

# The Institutional Transformations of Hamas and Hizbollah

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Hamas and Hizbollah are complex and multidimensional groups, simultaneously military organizations, political parties, and social movements. Analyzed by Western analysts primarily for their terrorist and military infrastructures and operations, these groups have also developed intricate social, political, and cultural structures to complement their military power. Thus at the same time that the military strength reinforces the groups' political power and influence, the socio-political infrastructures serve as a force multiplier. Consequently, both organizations invest a significant portion of their financial resources and political capital in non-military activities, and these non-violent dimensions, particularly those directly related to garnering and reinforcing popular support, have become focal determinants of the groups' strategic and military-related operational choices.

Beyond being hybrid organizations in their combining military, political, and social activism, Hamas and Hizbollah are also hybrid non-state armed groups that over time developed characteristics normally associated with state actors. Since 2007, Hamas has been widely perceived as accountable for the security and political situation in the Gaza Strip, while Hizbollah has long been involved with governing the Shiite areas under its control, from southern Lebanon to the Dayihe suburb of South Beirut.

This article analyzes the current role and status of Hamas and Hizbollah within their respective political environments, presenting

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both similarities and differences between their situational features and evolutionary trends. It explores the impact of the Arab awakening on these groups' evolutions. Finally, the essay discusses the security challenges these trends may pose to Israel and suggests how Israeli policies toward both organizations might respond to these trends most effectively

### **Hamas, Hizbollah, and their Political Environments**

Hamas and Hizbollah are deeply entrenched in their societies. Although their evolutionary trajectories differ, both movements have evolved from being marginal players to mainstream military and political organizations.

Hamas grew out of a mass-based movement, the Gaza branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The engagement of the MB in the Strip was initially focused on the *da'wa* and social work, with the objective of bringing an Islamic "cultural renaissance" to Gaza. In the early days of the first intifada, which erupted in the Palestinian territories in late 1987, the Gaza-based MB morphed itself into Hamas. The transformation, which was manifested by adding a military dimension to the popular infrastructure of the MB, was intended to advance two closely related goals: undermining the dominance of the Fatah-led PLO in the Palestinian arena, and leading a relentless struggle against Israel under the banner of Islam and nationalism as a solution to the grievances of the Palestinian people.

Hizbollah too emerged on the basis of a mass-based movement, although its organizational roots were not as strictly defined as those from which Hamas sprouted. It was established in the early 1980s by several Lebanese religious and political leaders and by Tehran, which sought to exploit the specific conditions in Lebanon at that time to export the Islamic Revolution. The creation of Hizbollah intensified the ongoing process of radicalization and social unrest among the Shiite community in Lebanon, spurred also by the frustration over the perceived inability of the mainstream Shiite movement Amal to secure the sectarian interests of this community, the lack of a strong central government in the country, and the effects of the Israeli invasion in 1982. With massive military backup from Iran, Hizbollah emerged with a very clear *raison d'être*: waging Islamic resistance against Israel.<sup>1</sup> Israel's military presence in Lebanon, which lasted until 2000, provided Hizbollah with an ongoing

and ever-growing reason for military entrenchment and activity, particularly in the southern area of the country, and a means to mobilize popular support for its self-appointed role as the defender of Lebanon against a foreign invader. Unlike the case of Hamas, Hizbollah's social-political infrastructure developed gradually over time, as the organization came to realize the need for popular backup for its military infrastructure and in accordance with its growing intra-Lebanese political ambitions.

Over the years, both groups built sophisticated military apparatuses, although Hizbollah's strength far exceeds that of Hamas. The Lebanese Shiite group is by far Lebanon's most formidable military organization, and its units are trained both to wage attacks against Israel as well as to maintain power in the areas it controls.

Hamas also has an impressive force, and the group now commands two parallel structures: its military wing (the Izz a-Din al-Qassam Brigades), and the security sector in Gaza. In the aftermath of the 2007 armed expulsion of the Fatah forces from the Gaza Strip and the takeover of the area by Hamas, the military wing grew in size and capacity. At the same time, Hamas relied on the security sector to crack down on internal opposition and solidify its control of the Strip.

Politically, both groups have evolved in the past decades and now occupy an important place within their respective arenas. Hizbollah has participated in Lebanon's political system since becoming a political party in the early 1990s in the aftermath of Lebanon's civil war. Following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, Hizbollah's political role institutionalized further, with the group first joining Lebanon's executive cabinet in 2005. This occurred while the organization was officially allowed, in accordance with the stipulations of the Ta'if Agreement, to maintain its independent military infrastructure, due to the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon. The Lebanese Shiite group's political role was further entrenched in the May 2008 Doha agreement, basically granting Hizbollah, together with its political allies, veto power within the cabinet. Since January 2011, Hizbollah is a member of the parliamentary majority under the government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

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Hamas also became an institutional player within Palestinian politics after it underwent a strategic shift and decided to participate in the official political process and the Palestinian political institutional sphere, by competing in the 2005 municipal elections and in the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council. However, Hamas's position is more complex: the group is an "insider" in Gaza, where it serves as the government, while it is an "outsider" with respect to the political institutions of the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.

