

Beyond the “Divine Victory”: New Challenges Facing Hizbollah

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Since the beginning of the Arab uprisings in late 2010, the Middle East has experienced fast-paced and pervasive social and political change. The so-called “Arab spring” has been redefining the balance of power and reshuffling the political cards in the region, affecting all existing political and military organizations alike.

In this sense, Hizbollah is no exception. However, while scholars and decision makers agree that the past year has been a crucial one for the Lebanese Shiite organization, there seems to be widespread disagreement over the impact of the ongoing regional and domestic developments on Nasrallah’s organization.

On the one hand there is a relatively widespread belief that the shifts in the Middle Eastern balance of power and the regional rise of political Islam will highly benefit groups like Hamas or Hizbollah, as well as their so-called “axis of resistance.” Even many who disagree with this concept, objecting to the overly simplistic downplaying of the differences between the local political processes and the distinct Islamist parties, concur that Hizbollah has not tremendously suffered from the ongoing social and political change. On the contrary, they argue, the group has been able to weather the storm of the “Arab spring” by repositioning itself at the center of the Lebanese political arena, enjoying both the rise of a friendly government under Prime Minister Najib Mikati as well as the de facto marginalization of the pro-Western March 14 forces and their Cedar Revolution. At the regional level, Hizbollah has also seen the demise of old regional foes, chief among them the Egyptian regime under Mubarak.

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Based on these assessments, Hizbollah, unaffected by the Arab uprisings, presents as a remarkable island of stability in a rapidly changing region. However, a closer look at Hizbollah's current security and political environment reveals certain serious cracks in the group's self-portrait as a paragon of internal control and external strength. Specifically, there is reason to believe that Nasrallah's organization is under serious threat as its legitimacy and relevance in the region are called into question. Hizbollah finds itself under threat because of ongoing political change at the regional level, increasing domestic tensions within Lebanon, and in the wake of internal organizational setbacks.

The Regional and Ideological Threat: The Unpredictable Impact of the "Arab Spring"

With the onset of the Arab uprisings in late 2010, Hizbollah's stance with respect to the protest movements in the Middle East was one of unequivocal support, especially in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain.

The fall of the Egyptian regime was particularly welcomed by Hizbollah, which saw in the downfall of Mubarak the decline of one of the organization's main regional opponents. Mubarak, defined by the organization as an Israeli and American puppet, was critical of the Lebanese Shiite group during the 2006 Second Lebanon War. In turn,

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over the past few years, Nasrallah's group has repeatedly expressed its opposition to the Egyptian regime, criticizing its relationship with Israel, its opposition to Hamas, and its role during Operation Cast Lead (2008-9), and going as far as calling for a popular uprising against the government.¹ After the collapse of the Mubarak regime, Hizbollah argued that it found itself in a much stronger position, as "the major blow to the resistance... was the participation of the Egyptian regime in the Camp David agreement and consequently the emergence [i.e., departure] of Egypt from the

Arab-Israeli struggle."² With Mubarak gone, Hizbollah contended, soon the Israeli-Egyptian détente would also collapse, shifting the balance of power in the Arab-Israeli conflict in favor of the "resistance."

Similarly, Hizbollah leveraged the political unrest elsewhere in the Middle East to boost its cause and advance the discourse of the “resistance.” In the words of Nasrallah, the protests represented “the revolution of the poor, the free, the freedom seekers, and the rejecters of humiliation and disgrace which this nation [Egypt] was subject to due to giving up to the will of America and Israel....It is the revolution... against...the regime’s policy in the Arab-Israeli struggle.”³

These attempts to capitalize on the “Arab spring” and reframe the ongoing uprising as a process favorable to Hizbollah are particularly interesting: they show how the organization feels the need to have its discourse included and validated by the protests. In other words, Hizbollah is attempting to forge a link between its “resistance” and the “Arab spring,” mostly because the protesters themselves had *not* made such a link. From a political and ideological perspective, Hizbollah and its political discourse have not in fact 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.

However, these attempts to reframe the uprisings have become increasingly difficult since the beginning of the political unrest in Syria. In fact, when the “Arab spring” finally hit Hizbollah’s longstanding friend and ally, the Assad regime, Nasrallah’s group adopted a remarkably different posture.

Instead of enthusiastically supporting the protests, as in the cases of Egypt and Bahrain, Hizbollah immediately sided with the government, with Nasrallah praising the role of Syria in the Middle East and with the Hizbollah-controlled media creating ad hoc campaigns to discredit the anti-regime movement, for example by downplaying its size or by accusing the protesters of having been paid to take part in the anti-regime demonstrations.⁴ Even as the anti-Assad regime demonstrations escalated, revealing the depth of the internal divisions within Syria, Hizbollah still remained unwavering in its commitment to the Alawite regime.

