

Hizbollah in Syria: Losing the Balance between “National Resistance” and Sectarian Interests?

Benedetta Berti and Yoram Schweitzer

Over thirty months ago Hizbollah greeted the beginning of the so-called Arab Awakening – the massive wave of social and political mobilizations that forcefully shook up the status quo in the Middle East and North Africa region – with a mix of hope and enthusiasm. Today, in an ironic twist of fate, the initial celebrations have gradually turned sour as the Lebanese Shiite Party of God finds itself directly affected by the arrival of the “spring,” much like its longtime ally and patron, the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. The past year has been characterized by Hizbollah’s incremental involvement in the Syrian civil war and by the group’s shift from offering cautious political backing and military advice to investing substantial political as well as military capital in directly supporting Assad’s war against his domestic opposition. Currently, having become a warring party in the ongoing internal war, Hizbollah risks its domestic as well as its regional legitimacy and popularity, while also potentially jeopardizing its pivotal role within Lebanon.

This article analyzes Hizbollah’s position with respect to the ongoing Syrian conflict, highlighting the organization’s interests and describing the gradual evolution in the organizational narrative as well as in its actual involvement in Syria. The article focuses on understanding the domestic as well as the regional impact of Hizbollah’s current strategy in Syria, assessing how the recent organizational choices may backfire in the short and medium terms. Overall, the challenge posed to Hizbollah by the Syrian civil war represents one of the most significant ideological,

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political, and military threats faced by the organization since its creation in the early 1980s, and perhaps the most significant challenge to the group's narrative and reputation since the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000.

Hizbollah's Strategy on Syria: Interests, Ideology, and Operations

Hizbollah initially welcomed the Arab Awakening, expressing its solidarity and support for the protesters and their demands and identifying the revolutions as "of the poor, the free, the freedom seekers and the rejecters of humiliation and disgrace...It is the revolution... against...the regime's policy in the Arab-Israeli struggle."¹ The support was especially strong in the cases of Egypt and Bahrain, due to Hizbollah's openly hostile relations with both the Mubarak regime and the al-Khalifa monarchy.

Hizbollah's enthusiastic support for the "Arab street" and the revolutions, however, soon proved to be selective and highly influenced by the group's organizational interests. Politics and a tinge of sectarianism, rather than shared values or ideology, seemed to dictate Hizbollah's approach to the regional unrest. Indeed, when the protests spread to Syria, Hizbollah immediately sided with the government and against the opposition, downplaying the rebels' strength and questioning their motivation.²

This approach was informed by the long and strategic cooperation between the Syrian regime and the Lebanese Shi'ite organization: since the end of the Lebanese civil war, Syria's political and military role in Lebanon has represented a force multiplier for Hizbollah, with Damascus looking after Hizbollah's interests while making sure the group's military apparatus was left unchallenged domestically. Following the end of Syria's tutelage of Lebanon in 2005, the relationship between the Assad regime and Hizbollah did not dissolve. On the contrary, Hizbollah continued to support Syrian interests within Lebanon in its de facto role as the political leader of the March 8 forces, the pro-Syrian political alliance between Hizbollah, the second main Shi'ite party – Amal, and the (Christian) Free Patriotic Movement of General Michel Aoun. In addition, over the past decades Syria has served as the connecting link between Hizbollah and Iran, offering both a secure route to transfer weapons and logistical assistance to the organization, as well as a solid link in the tripartite alliance. And since Bashar al-Assad rose to power

in 2000, the strong personal relations with Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah have deepened even further.

For all these reasons, Hizbollah's direct political, military, and geo-strategic interest from the beginning of the conflict in Syria was to assist in preserving the status quo. Yet despite Hizbollah's consistent interest in supporting Assad since anti-regime political demonstrations first broke out in the spring of 2011, the group's narrative and degree of involvement in Syria have evolved dramatically over the past year.