In operating as political parties and de facto rulers, both groups can count on their existing welfare and charity infrastructures to boost their legitimacy and popularity. Historically both organizations have actively provided a vast array of social services, from health care, to education, to welfare services to combat poverty. For instance in Gaza, where according to the most recent data approximately 39 percent of the population lives below the poverty line,<sup>2</sup> Hamas, together with UNRWA, is the most important food donor in the Strip, and this in turn represents an important source of legitimacy for the group. Hizbollah is in absolute numbers an even bigger player when it comes to social welfare activities. An example of this well-organized infrastructure is Hizbollah's Construction Foundation Jihad al-Binaa. After the 2006 war with Israel, Hizbollah rebuilt 5000 homes in 82 villages and repaired roads and infrastructure. The movement also promised to pay compensation to people whose houses were destroyed, offering \$12,000 for rent and furniture until homes were reconstructed, and spending approximately \$300 million for compensation.<sup>3</sup>

Having grown to large military, political, and social organizations, Hamas and Hizbollah have both experienced the challenge of adjusting their ideological aspirations as well as their military activities to the shifting political environment and the need to maintain popularity and enhance legitimacy.

Domestically, they have in the past decades downplayed some radical elements of their ideology in order to appeal to a larger audience. Hamas has always invested in promoting its identity as nationalist as well as Islamist, and in its 2005 political program, it deliberately softened its earlier stated ambitions to impose *sharia* in Gaza. Even since its 2007 takeover, despite the ongoing Islamization of Gaza, Hamas has adopted a cautious yet incremental approach with respect to imposing its Islamist vision of society.

Hizbollah, since becoming a political party, has narrowed its original goal to create an Islamic state within Lebanon. In its 2009 “Manifesto,” its revised ideological charter, the group omitted any reference to creating a state modeled after Iran, something that the group had clearly identified as a primary interest in its earlier charter, written in 1985. In addition, the group has invested in branding itself as both Arab and Lebanese, downplaying its strategic partnership with Iran.

With respect to their external relations in general and to Israel in particular, Hamas and Hizbollah have adopted two very different approaches. Outwardly, they both rely on similarly aggressive rhetoric towards Israel. However, over the years Hamas has adopted a more tempered discourse, for example by developing the concept of the *hudna* (a long term truce in return for a full withdrawal of Israel to the 1967 lines) and by discussing the de facto recognition of Israel,<sup>4</sup> whereas Hizbollah’s discourse leaves no room for maneuver at all with Israel.

Regarding their terrorist and military courses of action, both Hamas and Hizbollah have placed emphasis on entrenching their military power and from time to time demonstrate their operational capacity so as not to lose credibility in their commitment to the struggle against Israel. However, both have also displayed awareness of red lines, conscious that crossing them would trigger strong counteractions by Israel. By and large this is the case, despite incidents of miscalculation. The abduction of Israeli soldiers that provoked the Second Lebanon War in 2006 and the escalation in the rocket fire from the Gaza Strip that precipitated Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (December 2008-January 2009) are cases in point. Notably, deterring against precisely such eventualities has been a major motivating factor underlying the military buildup.

Finally, although both groups are deeply entrenched within their own society, they are not universally popular. In fact, the efforts of Hamas and Hizbollah to establish popularity do not convince the majority of their populations. The 2012 Pew Research Center polls show that support for Hizbollah is roughly at 40 percent, while being highly polarized (94 percent of the country’s Shiites support the group against only 5 percent of the Sunni community).<sup>5</sup> Support for Hamas within the Palestinian

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territories as of May 2011 was at 42 percent.<sup>6</sup> Even more significantly, in the June 2012 polls by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, roughly 27 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank and 31 percent of Palestinians in Gaza affirmed they would vote for Hamas' Change and Reform list if new legislative elections were to take place.<sup>7</sup>

Hamas's political status is weakened by the unpopularity of its rift with Fatah, as well as its shaky record of governance since 2007. Hizbollah, on the other hand, is largely distrusted by the majority of the Lebanese Sunni (and to a lesser extent Christian) community, especially following its temporary armed takeover of West Beirut in May 2008.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, as the next section discusses, recent events resulting from the Arab Spring have further challenged Hamas's and Hizbollah's standing in their domestic spheres and in the region.

