

Hizbullah, Hamas, and the “Arab Spring” — Weathering the Regional Storm?

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Over the past eighteen months, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has experienced fast-paced and pervasive social and political change. The popular protests that have characterized the so-called Arab Spring delivered a powerful blow to the status quo, affecting states and political, military, and social organizations alike.

How the Arab Spring has affected Hizbullah and Hamas' outlooks and strategies is a question of no little importance to the future of this region. It is worth examining how these groups have adapted to the new political and security environment in the MENA region.

There is in fact a relatively widespread belief that the shifts in the regional balance of power and the steady rise of political Islam have benefitted groups like Hamas or Hizbullah. Although there may be some truth to this assessment, it is overly simplistic, downplaying crucial differences between local political processes and the distinct Islamist parties. Instead, the balance sheet of the Arab Spring is far more mixed, bringing opportunities as well as posing serious challenges to both Hizbullah and Hamas.

Moreover, Hizbullah and Hamas, both of them multi-layered organizations, have responded differently to the regional “awakening.” So far, it seems that Hamas has been able to cope with the ongoing process of change more successfully, while Hizbullah has been experiencing more substantial and even profound challenges.

Hizbullah and the “Arab Spring” —The Ground is Shaking

A summary review of the political trajectory of Hizbullah since the beginning of the Arab Spring could lead to the belief that the group has not been negatively affected by the ongoing regional change.

Within Lebanon, Hizbullah managed to reposition itself at the center of the political arena in early 2011 with the rise of a friendly government under Prime Minister Najib Mikati. Since then, Hassan Nasrallah's organization has held onto its position in government while marginalizing its political opponents in the March 14 coalition. At the regional level, the rise of Islamist parties across the Middle East and the collapse of old foes of the organization—like Hosni Mubarak and his entourage—also seem to indicate that Hizbullah's position is stronger since the beginning of the Arab “awakenings.”

However, a closer look at Hizbullah's domestic and regional legitimacy, as well as at its current security and political environment, reveals that the notion that Hizbullah has emerged immune—if not strengthened—by the Arab Spring is untenable.

The first main challenge to Hizbullah's popularity and legitimacy—both within Lebanon and regionally—stems from the group's double-standard with respect to the events in the Arab world.

At first, when massive protests broke out in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain, Hizbullah stood firmly on the side of the “Arab street.” The group welcomed the fall of the Egyptian regime with particular enthusiasm. Defined by the organization as an Israeli and American puppet, Mubarak had been critical of the Lebanese-Shiite group during the 2006 Lebanon War, creating a permanent rift between the two sides. The relationship deteriorated further in the aftermath of the 2009 Gaza War, with Hizbullah accusing Mubarak of working for Israel by enforcing the blockade on Gaza, and with Hizbullah repeatedly expressing its opposition to the regime.¹

In these early stages of the Arab Spring, Hizbullah unequivocally took the side of the protesters, while also trying to link the rising social movements with the group's agenda of “resistance.” For instance, in early February 2011, Nasrallah claimed that the ongoing protests represented “the revolution of the poor, the free, the freedom seekers and the rejecters of humiliation and disgrace which this [the Egyptian] nation was subject to due to submission to the will of America and Israel. (...) It is the revolution (...) against (...) the regime's policy in the Arab–Israeli struggle.”² In the same speech, the secretary general also added that the protest movements were born out of “the Lebanese resistance in July 2006 war and the historic steadfastness of the Palestinian resistance during the Gaza war in 2008.”³

However, in reality, the protests of the Arab Spring failed to explicitly include the Arab–Israeli conflict among the list of main grievances, focusing instead on local

economic, social, and political demands. Moreover, the bulk of the protests in Tunisia and Egypt—largely conducted through strategic non-violent struggle—seemed quite distant from Hizbullah’s model of armed “resistance.” Thus, even though Hizbullah immediately took the side of the “Arab street” at the beginning of the protests, Nasrallah’s group still seemed somewhat disconnected from the new discourse that emerged from the regional revolutions.

The biggest challenge, however, for Hizbullah arose when the political turmoil spread to Syria. When protests erupted against the Assad regime—an historical ally of the Lebanese-Shiite organization—Hizbullah did a 180-degree turn on its previous endorsements of “popular revolution.” Since then, Hizbullah has by and large stood with the regime, discrediting the protesters and arguing that the anti-Assad movement was orchestrated by the “West.”⁴ Even as the anti-regime demonstrations escalated into a full-fledged civil war, Hizbullah continued to stand by Assad.