As such, the unlikely alliance between the protestors behind the “Arab spring” and Hizbollah has been deeply challenged by events in Syria, showing the existing rift between the discourse of the uprisings, centered 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

Trying to minimize the negative impact of supporting Syria, Hizbollah's secretary general denied the application of a double standard, arguing that the Assad regime is fundamentally different from its regional counterparts. In fact, Hizbollah affirms, Syria is the only country that strongly opposes US-Israeli interests in the region, and it is also the only country where the population is strongly divided between pro-Assad and anti-Assad forces.⁵ Moreover, according to Secretary General Nasrallah, Assad has undertaken important internal reforms, thus complying with the demands of the protesters.⁶ In this sense, Hizbollah asserted that the ongoing demonstrations are merely a consequence of Assad's unwillingness to "bow" to US-Israeli interests, rather than the result of concrete unaddressed social and political grievances.⁷

However, despite this reframing of Hizbollah's support for the regime, public opinion within the region does not seem to be convinced by Nasrallah's defense. First, the political opposition in Syria has been extremely critical of Hizbollah's support of the regime, with the protesters burning Hizbollah flags and openly calling for the Lebanese Shiite group to "back off."⁸ Within Lebanon, the Sunni community has been equally critical of Nasrallah's group, with Saad Hariri, leader of the March 14 coalition, rhetorically asking: "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 people."⁹ The pro-March 14 newspaper *Now Lebanon* similarly stated, "Any ally of a dictator is an enemy of the Arab street."¹⁰

Therefore, Hizbollah's ongoing support for the Assad regime represents the Achilles' heel of the group's strategy to ride the wave of the "Arab spring." Moreover, this backing also threatens the group's standing and popularity across the region.

The ongoing unrest in Syria portends a serious threat to Hizbollah in additional ways as well, as prolonged internal violence and regime weakness could hinder Syria's ability to stay involved in Lebanon and continue to back Hizbollah, as well as its ability to direct weapons and logistical support from Iran to Hizbollah efficiently. If the Syrian regime

were to fall, Hizbollah would lose a crucial ally in the region, and it may have a hard time building good relations with the same opposition forces that it previously accused of being on the US payroll. Indeed, regime change in Syria could provide the Cedar Revolution and Hizbollah's political opponents within Lebanon a powerful second wind.

Finally, the potential impact of the “Arab spring” could extend even beyond the ideological level and the deterioration in the status of Hizbollah's ally, the Assad regime. Indeed, the ongoing Arab uprisings also have the potential to impact negatively on the group's main strategic partner, Iran. The Islamic Republic is challenged by the “Arab spring,” both ideologically as well as practically, as the regime fears that the protests will rekindle the internal opposition forces to the establishment that sparked the 2009 mass protests against the government. In turn, a weakened Iran represents a serious problem for Hizbollah, as the group has historically counted on the Islamic Republic for logistical assistance, as well as ideological and political backing.

The Domestic Threat: The Weakening of the Internal Political Alliance

Hizbollah's ongoing support for the Assad regime in Syria is also highly significant at the domestic level. Specifically, Hizbollah's stance vis-à-vis Syria has been one of the key reasons behind the rising tensions between Hizbollah and the March 14 bloc, led by the Future Movement and the Sunni community. This rise in inter-sectarian Sunni-Shiite tensions within Lebanon is a problematic trend for all political groups alike, including Hizbollah. However, the rivalry and intense political opposition between the Hizbollah-led March 8 political bloc and the March 14 coalition is nothing new: this trend has been an important feature of Lebanese domestic politics since the Syrian withdrawal in 2005.

What is different today is that Hizbollah is also beginning to face increasing pressure both from the political opposition and from within the ranks of its own political allies. In turn, this represents a new and serious domestic threat. In this sense, the main worrisome development for Hizbollah is the progressive cooling of relations between the group and Prime Minister Mikati. Most prominently, Mikati and Hizbollah

have been increasingly at odds with respect to the issue of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL).

Always starkly against the Tribunal, Hizbollah has adopted an increasingly defiant attitude regarding the STL, especially since the indictments were issued in August 2010 against members of Nasrallah's group. For example, following the indictments, the secretary general mocked Lebanon's international commitments to the UN court by repeatedly asserting that no political force or government would be able to arrest the suspects, adding, "I believe that not in 30 days or 60 days or one year or two years or 30 years or 300 years, they would find, detain or arrest them."¹¹ More recently, the group stated that it would veto any measure undertaken by the Cabinet to provide new funding for the Tribunal.

