HIZBALLAH AND THE ARAB REVOLUTIONS: THE CONTRADICTION MADE APPARENT?

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Since the 1990s, Hizballah has defined itself along a number of parallel lines, each of which prior to 2011 appeared to support the other. The movement was simultaneously a sectarian representative of the Lebanese Shi'a, a regional ally of Iran and Syria, a defender of the Lebanese against the supposed aggressive intentions of Israel, and a leader of a more generically defined Arab and Muslim "resistance" against Israel and the West. As a result of the events of 2011, most important the revolt against the Asad regime in Syria, these various lines, which seemed mutually supportive, began to contradict one another. This has diminished Hizballah's position, though it remains physically unassailable for as long as the Asad regime in Syria survives.

The year 2011 witnessed a series of upheavals and revolutions, which launched a long-awaited process of change in some of the stagnant polities of the Arab-speaking world. It is too soon to draw any definitive conclusions regarding where these changes may lead or what the Arab world will look like when the storm has passed. Nevertheless, the transformations that have already taken place are presenting established political players across the Middle East with new and unfamiliar questions and dilemmas.

Prominent among those existing political forces facing new challenges as a result of regional changes is the Lebanese Shi'i Islamist Hizballah movement. Since the early 2000s, the Middle East has been dominated by a competition between the U.S.-led regional dispensation and a challenge to this hegemony undertaken by Iran and its allies.[1] Hizballah was and remains a key component of the Iran-led alliance, also constituting a central sectarian player in the Lebanese context and a champion of the idea of "resistance" against Israel and the United States. The emerging nature of the regional upheavals are posing difficulties for Hizballah on all three levels of its identity–as an Iran-aligned force, a Shi'i political player in the Lebanese context, and as the self-proclaimed champion of regional "resistance." This article will consider the origin and emergence of these difficulties and their likely implications for Hizballah's future.

The most urgent and central issues facing Hizballah of course relate to the uprising in Syria. Prior to the outbreak of the revolt against the Bashar al-Asad regime, Hizballah was able to adopt a stance of vociferous support for the uprisings. This was because in their initial phase, the revolts all took place in states aligned with the United States and the West–Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen.

In mid-March 2011, however, a revolt broke out in the southern Syrian town of Dar'a.[2] Many analysts initially expected that the Syrian regime's near matchless capacity for brutality would enable it to crush the uprising swiftly. This has not proven to be the case, which has placed Hizballah in a difficult situation.

This article discusses Hizballah's position immediately prior to the Arab Spring. It traces the trajectory of the movement's response to the events of 2011, seeking the logic behind Hizballah's stance on Syria, Bahrain, and other pivotal locations. It concludes by asking what implications the events of 2011 and the broader changes under way in the Middle East are likely to have on Hizballah's future. It is argued that among its many other effects, the Arab Spring has served to tease out the contradictions apparent in the

various components of Hizballah's identity. In particular, the uprising in Syria has made apparent the central contradiction between Hizballah's claim to represent and support the will of the peoples of the Arab world against tyranny and oppression. It has also made clear the movement's status as a component of a regional strategic alliance centered on the Islamic Republic of Iran and including Asad's Syria.

HIZBALLAH ON THE EVE OF THE ARAB SPRING

On the eve of the Arab Spring, Hizballah's position appeared relatively secure. The issue of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) investigating the 2005 murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri was the main dark cloud on the movement's horizon. Evidence had emerged implicating senior Hizballah members in the killing.[3] In late 2010, Hizballah broke up the governing coalition in order to secure the establishment of a government that the movement believed would take a firm stance against the STL.[4] A pro-Syrian prime minister, Najib Mikati, replaced the March 14 leader Sa'ad Hariri as prime minister.

Yet the STL notwithstanding, Hizballah's position appeared secure. With Iranian help, the movement had rebuilt much of the damage inflicted by Israel on its South Lebanese and south Beirut heartland in the 2006 Lebanon War. The movement's military infrastructure had also been repaired, replenished, and significantly expanded.[5]

In the May 2008 events, Hizballah had proved that no other political force in Lebanon was capable of mounting a physical challenge to its extensive, independent military and communications infrastructure. Thus, on the eve of the Arab Spring, Hizballah's position looked secure–indeed virtually unassailable–from the point of view of its physical power within Lebanon. Regarding the possibility of renewed conflict with Israel, considerable evidence emerged suggesting the war-weariness of the Shi'i population of Southern Lebanon–Hizballah's core base of support–and their fear of renewed conflict.[6] The movement would doubtless need to take this into account when considering the option of renewed aggression against Israel.