### **Strategic Implications of the Arab Spring**

The past two years have produced a new discourse throughout the region, focused on socio-political rights and freedoms, civil society, and large scale use of strategic non-violent struggle. It has also seen the ascent to power of non-violent groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

This trend has likewise been manifested in the reshuffling of the political cards in both the Palestinian territories and Lebanon. The "Arab Spring" has led both Hamas and Hizbollah to undertake a number of significant changes at the ideological, political, and strategic levels. This is the case even though the regional protests have not resulted in a direct challenge to the groups' institutional roles.

Hamas reacted to the emerging regional trends by rethinking its strategy and political discourse, for example by emphasizing its interest in pursuing non-violent struggle in parallel with armed "resistance."<sup>9</sup> The regional changes have also spurred an internal debate on the organization's readiness to consider adherence to public opinion in case of a breakthrough in the political process towards an agreement with Israel. Similarly, an older debate on the possibility of a de facto recognition of Israel has been revived within Hamas. Moreover, the Palestinian organization has gone back to its roots by stressing its own links with the Brotherhood, both in Egypt and internationally.<sup>10</sup>

Hizbollah has evinced less inclination for evolution and shown no substantial changes in its political discourse. In addition, the group has been perceived as ideologically inconsistent with respect to the

Arab awakening. Hizbollah first took the side of the “Arab street” and supported the revolutions where it suited its political strategy (as in the case of Egypt), but later switched sides and stood by the Assad regime and against the political opposition in Syria. Hizbollah’s backing of Assad has led to widespread criticism against the group and its “hypocrisy,” both at the regional and domestic levels.<sup>11</sup>

For Hamas, the regional awakening heightened the issue of Palestinian reconciliation. In 2011 Hamas very much feared that the regional turmoil might extend to the Gaza Strip, fueled by the domestic discontent over the longstanding rift between Fatah and Hamas. The strong desire (shared by both Fatah and Hamas) to diffuse a potential “demonstration effect” of the “Arab Spring” on the Palestinian territories pushed both parties to sign the May 2011 “reconciliation agreement” in Cairo and to commit (at least on paper) to move beyond divisions and polarizations. However, the Cairo agreement served more to institutionalize the balance of power between Hamas and Fatah and send a goodwill gesture to the temporary military council ruling Egypt than to truly end the rift between the parties.<sup>12</sup> Currently, the reconciliation process is in fact frozen, as both Fatah and Hamas are unwilling to do what it takes to establish power sharing.

The political impact of the “Arab Spring” on Hizbollah is equally significant and related to the group’s alliance with Assad and his regime in Syria. Hizbollah’s backing of Assad has contributed to the deterioration of the already sour relations with the March 14 movement. It has also led to an escalation in the political and sectarian divide between Hizbollah and the Shiite community on the one hand, and the Sunni community on the other, backing the Assad regime and the opposition forces, respectively. The tensions at times escalate into full fledged armed clashes,<sup>13</sup> resulting in more internal instability and threatening Hizbollah’s domestic standing. In addition, Hizbollah appears to be losing some of its political clout with respect to its own political allies, largely diverging on the issue of Syria.

Strategically, the progressive escalation of the internal crisis in Syria has affected both Hamas and Hizbollah. Syria had traditionally been an important ally of both groups. In the case of Hamas, Syria has consistently backed the Palestinian group while also housing the headquarters of the Political Bureau. With respect to Hizbollah, Syria served as the connecting link between Iran and Lebanon, allowing the

flow of weapons and logistical support from Tehran to Hizbollah. Also, the Assad family was a strong political supporter of Hizbollah, and during the long decades of Syrian “tutelage” over Lebanon, Damascus protected the Lebanese-Shiite organization and its weapons.

However, despite both groups’ ties with the Assad regime, Hizbollah and Hamas reacted very differently to the political protests in Syria.

On the one hand, Hamas had a strong political connection with Assad as well as sectarian and religious ties to the Sunni majority protesting against the Alawite-dominated regime. As such, openly siding with the Syrian regime the way Hizbollah or Iran did was not a viable option for Hamas. This explains the initial reluctance displayed by Hamas leaders to condemn the Syrian regime and take the side of the protesters, as it did immediately in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt,<sup>14</sup> as well as its attempts to keep a low profile on the Syrian crisis. As the crisis escalated, Hamas’s policy of non-interference started to shift. The relationship with both Iran and the Assad regime quickly became lukewarm due to Hamas’s lack of open support for the Syrian regime.<sup>15</sup> With the escalation of the crisis, Hamas also gradually started to distance itself from Damascus, first by reducing its presence in Syria, and then by quietly relocating its political bureau.<sup>16</sup> The severed relationship between Syria and Hamas has indeed

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been one of the most important consequences of the “Arab Spring” for the Palestinian group. It represents a window of opportunity for Hamas to redefine its regional alliances and move away from the “axis of resistance,” leading the group closer to both Egypt and the Gulf countries. With these countries having a stronger impact on Hamas and its organizational outlook, the group’s pragmatism is likely to be encouraged.