For his part, Prime Minister Mikati has attempted to thwart criticism from the international community by stressing his government's respect of all existing international commitments, insisting on both his intention to cooperate with the STL and apprehend the suspects as well as his commitment to continue financing the STL.¹² Indeed, the Prime Minister has openly admitted he considers this to be a crucial issue, one worth fighting for. In other words, with Hizbollah plainly opposing the

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STL funding and Mikati publically pushing for it, the level of tension within the pro-Hizbollah government reached unprecedented heights. A crisis was averted once Mikati found a way to finance the Tribunal without submitting the proposal to a vote in the Cabinet, thus saving face and avoiding a political crisis.

However, in the long term, the differences between Hizbollah and Mikati represent a serious threat to the Lebanese-Shiite organization and its capacity to preserve a non-hostile political environment. The differences between the two political actors are in fact not limited to the issue of the STL. The Prime Minister is quietly attempting to downplay Lebanon's support for Syria (for example, by abstaining in the UNSC vote against the European draft resolution condemning the events in Syria), while Hizbollah is making no secret of its support for the Assad

regime. Nasrallah recently minimized the ongoing cross border Syrian incursions,¹³ while Hizbollah’s parliamentary representatives contested the investigations by Lebanon’s Internal Security Services into the kidnappings of Syrian dissenters residing in Lebanon.¹⁴ In the long term, this rift puts the Prime Minister in a very difficult situation, challenging him either to concede to Hizbollah’s demands – which in turn would result in a loss of his domestic and international credibility – or to resign from his post, catapulting the country into another political crisis.

The rising tensions between the Prime Minister and Hizbollah have been accompanied by other cracks in Hizbollah’s political coalition. For example, recent declarations by Druze leader Walid Jumblatt have strongly emphasized his personal differences with Nasrallah’s organization, including on STL funding and on the relationship with Syria.¹⁵ For the time being, Jumblatt has expressed interest in remaining part of the “pro-Hizbollah” government, but the alliance is particularly weak and heavily tied to political developments in Syria.

The possibility of the Party of God losing its current political backing and the country submerging into another crisis deeply threatens the group’s political power and role within Lebanon, while also questioning Hizbollah’s capacity to remain relevant in the rapidly changing region.

The Internal Threat: The Impact of the Counter-Intelligence War

In addition to the ongoing turmoil at the regional and domestic levels, Hizbollah may be facing internal problems, suggested by the November 2011 alleged uncovering of a CIA-orchestrated spy network that infiltrated Nasrallah’s organization. Even if this episode was reported by most international media as an isolated incident, the truth is that the alleged uncovering of a CIA spy ring is just the latest chapter in Hizbollah’s post-Second Lebanon War “counter-intelligence war.”

Indeed, following the war Hizbollah focused on improving both its intelligence and its counter-intelligence capabilities. Regarding the former objective, the group has been engaged in attempting to improve its knowledge of its main enemy, in part through recruiting informants and attempting to set up spy rings within Israel.¹⁶ With respect to counter-intelligence, Hizbollah has emphasized both the importance of preventing infiltration and information leaks from within the organization, as well as the priority of investing further in its independent fiber optic

communications network, sponsored by Iran, specifically to prevent the infiltration and disruption of its own communications system.

In this context, the group has relied specifically on an ad hoc secret body created in the early 2000s to perform the role of internal watchdog, prevent infiltration, and enforce organizational security: the "counter-intelligence" (*amn al-muddad*) unit.¹⁷ Using both SIGINT – through its sophisticated electronic apparatus, courtesy of Iran – as well as HUMINT, the group's efforts to pursue alleged double agents and prevent internal infiltration has adopted a renewed, more aggressive, and increasingly public dimension in the post-2006 years. Indeed, since 2006 the group has focused on an aggressive campaign to target alleged spies and informants operating within Lebanon. This project gained momentum and stamina in 2009.¹⁸

However, despite the domestic relevance of these episodes, the event that truly changed the internal narrative over this issue was the June 2011 reports over the direct infiltration of "agents" within the ranks of Hizbollah proper. In fact, in June 2011 Hizbollah revealed that it had uncovered a spy cell operating within its own ranks, and that the suspected spies included over five Hizbollah members.¹⁹

These reports contributed to undermining Hizbollah's reputation in terms of its unity and cohesion, as for the first time the group admitted to infiltration of its ranks. In this context, it is not surprising that when in September 2011 new reports in the Arab press stated that Hizbollah had uncovered five additional suspected "Israeli" spies operating within its own ranks, the Lebanese Shiite organization was quick to dismiss the reports as "fabrications."²⁰ However, in November 2011, the group took the opposite stand and openly announced that it had foiled another internal infiltration, unmasking a number of Hizbollah members who were allegedly serving as CIA informants. The announcement was again denied by US official authorities in Lebanon, but confirmed unofficially by operatives among the local staff.