Hizballah is an ideological movement deeply committed to the strategic goal of the destruction of Israel.[7] It also discovered a new *casus belli* for its war against Israel in the Shab'a Farms area, after the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in May 2000. The movement claims that this area, captured from Syria by Israel in 1967, in fact constitutes Lebanese territory.[8]

Yet while the long war against Israel is the central focus for Hizballah, there was no immediate or urgent reason for Hizballah to seek renewed conflict with the Jewish state in 2011. The 2006 war erupted as a result of an operation to kidnap IDF soldiers in order to secure the return of a number of Lebanese held in Israeli jails. These individuals, along with Hizballah prisoners captured in the war, were released by Israel in 2008, in exchange for the corpses of two kidnapped IDF soldiers. Since the 2006 war, Hizballah had endeavored to keep the border with Israel quiet.[9] The movement portrayed the war of 2006 as a "divine victory" for itself. Its propaganda continued to focus on the long strategic contest with Israel. Its cadres,

according to reports, believed that the next war between the movement and the Jewish state would result in the latter's destruction.[10] In the meantime, however, Hizballah preferred to keep the border in a state of unaccustomed quiet.

Thus Hizballah's internal enemies had been intimidated militarily in May 2008. It had appeared also to have reached a tense but stable equilibrium with its main external enemy. In terms of hard power and coercive ability, then, Hizballah's position seemed secure on the eve of the Arab Spring. In political terms, however, and in terms of the movement's perceived legitimacy within Lebanon, the situation was less positive for the movement. First, the decision to turn its weapons on fellow Lebanese in May 2008 had deeply tarnished Hizballah's image as a pan-Lebanese "resistance" group that carried weaponry only for use against Israel.

Many Lebanese commentators consider that the political system in Lebanon has a built-in regulating mechanism, which acts to prevent any single confessional grouping from amassing too much political power at the expense of other groups.[11] By the end of 2010, Hizballah, with the help of Iran, appeared to have transcended this process. It had done so, however, without the consent of its rivals, but rather by coercion. This meant that it was able to maintain its position only through the implicit threat of its arms, and in the face of the resentment of other parts of the population. This was a tenable position–for as long as the superior strength was there. This superior strength, in turn, was dependent on the continued support of Iran and Syria.

In addition, by 2011, considerable evidence had emerged to suggest that Hizballah was losing the image of Shi'i Islamist purity and integrity that had characterized it in the past. A widely-noted financial scandal erupted in 2010, featuring Salah Ezz al-Din of the South Lebanese village of M'aroub.[12] Ezz al-Din, a Lebanese Shi'a in his fifties, was accused of embezzlement and defrauding investors of hundreds of millions of dollars. He had promised quick returns on investments in what he claimed were construction, oil, and gas projects outside of Lebanon. Ezz al-Din guaranteed investors 20 to 25 percent profits within 100 days on certain investments. Yet Ezz al-Din was running a Ponzi scheme–paying clients with funds gleaned from newer investors. He is believed to have defrauded investors of around $500 million.

Ezz al-Din was no ordinary financier. He enjoyed close links to Hizballah. He ran a variety of enterprises associated with the group. Most important was the Dar al-Hadi Publishing House, named after Hadi Nasrallah. Hadi Nasrallah was Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah's son, who was killed fighting the IDF in Southern Lebanon and is somewhere near the top of the movement's pantheon of "martyrs." The publishing house that bore his name was responsible for the publication of a number of books by senior Hizballah officials.

The perception of Hizballah patronage was a major factor in encouraging investors to place their trust in Ezz al-Din. As one disappointed client put it, "People put money with him because he was wearing the Hizbullah cloak."[13] The affair, additional revelations concerning the alleged personal wealth of Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah,[14] and the alleged activities of the sons of a number of prominent movement figures[15] all served to detract from Hizballah's stern, carefully cultivated image.

The result was that on the eve of the Arab upheavals of 2011, Hizballah found itself in a curious position. On the one hand, its strength seemed unassailable–it had emerged honorably from a war with its most powerful foe; it had brushed aside the threat of its internal enemies; and it was allied with powerful anti-Western, anti-Israel countries (Iran and Syria). On the other hand, its position was maintained

because its internal enemies had been intimidated, not because they had given their consent. The image that the movement had built of a Shi'i Islamist group with integrity acting in the defense of all Lebanese, meanwhile, was also looking somewhat frayed.