The double standard adopted by the group with respect to the protests in Syria has undermined Hizbullah’s popularity and legitimacy at the regional level. Also, within Lebanon, Hizbullah has been sharply criticized for siding with Assad. The opposition newspaper *Now Lebanon* openly stated: “Any ally of a dictator is an enemy of the Arab street.”⁵

The impact of the ongoing Syrian crisis also goes well beyond the ideological realm, and it has the potential to undermine Hizbullah at the political as well as operational levels. Politically—and this is the second main challenge to the group’s standing—Hizbullah is losing some of its clout. Within Lebanon, Hizbullah’s stance with respect to Syria has been a key factor in the souring of the already rocky relationship between Hizbullah and the March 14 coalition, led by the *Tayyar Al-Muwaqbal* [Future Movement] and the Sunni community.

This rise in political rivalry also reflects an ongoing escalation in inter-sectarian Sunni-Shiite tensions within Lebanon. With the Sunni community largely backing the anti-Assad forces and the Shiites standing behind the Syrian regime, the Syrian crisis has heightened the tones of an already explosive political situation and sectarian cleavage.⁶ While the armed clashes among pro- and anti-Assad supporters have so far been contained geographically and have not directly involved Hizbullah, this violence is a sign of the toxic effect of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon.

With the rise of inter-sectarian tensions, Hizbullah lost some of its cross-sectarian appeal. For instance, in the most recent Pew poll released, only 5 percent of the Lebanese Sunni community declared support for Hizbullah, versus 94 percent

of the Lebanese Shi'ites. Interestingly enough, that poll also reflected a growing disaffection with Hizbullah on the part of the Christian community, with only approximately one third of the Lebanese Christian community openly siding with Nasrallah's group.⁷

Hizbullah's stance on the Syrian crisis has not only exacerbated the existing political and sectarian cleavage with the Sunni community and the March 14 movement, but has also weakened the group's relations with its own political allies within the government. In the past year, Hizbullah's relation with Mikati, Druze leader Walid Jumblat, and even Christian leader and core Hizbullah ally Michel Aoun have all weakened. The possibility of Hizbullah losing its current political backing and of the current governing coalition collapsing threatens the group's political power and its role within Lebanon.

Finally, the ongoing turmoil in Syria has the potential to affect the group's long-term strategic and operational outlook. Historically, Syria has played a crucial role for Hizbullah, serving as the link between Iran and Lebanon and facilitating the flow of weapons and logistical support to the Lebanese-Shi'ite group. Over the past decades, Syria's strong presence in Lebanon has ensured that Hizbullah's weapons and its "resistance" agenda would not be challenged from within. The conflict in Syria threatens this arrangement. Prolonged internal violence and regime weakness could diminish Syria's ability to stay involved in Lebanon and to continue backing Hizbullah domestically. Its capacity to efficiently channel weapons and logistical support from Iran will also be affected.

Over the longer term, as Assad and his regime seem headed toward implosion and collapse, Hizbullah will face an even bigger challenge. Post-Assad Syria will likely reverse the existing partnership with Nasrallah's group and revisit the "special relationship" with Hizbullah, leading it to lose an important source of external support. The political opposition in Syria has been extremely critical of Hizbullah's role in supporting the regime, with protesters burning Hizbullah flags and openly calling for the Lebanese-Shi'ite group to "back off."⁸ In this context, the relatively recent kidnapping of eleven Lebanese Shi'ites in Syria by the opposition serves as a perfect example of this sour relationship. The kidnappers have in fact requested that Nasrallah apologize to them as a pre-condition to setting the captives free.⁹ Within Lebanon, a regime change in Damascus could provide the "Cedar Revolution" and Hizbullah's political opponents a powerful second wind.

In this context, it is fair to state that the group is now facing one of the most serious challenges since its creation in the early 1980s. Clearly, thus far, the Arab Spring has not substantially benefited Hizbullah and its agenda. However, it is also true that the challenge of the potential downfall of Assad is not insurmountable. Given

the sophistication and magnitude of the group's military apparatus and its solid partnership with Iran, the fall of the Assad government would not be enough to extinguish external political support for the group. Also, within Lebanon, the vast majority of the Lebanese-Shiite community continues to support Hizbullah, partly as a result of the lack of serious political alternatives to the Amal-Hizbullah bloc. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Syrian challenge alone would be enough to bring about the permanent demise of the group. Still, significant political change in Syria would be a very problematic development for Hizbullah.

Hamas and the “Arab Spring”—A New Organizational Dawn?