Unlike Hamas, Hizbollah cannot afford to dissociate itself from Assad. Its logistical dependence on Syria and its ideological and logistical ties with Iran are crucial sources of power for the organization within the Shiite community and therefore in Lebanon as a whole.

In fact, Hizbollah appears to have no alternate effective supporter in the region, other than Syria and Iran. Even its relationships with the Syrian opposition forces are extremely antagonistic. As such, it is likely these

groups would choose to turn their backs on Hizbollah once Assad is gone and they are in power. Hence the turmoil in Syria and the threat to Assad's regime have placed Hizbollah in a very delicate position. The collapse of the Syrian regime would also reshuffle the political cards in Lebanon, giving strength and influence to Hizbollah's political opposition, backed by Saudi Arabia.

Thus although both Hamas and Hizbollah have been affected by the "Arab Spring" at the ideological, political, and strategic levels, Hamas's position seems substantially more promising than Hizbollah's. This is because the Palestinian group has been able to adapt to the shifting political environment – notwithstanding the obstacles to translating the readiness to reconcile with the PA into a real change in the Palestinian political framework, and the fact that Hamas's declared acceptance of a potential settlement with Israel has not yet been put to a test. In contrast, Hizbollah, with deeper strategic links to both Syrian and Iran, has been slower in responding to the regional changes.

### **Strategic Implications for Israel**

Although Hamas and Hizbollah have undergone different institutional developments, with the former emerging from a larger social movement and the latter initially created as a military organization, nowadays both groups have reached a similar status as complex social, military, and political organizations. Both groups have also evolved into quasi-state actors. Both organizations continue to represent a significant challenge for Israel, being militarily capable of triggering an armed confrontation. They are equally significant from a political perspective, as the views of Hamas and Hizbollah with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict influence and constrain the position of their respective societies.

The rapid process of social and political change set in motion by the "Arab Spring" has had an impact on the organizational outlook and strategy of both Hamas as well as Hizbollah – even though the groups have largely been able to hold on to their respective power and status. Hamas is still in charge of Gaza, and the Fatah-led calls to launch a Palestinian Arab Spring in 2011 did not amount to any substantial challenge to the group.<sup>17</sup> Hizbollah has been part of the parliamentary majority since January 2011, and the Mikati government has so far weathered the storm of the regional revolutions.

Even so, the ongoing regional turmoil in general, and the war in Syria in particular, have challenged these groups at the ideological, political, and strategic levels. The different coping strategies implemented by Hamas and Hizbollah to adapt to the “Arab Spring” signal that these groups are now undergoing very different institutional processes, and as such, they should be approached differently.

With respect to Hamas, the group has shown itself more pragmatic and able to adapt to the changing regional circumstances. To be sure, its readiness to change alliance is not just an indication of ideological and strategic flexibility, but also the result of its being the representative of a religious-national, not a sectarian community, and of having much less to lose than Hizbollah from breaking away from the Syrian-Iranian axis. Thus, Hamas is likely to benefit from some of the changes created by the Arab Spring, including the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt. As time passes, the isolation of Hamas seems an ever less realistic policy, which suggests that Israel might do well to consider adjusting its policy. Specifically, while pressurizing Hamas to bring its military buildup and activity to a halt, Israel should also take steps to engage with Hamas directly, as well as consider easing the economic restrictions on the Strip and stop obstructing the (notably half-hearted) intra-Palestinian reconciliation attempts. In turn, this could well enhance the chances of establishing a nationally legitimate and functioning authority in the Palestinian arena.

With respect to Hizbollah, the political calculation is quite different. The group has shown far less capacity to adapt, especially when compared to Hamas, and it is now in a much weaker position. In particular, the likely fall of Assad would inflict a hard, albeit not mortal, blow to the Lebanese Shiite organization. With this predicament in mind, Israel would do well not to initiate any hostility with respect to the group, as this might well reverse the process of domestic crisis and rally the Lebanese population behind the “Party of God.”

Given the different positions of Hamas and Hizbollah, Israel should also expect them to have different reactions to a potential Israeli attack on Iran. Hamas can be expected to exercise caution and stay at the margins of a confrontation in order to avoid risking an Israeli counter-reaction that would inevitably jeopardize their institutional gains thus far. This is particularly true as Hamas is currently repositioning itself away from the Syrian-Iranian axis and closer to Egypt as well as the Gulf states. In

the case of Hizbollah, the group would be more likely than Hamas to get involved, although a direct and full fledged military involvement should not be taken for granted, given the group's current domestic constraints.

However, in light of their professed anti-Israeli credo, Israel should continue to endorse careful, calculated containment, so as to make it hard for both groups to dictate the rules of the game and to trigger repeated cycles of violence when such a development suits them and their aim to reinforce their domestic standing.

### Notes

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