At the outset of the anti-Assad protests, Hizbollah focused simultaneously on keeping itself at the margins of the conflict by downplaying any direct involvement, while tempering open support for the regime with conciliatory statements with respect to the "need to reform." Secretary General Nasrallah emphasized on multiple occasions that "a majority of the Syrian people believe in the regime and support Bashar al-Assad."³ He explained, "The difference between the Arab uprisings and Syria...is that President Assad is convinced that reforms are necessary, unlike Bahrain and other Arab countries," and urged "all Syrians to preserve their country as well as the ruling regime, a regime of resistance, and to give their leaders a chance to cooperate with all Syria's communities in order to implement the necessary reforms."⁴

Hizbollah invested in casting its support for Assad as part of its resistance agenda, rejecting accusations of applying a double standard with respect to the Arab revolutions, while stressing its consistency in standing firm against foreign interests in the region. Accordingly, the organization stressed that the Assad regime, the only government seriously opposing US-Israeli interests in the region, merited Hizbollah support.⁵ Hizbollah emphasized the negative impact of foreign powers on the conflict by asserting that "America, the West, Israel, and some regional sides want to destroy Syria only because they want to get rid of the main supporter of the resistance in Lebanon and Palestine. They want to take revenge against the Syrian state, against the people, the leadership, and the army, which supported the resistance in Lebanon and the resistance in Palestine."⁶

As the conflict in Syria escalated into a full-fledged civil war, Hizbollah found itself gradually downplaying its more accommodating narrative regarding the need to reform and compromise, while emphasizing the importance of supporting Assad and highlighting the negative role of foreign interests and their desire to destroy "Syria as a state, as a people,

as a society and as an army.”⁷ The tones have escalated sharply, with Nasrallah stating in a speech on April 30, 2013 that “Syria has friends that will not allow it to fall into the hands of the United States, Israel, or *takfiri* groups,” referring to a radical branch of Salafism.⁸

This statement is significant, whether it reveals Nasrallah’s authentic view of the conflict or his sophisticated rhetoric intended to justify his controversial policy on Syria. First, the statement clarifies Hizbollah’s narrative of the Syrian front as an extension of its national resistance campaign against American and Israeli interests. According to Hizbollah, such foreign players do not only aim to topple the regime and remove Syria from the axis of resistance, but also want to turn the country into a failed state. In this context, Nasrallah tied the Syrian events to the Palestinian cause as well, stating: “Apart from the target, what is taking place now in Syria and is going on is very dangerous, challenging, threatening and harmful to Syria itself and to the Palestinian cause as we used to say in the first days. Today what is being weaved to the Palestinian cause in the stage of Palestinian exhaustion, obscurity and unknown future, in the stage of Israeli arrogance and in the stage of the return of the Americans forcefully to the region [sic].”⁹ A few weeks later, Nasrallah made this link even more explicit by stating: “Syria is the backbone of the resistance, and support for the resistance and the resistance cannot sit idly by while its back is being broken....If Syria falls then Palestine is lost and the resistance in Palestine is lost, Gaza, the West Bank, and Jerusalem will be lost.”¹⁰

But although Nasrallah’s statement underscored the links Hizbollah sees between Syria, its national resistance, and the Palestinian issue, in recent weeks the organization appears to have adopted an increasingly confrontational and even sectarian tone. In a speech delivered on May 25, 2013, Nasrallah stated that he had attempted mediation between the Assad regime and the opposition, but that this endeavor failed due to the anti-Assad forces’ refusal to find a peaceful solution for Syria.¹¹ By blaming the continuation of the conflict entirely on the opposition and by accusing its activists of extremism, Hizbollah has marked even more clearly the fault lines between the pro and anti-Assad forces, in Syria as well as within Lebanon. In addition Nasrallah has repeatedly referred to jihadists portions of the opposition as *takfiris*, an extremely charged word that clarifies the organization’s belligerence toward such groups.

At the same time, sectarian themes have gradually assumed more prominence, for example with Nasrallah emphasizing the importance of Hizbollah's role in protecting Shiite shrines (first and foremost the Sayyidah Zaynab Shrine in Damascus) as well as border towns in the al-Qusayr area.¹² Hizbollah, however, is extremely sensitive to this issue and has openly stated on many occasions that it is not acting based on a sectarian agenda, specifying that "they accused us of sectarianism. This is nonsense.... We fought in Bosnia and lost martyrs, in defense of whom? In defense of Muslim Sunnis in Bosnia. There are no Shia in Bosnia. All the hardships that we endured and will continue to endure are for the sake of Palestine. Nobody can accuse us of sectarianism."¹³

Finally, Hizbollah's increasingly confrontational strategy not only escalated the rhetoric with respect to the opposition, but it also resulted in the organization openly admitting involvement in the war and military support for Assad, a claim it had denied until its May 25, 2013 speech (and even in this speech, Nasrallah stated that Hizbollah's active involvement had only started the previous month). Nasrallah has also been careful to stipulate that the struggle by Lebanese for Syria (and in Syria) should not be exported to Lebanon, with the Hizbollah leader emphasizing his intention to avoid military clashes within Lebanon.

