at home and abroad. Further, the brutal repression of the Syrian civilian population has not deflated the protests.

In other words: the regime is still very much hanging by a thread and it may very well collapse. In turn, if this were to happen, Hizbollah would lose a core political ally in the region, since Syria has been historically crucial in backing Hizbollah within Lebanon, as well as in serving as the connecting link between Hizbollah and Iran (for example, by allowing and facilitating the transfer of weapons). With Assad gone, Hizbollah could lose both political backing as well as logistical and operational assistance. This is especially true since Hizbollah may have a hard time building good relations with the same Syrian opposition forces that it earlier accused of being on the American and Israeli payroll. A regime change in Syria might also complicate Hizbollah's position within Lebanon by strengthening the March 14 forces and providing a powerful second-wind to the "Cedar Revolution" of spring 2005.

But, aside from these very real regional concerns, the most serious challenge that Hizbollah now faces is domestic, and it is largely a product of the organisation's own hubris in dealing with its political allies. In recent weeks, Hizbollah has in fact taken a series of positions that may lead the group to lose support from its own political allies, while risking further alienating the non-Shi'ite Lebanese.

In this context, Hizbollah should be particularly concerned by the rising tensions between the party and Lebanese PM Mikati, who is a Sunni Muslim. In the past few weeks, the prime minister and Hizbollah took radically different approaches with respect to the issue of renewing the funding for the UN Special Tribunal.
On the one hand, Nasrallah openly stated that Hizbollah would not allow the cabinet to approve Lebanon's funding of the tribunal and ridiculed Mikati's pledges to the international community to continue complying with all of Lebanon's international obligations.

On the other hand, Mikati maintained that funding the tribunal was absolutely crucial, hinting that he would not budge on the issue.

This put the prime minister in a very difficult situation: either to concede to Hizbollah's dictates - losing both credibility in front of the international community as well as the support of his own community - or to resign and send Lebanon into yet another political crisis. In the end, the crisis was (temporarily) averted as Mikati found a way to obtain financing for the tribunal without submitting the proposal to a vote in the cabinet, thus saving face and avoiding a political crisis.

However, the situation remains tense between the prime minister and Nasrallah's organisation, especially as Hizbollah's behaviour has been problematic not just with respect to the tribunal, but also regarding its continuous support for the Syrian regime.

While Mikati has been quietly attempting to downplay Lebanon's support for Syria in front of the international community (for example by abstaining in the UNSC vote on the European draft resolution condemning events in Syria), Hizbollah is making no mystery of its support for the Syrian regime.

The cooling of relations between Mikati and Hizbollah represents a crucial political development, one that could lead to a collapse of the Hizbollah-friendly government.

In this context, while the prime minister continues to differ with the Lebanese-Shi'ite group over Lebanon's international standing and its commitment to its pre-existing obligations, other voices from within Hizbollah's political coalition have started to sound more ambiguous regarding their commitment to the current government.

One such voice is that of the ever-fickle Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who - while waiting to see how things turn out in Syria - has decided to remain in the Hizbollah-led coalition, while emphasising his personal differences with Nasrallah's organisation, including on the tribunal funding and on the relationship with Syria.

In parallel, Hizbollah's uncompromising attitude with respect to both the tribunal and Syria have also exacerbated the existing differences with the March 14 coalition and their political supporters, indicating that the level of popular dissatisfaction with Hizbollah is growing within Lebanon.

In this context, taking into consideration both the possibility of the Party of God losing its current political backing within Lebanon, as well as the threat represented by the potential fall of the Assad regime, it is fair to state that Hizbollah is now facing one of the most serious challenges since its foundation in the early 1980s.

Could the end of Assad be the inevitable prelude to the demise of Hizbollah? Hardly, given the sophistication and magnitude of the group's military apparatus and its solid partnership both with the Lebanese-Shiite community and with Iran.

However, regime change in Syria would spell trouble for Nasrallah's organisation, especially now that the group finds itself in a position of internal weakness and regional ambiguity. In other words, contrary to conventional wisdom, the Arab Spring has not resulted in a rise in the level of power or popular support and legitimacy for the Lebanese-Shiite organisation.

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