HIZBALLAH'S RESPONSE TO THE "ARAB SPRING"

The series of upheavals given the collective name of the "Arab Spring" erupted in a region already in a state of acute political tension. A "cold war" was dividing the Middle East, pitting the United States and its allies in the region against a challenge from Iran and its clients, including Hizballah. The upheavals did not end this cold war-style standoff, though they succeeded to divert Western media attention from it for most of 2011. From Hizballah's point of view, as a leading member of the pro-Iranian alliance, the question of the relative power of the two blocs is the key to understanding its response.

The first two leaders to fall in 2011 were President Zine al-Abidine Bin Ali of Tunisia and President Husni Mubarak of Egypt. Both, in addition to being authoritarian rulers, were important clients of the United States in the Middle East. Hizballah thus enthusiastically supported the uprising that brought these rulers down. Mubarak in particular was hated by the movement because of his strong opposition to Iran and the arrest by the Egyptian authorities of a Hizballah-led paramilitary network operating in the country in 2009. (Sami Shihab, a Hizballah operative who led the cell, was reported to have escaped from jail in the chaotic period that followed the fall of Mubarak.)[16]

Thus, Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah spoke to a festival in Beirut backing the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Nasrallah described the revolution in Egypt as the "*product of the people's will and determination… a complete revolution for the poor, the free, the students, and freedom. It is a political humanitarian revolution against everything, especially the regime's policies towards the Arab-Israeli conflict.*"[17]

Nasrallah placed his praise for the revolutions in a very specific context–namely, what he portrayed as their anti-American and anti-Israeli nature. In this regard, he likened the revolts to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran:

Ayatollah Khomeini was loyal to the aspirations of the nation and not an American ally and this is the case of the Tunisian and Egyptian people. The Americans tried to contain the revolution to improve their image in the Arab world. The U.S. does not care if an Islamist or a secularist assumes power. Its only concern is the substitute's political approach and whether it will be in its and Israeli interests.[18]

This understanding of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia resembled the analysis emerging from Iran, Hizballah's patron. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i described the Arab upheavals as an "Islamic Awakening"[19] (a description widely derided at the time, which in retrospect, given subsequent events, appears to have been far more prescient than much Western analysis.)

In this first phase of the Arab upheavals, Syrian President Bashar Asad expressed himself in a similar way. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Asad predicted that the unrest would not reach Syria, because of the regime's support for the Palestinian cause and for "resistance" across the region.[20] This was the shared view of the self-proclaimed "Resistance Axis" in the region, led by Iran, of which Hizballah is a senior member. This axis was expecting in the first months of 2011 to see members of the rival bloc falling to popular unrest, while themselves remaining immune.

The outbreak of a revolt in Bahrain in February 2011 provided further cause for enthusiasm on the part of Hizballah. This seemed a situation tailor-made for the propagandists of Iran and its allies. A Shi'i majority population, situated in the vicinity of Iran (in an area often referred to by Iran as its "fourteenth province")[21] and its archrival Saudi Arabia were in revolt against its Sunni, Western, and Saudi-aligned ruler.

Hizballah offered vocal condemnations of the Bahraini authorities. In particular, it spoke out against the "repression" of the Peninsular Shield Force, which intervened to crush the revolt on behalf of the monarchy. Nasrallah, in a speech, called the events in Bahrain a "special injustice."[22] According to the Bahraini monarchy, the support also went beyond the merely verbal. In a document exposed by Wikileaks preceding the 2011 revolt, Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa claimed that opposition groups were receiving training from Hizballah in Lebanon. U.S. officials concluded, however, that no clear evidence had emerged to support these claims.[23]

Hizballah's verbal and possibly additional support for uprisings against Arab rulers made sense in the cold-war context through which the movement sees the region, and, in a more nebulous way, in terms of the resistance image in which the movement likes to clothe itself. Yet the outbreak of an uprising in Syria on March 15, 2011, disturbed the picture. Syria forms a vital link in the Iran-led regional alliance of which Hizballah is a part, and also a vital ally for Hizballah itself.

In terms of the former, Syria is the only significant Arab state ally that Iran possesses. With the emergence to power of a Shi'i government in Iraq, the Iranians had hoped to achieve a contiguous line of pro-Iranian states stretching across Iraq and Syria to Hizballah-dominated Lebanon.[24] Hence, the survival of the Asad regime has been a matter of central importance to the Iranians, who have been actively involved in the defense of the Asad regime since the outset of the uprising.