When Hizbollah openly acknowledged its active involvement in the Syrian conflict, the group confirmed what the international community already knew: that Hizbollah had not limited itself to offering moral, political, and limited military support to the Assad regime; but that the group had also began to send its fighters in masses to fight side-by-side with the Syrian army.

Although over the past eighteen months there have been recurring reports of Hizbollah militants killed in Syria,¹⁴ it appears that the organization's involvement in the war has increased exponentially over the past six months, with the group backing the Syrian army and supporting it in both defensive and offensive missions.¹⁵ A particularly important example of this pattern of increasing involvement is the role Hizbollah has reportedly played in the fighting in the area around al-Qusayr. This border town in western Syria is the key to holding the Homs province, as well as to securing a safe corridor between Syria and Lebanon and

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establishing a link between the Syrian capital and the Alawite areas in the northwestern coastal areas of the country. Hizbollah's support for the regime in taking al-Qusayr from the rebel forces is the culmination of the group's increased involvement in the conflict and confirmation that Hizbollah, from secondary actor, has now become a strategic ally for the Syrian regime.

Hizbollah in Syria: Domestic, Regional, and International Impact

Hizbollah's growing military and political role in Syria has been accompanied by a clear narrative that portrays the battle for Damascus as associated with the group's resistance in Lebanon as well as with the Palestinian cause. However, Hizbollah's self-portrait as a the champion of Arab interests trying to prevent American and Israeli agents from toppling Assad and destroying Syria has failed to win the hearts and minds of the majority of the Middle East. In fact, throughout the region Hizbollah has been repeatedly accused of harboring a double standard in its support for the Arab Awakening and of placing narrow parochial interests above the call to resist injustice.

Within Lebanon, the group has seen a decline in its reputation and legitimacy, especially within the Sunni community. This trend is not new, as the political and sectarian divide between the Shiite and the Sunni communities dates back at the very least to the post-2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the subsequent Syrian withdrawal. Still, the Syrian crisis has exacerbated existing divisions: for example, a recent poll showed that only 5 percent of the Lebanese Sunni community declared support for Hizbollah, against 94 percent of the Lebanese Shiites. The poll also showed a growing disaffection toward Hizbollah from the Christian community, with only approximately one third of Lebanese Christians openly siding with Nasrallah's group.¹⁶

Walid Jumblatt, a seasoned politician and the leader of the Druze community and the (Druze) Progressive Socialist Party, expressed this sense of frustration with Hizbollah's staunch support for Assad, stating, "I felt sad when I heard that Sayyed Hasan – who was the Arab and Islamic hero in 2006 – insists on belittling himself this way...defending a regime that will not last."¹⁷ Jumblatt had also previously stated that "anyone who defends Palestinians...cannot stand against the Syrian people."¹⁸

This statement briefly summarizes the serious legitimacy challenge, in Lebanon and regionally, that fighting in Syria poses to Hizbollah.

The organization built its reputation and support as a non-sectarian movement focused on external resistance and on protecting Lebanese and Arab rights. Following the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, and after the self-proclaimed “divine victory” against Israel in 2006, Hizbollah’s regional and domestic reputation soared. This trend, however, has been reversed in recent years, first in May 2008, when the organization turned its weapons inward against other Lebanese groups, and later with the accusations launched by the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) of direct involvement in orchestrating and executing the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri. Syria is another nail in the coffin of Hizbollah’s reputation as the national resistance, as it strengthens the perception of the group acting on a self-serving, parochial, and sectarian basis and of being more interested in its strategic partnership with Tehran and Damascus than its role and status in Beirut. Similarly, Hizbollah’s claims to be fighting on behalf of the Palestinians are challenged by the Syrian regime’s multiple attacks against Palestinian refugees in Syria, as well as Hamas’ public distancing from Assad and his war.