In disclosing such information, Hizbollah is carefully balancing two mutually exclusive needs: the need to boost its reputation by promoting its alleged achievements and the equally important organizational need to preserve its reputation of unity, cohesion, and strength. Thus, while the group is anxious to promote its counter-intelligence, it also wants to preserve its reputation of cohesion and unity and downplay the level of

internal defection. In the aftermath of the 2006 war, the group’s reputation for invulnerability has taken a series of important hits, first with the 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus, and then with the repeated reports of internal infiltration, first revealed in June 2011. At the time, Nasrallah’s revelations were quite explosive, undermining his earlier claims that Hizbollah was immune to infiltration and somewhat tarnishing the group’s aura.²¹ To counter the (from Hizbollah’s perspective, intolerable) perception of internal weakness stemming from the alleged internal breaches, Hizbollah has labored to downgrade their size, minimize the number and rank of officials involved, and also argue that in many cases the alleged spies were not in fact directly affiliated with Nasrallah’s group.

At the same time, news reports from the Arab world have focused on attempts to grasp the internal consequences of exposing the alleged spy rings. Accordingly, Hizbollah, known to take internal security extremely seriously, has undertaken an in-depth internal investigation of its rank and file to prevent further cases of collaborators and double agents, leading to the removal of some high level officials over their alleged inefficiency in preventing infiltration, while openly tackling the previously unmentioned issue of internal corruption.²²

While it is almost impossible using open intelligence to conduct a precise evaluation of the actual extent and impact of the “spy files” and the related measures undertaken by the group, it remains clear that the reports of the such internal security breaches in the Lebanese media represents an important juncture in Hizbollah’s recent history, pointing to the existence of an internal challenge to the group, which joins the aforementioned regional and domestic challenges.

Hizbollah’s support for the increasingly alienated Assad regime in Syria has contributed to lowering the organization’s regional standing and its ability to ride the wave of the “Arab spring.”

Hizbollah in 2012: An Assessment

Despite the widespread belief that Hizbollah has emerged unscathed, if not strengthened, by the ongoing Arab uprisings, this article contends that the group has indeed been negatively affected by the ongoing regional and domestic change.

Regionally, the group's support for the increasingly alienated Assad regime in Syria has contributed to lowering the organization's regional standing and its ability to ride the wave of the "Arab spring." Moreover, the ongoing downfall of the Assad regime represents a concrete threat to the organization, which now risks losing one of its historically crucial allies. The potential for this wave of social and political protests to extend to Iran also deeply threatens Hizbollah's security and political environment. Domestically, in addition to the preexisting tensions between Hizbollah and the March 14 political opposition, Hizbollah's overconfidence in dealing with its own political allies is resulting in a decline in domestic political support, a trend exemplified by the progressive cooling of the relations with Prime Minister Mikati. Internally, the recent revelations of the alleged infiltration of Hizbollah have tarnished the group's aura of invulnerability and its myth of solid internal cohesion. Even though Hizbollah has attempted to diminish the impact of the internal breaches by downplaying their size and magnitude, the revelations were damaging and have triggered some internal reorganization to prevent any recurrences.

The fall of the Assad government would not be enough to bring about Hizbollah's demise, but would be sufficient to weaken its standing, both domestically as well as regionally. At the same time, no one should be fooled into believing Hizbollah would go down without a strong fight.

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

Considering the sophistication and magnitude of the group's military apparatus and its solid partnership with both the Lebanese-Shiite community and Iran, the fall of the Assad government would not be enough to bring about the demise of the group but would be sufficient to weaken its standing, both domestically as well as regionally. This could certainly be seen as a positive development for Israel, in contrast with the grim

assessments that the "Arab spring" will inevitably worsen Israel's position in the region on all fronts. At the same time, no one should be fooled into believing Hizbollah would go down without a strong fight.

Nonetheless, significant political change in Syria would be a highly problematic development for Nasrallah's organization, especially now that the group finds itself in a position of internal weakness and regional ambiguity. Given the alternative scenarios, Hizbollah may attempt to try to preserve this current uneasy status quo, hoping for Syria to ride out the political storm as quickly as possible.

Notes

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