For Hizballah specifically, the survival of Asad was no less vital. Syria formed a key conduit for the transfer of weapons to the movement from Iran. Syria's support for Hizballah was also a vital element in the political balance of power within Lebanon itself, which underlay Hizballah's intimidation of its enemies and domination of the country. Were Asad to fall and be replaced by a regime dominated by Syria's Sunni-Arab majority, this could portend a strategic shift in favor of the Sunni-dominated bloc opposing Hizballah in Lebanon.

Hizballah thus began to offer verbal support to the Asad regime, in stark contrast to its support for uprisings elsewhere. It is worth noting that there was a lull of two months between the outbreak of the uprising in Syria and the first public statements by Hassan Nasrallah in support of the regime. This lull may be attributed to Hizballah's awareness of the obvious dissonance between its previous support for the uprisings and its pro-Asad position. Clearly, the movement had hoped that Asad would rapidly crush the opposition to him, in line with the expectations of many analysts.

By May 2011, it was clear that this was not going to happen. Hence, on May 25, Nasrallah issued his first clear comments in support of the Asad regime. Nasrallah's remarks again sought to locate the logic of his movement's position within the broader conflict against the United States and Israel. In a speech given to mark the eleventh anniversary of the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon, Nasrallah told his audience, "Overthrowing the regime in Syria is in the American and Israeli interest."[25]

In the same speech, Nasrallah praised the overthrow of the regimes in Tunisia, while claiming that Asad in Syria wanted to implement reforms, but in a "calm and responsible" manner.[26] Hizballah has not substantively deviated from this line in any further public statements by its leaders and activists on the crisis in Syria. Significant evidence has also emerged that the movement's support for the Asad regime has not been limited to declarations alone.

Syrian opposition sources tended to dismiss early claims that Hizballah men were taking an active part in repressing the demonstrations. They argued that Asad had no shortage of thugs able and willing to kill, and therefore the regime was unlikely to need Hizballah's help in this regard. However, a number of analysts have since suggested that Hizballah personnel were playing an active role in the effort to suppress the uprising–specifically in efforts to infiltrate and subvert opposition circles. There have also been allegations of direct involvement of Hizballah fighters in the suppression of protests.[27]

More tangibly, Hizballah activists alongside Lebanese state security personnel took part in the harassment of Syrian (mainly Sunni) oppositionists who sought refuge in Lebanon. In November 2011, for example, an attempt by Hizballah to arrest a Syrian (who was either a dissident or a smuggler) in the Sunni border town of Arsal resulted in a pitched battle between armed local residents and Hizballah operatives. The latter had to be evacuated by Lebanese Armed Forces troops.[28]

Hizballah operatives themselves have admitted that this activity on behalf of the Syrians is taking place, though they claim that they are looking only for "weapons dealers, al Qaeda members, and those who would destabilize Lebanon."[29] Thus, Hizballah is both actively and verbally engaged in the efforts to keep the Asad regime in power in Syria. This is an unambiguous position, from which the movement has not deviated in any detail.

EXPLAINING HIZBALLAH'S RESPONSES: THE CONTRADICTION MADE APPARENT?

It is not difficult to understand the contradictory position adopted by Hizballah vis-à-vis the Arab upheavals, once the movement's priorities and key loyalties are understood. At the outset, this article noted four aspects of Hizballah's identity: It is an Iran-aligned force, a representative of the Lebanese Shi'a, a regional Shi'i Arab force, and a representative of a self-proclaimed "resistance" trend in the wider Arab and Muslim worlds. The movement's response to the Arab upheavals, however, indicates the order of importance of these aspects. The alignment with Iran, and the movement's dominant position in Lebanon predictably, over-rode any other considerations.

When a dilemma emerged, Hizballah did not hesitate to adopt a position in obvious contradiction to its earlier claims to support the rights and demands of the peoples of the region, in order to line up alongside

its patron–Iran–and fellow client–the Asad regime. Of course, it would be naïve to be surprised by this. History is replete with examples of the truism that power politics trumps ideology. Yet in Hizballah's case, the contradiction between its early support for the uprisings and its defense of Asad was particularly pronounced. It hinged, of course, on the primary loyalty to the alliance of which the movement is part.

Hizballah was established under the auspices of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. It receives between $100 million and $200 million per year from Iran.[30] Iran and Syria supply the weaponry that has enabled the movement to outgrow its early context as a Lebanese sectarian militia. Hizballah is in no position to turn against any of this, even if it had the desire to do so–of which there is no evidence. Its response in 2011 has been that of a loyal component of a regional bloc.