Hizbollah’s political foes – the March 14 forces led by Saad Hariri and the Future Movement – have relied on these apparent contradictions to build a case against Hizbollah in Lebanon. Already in August 2011 Saad Hariri stated: “Is there in history any resistance movement that supported an oppressive ruler against oppressed people or supported despotic regimes against peoples demanding freedom?...It is shameful that Hizbollah views the Syrian uprising from the perspective of the Iranian interest, not the will of the Arab peoples.”¹⁹ More recently, in April 2013, the March 14 General Secretariat declared that Hizbollah’s role in Syria “will not only threaten Lebanon and its national unity, but the entire region and even the world,” adding that “Hizbullah bombarded Qusayr, Nahriyeh, Burhaniyeh and Saqarji...from its positions in al-Qasr and Hawsh al-Sayyed Ali. They bombed civilians and killed many women and children.... If we have to, we will target civilians just like they do. Our civilians are not less valuable than theirs. Hizbullah is killing arbitrarily in Syria.”²⁰ These same

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arguments are echoed across the Middle East, and especially in countries that have openly taken a stand in support of the anti-Assad opposition, like the Gulf countries.

While so far the Shiite community within Lebanon continues to back Hizbollah and its involvement in Syria, in the future such support may begin to quiver as sectarian relations within Lebanon collapse under the pressure of Hizbollah's role in Syria, and as more Hizbollah militants die in fighting Assad's war. So far the organization's involvement in Syria has been used by anti-Hizbollah leaders within the Shiite community to criticize the group. For example, historic friend-turned-foe Subbhi al-Tufayli stated in February 2013: "Hizbollah should not be defending the criminal regime that kills its own people and that has never fired a shot in defense of the Palestinians...those Hizbollah fighters who are killing children and terrorizing people and destroying houses in Syria will go to hell."²¹ While overall such criticism does not alter the fact that Hizbollah can still count on the support of the Lebanese Shiite community and its Christian allies, led by General Michel Aoun, the organization's behavior in Syria has clearly inflamed its critics.

Not surprisingly, Hizbollah's increased participation in the Syrian civil war has worsened its already rocky relations with the Syrian opposition. Even in the early days of the demonstrations, protesters repeatedly burned Hizbollah flags and openly called for the Lebanese-Shiite organization to back off.²² More recently, the level of animosity has escalated, with Hizbollah militants treated as enemy combatants by the Syrian opposition and with the chief of staff of the Free Syrian Army, General Salim Idriss, declaring: "Hizbollah fighters are invading Syrian territory. And when they continue to do that and the Lebanese authorities don't take any action to stop them coming to Syria, I think we are allowed to fight Hizbollah fighters inside [Lebanese] territory."²³ In an ironic twist, Hizbollah is labeled as a "foreign occupier" and threatened that its presence in Syrian territory will be met by local "resistance." In the Salafist circles, in Syria and abroad, Hizbollah is also depicted as an enemy of the Syrian revolution, with the group referred to as the "party of the devil" and a "terrorist organization."²⁴

Hizbollah's involvement has also drawn similar regional criticism, with Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag rhetorically asking, "How could a party that calls itself the party of God wage war to kill innocent men, women and children ... it should change its name to

the party of Satan,”²⁵ and with the Gulf Cooperation Council labeling Hizbollah as a terrorist organization and taking steps to target the group’s financial assets.²⁶ Influential Sunni Muslim cleric Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi also made militant and sectarian remarks against Hizbollah, calling it the “Party of Satan” and stating: “The leader of the party of the Satan comes to fight the Sunnis...Now we know what the Iranians want... They want continued massacres to kill Sunnis.” In addition, Qaradawi openly called for Sunnis to join the jihad against Assad.²⁷

More generally, the level of regional support for Hizbollah has been negatively affected by its involvement in the Syrian civil war. For example, popular support for Hizbollah between 2010 and 2012 fell by 10 percent in Egypt and by a staggering 26 percent in Jordan.²⁸ Naturally this negative perception extends to other strong supporters of the Assad regime, including both Russia and Iran. At the same time, the rising regional criticism around Hizbollah’s role in Syria is further strengthened by the growing sectarian tones of the civil war. In this sense, the rising internal tensions within Lebanon can be interpreted as a reflection of a larger, and worrisome, regional trend.

Internationally, the combined pressure of Hizbollah’s involvement in Syria, the STL indictment, and the recent Bulgarian accusations of direct involvement in the July 2012 Burgas terrorist attack have had a broad impact and led the European Union to alter its neutral stance with respect to Hizbollah. On July 22, 2013 the European Union decided to send a strong political signal against Hizbollah’s growing regional and international activism by designating Hizbollah’s military wing as a terrorist organization. Labeling Hizbollah as a terrorist organization helps weaken the group’s political legitimacy and international standing, both of which are highly valued by the Lebanese Shiite organization. Nonetheless, from a practical standpoint the EU’s new categorization of Hizbollah’s military wing does not constitute a huge hurdle for the organization.

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Hizbollah's stance with respect to Syria has created a rift with recent political allies, like the Druze community, while souring the already tense political relations with the March 14 forces. Overall, this has led to a rise in inter-sectarian tensions within Lebanon, resulting in repeated armed clashes between pro and anti-Assad supporters, mostly localized in the historically troubled areas around the northeast border city of Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city. The rising number of clashes has been fueled by the growing polarization of Lebanese society and by the growing influence and strength of Sunni Salafist organizations, which have been urging their followers to support the Syrian opposition as broadly as possible while adopting an antagonist approach with respect to Hizbollah. So far open clashes in Lebanon between Sunni supporters of the anti-Assad forces and Hizbollah have been limited, but more recent episodes – including the May 2013 rocket attack against the al-Dahiya suburb, Hizbollah's stronghold in southern Beirut – indicate that inter-sectarian relations within Lebanon have hit a new low.

Hizbollah calculates that its involvement in Syria will not lead to a broader internal civil war in Lebanon, a scenario that would deeply threaten its position in the country and likely weaken it. However, the domestic climate in Lebanon is exceptionally tense, especially given the current state of political paralysis following the fall of the government of PM Najib Mikati, which did not survive the growing domestic tensions exacerbated by the Syrian civil war. Lebanon's next parliamentary elections are unlikely to take place as scheduled in the summer of 2013, thus leaving the country in a state of political limbo and weakness. In this context, Hizbollah's open declaration of war in Syria may truly complicate the group's standing in Lebanon.

Hizbollah in Syria: Looking Ahead

By supporting Assad so visibly, actively, and extensively, Hizbollah has taken a huge risk. So far the organization may have concluded that the prize is worth the fight, given that Hizbollah's military contribution is proving crucial to Assad, offering a lifeline to the exhausted Syrian army. Informed by the belief that losing Syria will jeopardize the organization's political, military, and regional position, Hizbollah has decided to put everything on the line.

From Israel's vantage, Hizbollah's current strategy on Syria places the group in a difficult predicament, and overall, in a weaker position. This

is the case because of its political decline within Lebanon and regionally, but also because of its substantial military involvement in the civil war. Furthermore, in the longer term, Hizbollah's decision to support Assad and become directly involved in the conflict may prove to be a strategic blunder for the group. This assessment was expressed in a recent speech by the IDF chief of staff, referring to "flames" that have seized the edge of Nasrallah's robe that could potentially threaten his position in Lebanon and beyond.

Even if Assad and his allies were to prevail in Syria (still an unlikely scenario), Hizbollah may yet find itself in a weaker position, after having alienated a large part of its regional and domestic constituency. This will be the case especially if the organization will begin suffering substantial casualties among its ranks, which could in turn jeopardize part of the support from the Lebanese Shiite community. In this scenario, Hizbollah would manage to preserve its strategic partnership with Iran and Syria, but would still be politically weaker and have a dire need to regroup after its military losses in Syria. As a result, the organization would not be in an immediate position to initiate a confrontation with Israel.

If Assad and his regime were to implode, Hizbollah's status in both Syria and Lebanon would be even more at risk: a regime change would empower the anti-Syrian opposition and weaken both Hizbollah's as well as Iran's position in the Middle East. In both cases, Hizbollah would come out of the war in a more uncertain and weaker position, even though the organization's military force in Lebanon and its alliance with Lebanese-Shiite community and with Iran would likely be enough to stop its implosion. In addition Hizbollah may in the future have a taste of its own medicine and suffer retaliatory violent attacks from the Salafist groups in both Syria as well as Lebanon. Here too in this scenario Nasrallah's organization would need to retreat and regroup before considering opening a new military front by attacking Israel.

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Yet Israel would be ill-advised to interpret Hizbollah's current weakness as an opportunity to become directly involved in the conflict in Syria or to target its longstanding adversary in Lebanon directly. Indeed, despite its numerous problems, Hizbollah remains a significant foe

with formidable military power and would still be capable of engaging in a relatively protracted and extremely damaging war against Israel. Moreover, perceived Israeli aggression against Syria, or even more so, directly against Hizbollah in Lebanon, would likely contribute to improve the level of support for the organization and unite the country as a reaction to the common threat. As such, Israel should be mindful of this predicament and avoid being dragged into the Syrian civil war or into a war in Lebanon.

Notes

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