Hizballah has sought to justify its stances in terms of anti-Western and anti-Israeli power politics, entirely ignoring the will of the Syrian people, as demonstrated by the ongoing demonstrations and rallies against the Asad dictatorship. In so doing, Hizballah has paid a significant price in terms of its popularity and legitimacy across the region. This is of less importance to it than the preservation of the vital strategic asset of the Asad regime. Yet its importance, as well as the larger negative significance of the Arab upheavals of 2011 for Hizballah and the bloc of which it is a part, should not be underestimated.

CONCLUSION: HIZBALLAH, THE RESISTANCE BLOC AND THE EVENTS OF 2011

The "resistance ideology," and indeed the Iran-led bloc have emerged as significant losers as a result of the 2011 Arab upheavals.[31] This is so for two central reasons. First, the earlier, rights-based language emerging from the protest movements in Tunisia focused on issues about which the movement and its Iranian patrons have little or nothing to say. Iran and Hizballah locate the central problems facing the Arab and Muslim worlds as external–above all, the threat supposedly represented by the existence of Israel and the designs of the United States.

The early protest movements were noted for the absence or minor presence of anti-Israeli and anti-American rhetoric. Rather, the demonstrators sought to focus attention on the glaring political and social problems affecting their countries. Unlike anti-Israeli and anti-American anger, this kind of sentiment is not available for exploitation by the "resistance bloc," because this bloc itself pursues authoritarian and non-democratic politics, and it has signally failed to develop successful economies or civil societies wherever it has held power. It has nothing to say regarding an Arab politics turned toward internal development and reform. Thus, as noted above, the "resistance bloc" avoided any reference to these aspects. Instead, Ayatollah Khamene'i referred to the uprisings as an "Islamic Awakening," and Iran and Hizballah supported or opposed them based on the power political interests of the Iran-led bloc.

Yet a potentially more significant setback has been suffered by the Iran-led bloc, as the nature of the changes under way has become more apparent. The beneficiaries of the 2011 toppling of long-standing dictatorial regimes in the Arab world have been Sunni Islamist movements. Hizballah in its language has often claimed to represent a general Muslim or Arab interest. However, it is a Shi'i organization. It is also

part of a regional power bloc led by Iran. This bloc, while it too sometimes speaks a pan-Islamic language, overwhelmingly consists of Shi'i (or at least non-Sunni) elements. The key members of the bloc are Iran itself, the Alawi-dominated regime in Syria, Hizballah, and the Sadrist movement in Iraq.

This fact may on occasion have been overlooked by non-Shi'i parts of the region–in particular when Hizballah was engaged in combat with Israel, which is an object of hatred for Sunni and Shi'i Arabs alike. Yet the main tangible effect of the Arab upheavals so far has been to raise the real possibility of Sunni Islamist regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and–most worryingly from Hizballah's point of view–Syria.

Should such regimes emerge, they are likely to align either with each other or with existing Sunni powers in the region. They are highly unlikely to ally with the Iran-led bloc. Hizballah, for a while, was the emblem and symbol of Iran's resistance project in the Arab world. Should the Asad regime in Syria fall, this would constitute a very significant blow to Hizballah, and to its patron. Yet the larger and more profound challenge to Hizballah and its allies set in motion by the events of 2011 may well be the emergence of Sunni Islamism as a contender for or holder of political power in a number of different Arab countries. This is likely to introduce a more openly sectarian tone to intra-Arab power politics, which will constitute a potentially deadly blow to attempts by Hizballah and their Iranian allies to present themselves as representing the general Arab or Muslim interest.

Should Sunni-Arab Islamists in the future wish to point to evidence regarding the hollowness of claims by Hizballah and its allies to represent interests outside of that of the Shi'a, meanwhile, a central item of evidence they are likely to present will be the stance of Hizballah vis-à-vis the Syrian uprising of 2011 and the uprisings that preceded it. They will note, accurately, that in its response to the threat to the Asad dictatorship, Hizballah elected to shed any ecumenical pretenses, preferring to offer its full support to efforts to keep the dictatorship in place. This may well have included direct Hizballah violence against Syrian civilians. This took place at a time when the Asad dictatorship was engaged in a frontal struggle against a largely Sunni uprising against its rule. By doing so, Hizballah demonstrated its status as above all a client of the Iran-led regional bloc, and on a secondary level a Lebanese Shi'i sectarian force–with pretensions toward leading a general regional "resistance" relegated to a distant, rhetorical third place.

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