Just as in the case of Hizbullah, the Arab Spring has had a direct impact on Hamas. On the one hand, the organization has been able to weather the storm by diffusing internal dissent in Gaza and by remaining firmly in charge of the Strip. On the other hand, in the past few months Hamas has been undergoing a number of important changes, in an attempt to evolve and adapt to the shifting regional environment.

When the “Arab awakening” first erupted in Tunisia and Egypt, Hamas—just like Hizbullah—openly supported the nascent protest movements. As early as January 2011, Osama Hamdan—who is charged with the conduct of Hamas' foreign relations—praised the revolution in Tunisia, calling for the protests to serve as a model for the rest of the region.¹⁰

Hamas' reaction was even more supportive in the case of Egypt. Here the Palestinian group clearly stated that they saw the demise of Mubarak as a hard blow to Israel. In brief, the main thesis embraced by the group was that: “Changing the Egyptian regime means breaking the equation that has provided the Jews [sic] with security as regards their fears of the Egyptians, assuaged their hunger for reassurances about their existence, and provided them with protection from the anger of the masses. All these benefits to Israel fell under the headline of the peace process.”¹¹

The main perception was that the ongoing Arab Spring would benefit Hamas, first by bringing about the collapse of old enemies—like Egypt under Mubarak—and second, by spreading the ethos of the “resistance” across the Middle East. The progressive affirmation of Islamist parties in post-revolutionary Egypt and Tunisia was similarly regarded as an encouraging development. This positive assessment was further strengthened by the fact that all the calls to start a “Palestinian Arab Spring” in Gaza largely fell flat.¹²

Even so, Hamas was still aware that the massive wave of social and political change at the regional level could represent a challenge to the group in at least two major

ways. First, Hamas very much feared that the regional turmoil might extend to the Gaza Strip, fueled by the domestic discontent over the state of affairs within Palestine. Among the range of grievances displayed by the Palestinian population, a particularly unpopular issue was certainly the long-standing rift between Fatah and Hamas and the *de facto* separation of the West Bank and Gaza. In this sense, the strong desire (shared by both Fatah and Hamas) to diffuse a potential “demonstration effect” of the Arab Spring on Palestine pushed both parties to sign the May 2011 “reconciliation deal” and to commit (at least on paper) to moving beyond divisions and polarizations.

Moreover, the Arab Spring—with its new discourse centered on sociopolitical rights and freedoms—has led Hamas to carefully rethink its branding strategy. An important consequence of this development has been that in the past year, the group has emphasized its interest in pursuing non-violent struggle in parallel with armed “resistance.”¹³

Hamas understands that the new regional developments have been characterized by the rise of non-violent groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Hence it is not surprising that the Palestinian organization has responded to this trend by emphasizing its non-armed activities as well as by stressing its ideological proximity to the Brotherhood. For example, in December 2011, the group announced that it would be pursuing official “reintegration” into the international organization of the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is an offshoot.¹⁴

Another significant challenge stemming from the Arab Spring for Hamas has been operational and strategic rather than ideological. Specifically, just as in the case of Hizbullah, the ongoing turmoil and violence raging in Syria has directly affected the group. In fact, Syria, through the Assad regime, had long been an important ally of the Palestinian organization, with Damascus housing the headquarters of the group’s political bureau under the leadership of Khaled Mashal. However, Hamas’ position on Syria was much more complex than Hizbullah’s. While the Lebanese-Shiite group had special political, ideological, and strategic ties solely with the Assad regime, Hamas was from the beginning somewhat caught in between the warring parties. In fact, while having a strong political connection with Assad and his regime, Hamas also had sectarian and religious ties to the Sunni majority protesting in Syria against the Alawite-dominated regime. Moreover, one of the main opposition groups against Assad is the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. As such, openly siding with Assad and disregarding the grievances of the opposition was not really an option for Hamas.

In turn, this explains the strong reluctance displayed by Hamas leaders at the outset of the anti-Assad protests to condemn the regime and take the side of the

protesters, as it had done in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt right from the start.¹⁵ On this thorny issue, *Asbarq al-Awsat* quoted a journalist in the pro-Hamas camp who accurately expressed the dilemma posed by the Syrian crisis: “Both the Syrian people and the Syrian leadership have always stood alongside the Palestinian resistance and they have protected this resistance, especially Hamas... What is currently taking place in Syria is a strictly internal affair and Hamas does not interfere in Syrian internal affairs.”¹⁶

However, as the crisis escalated and the violence worsened, Hamas’ policy of non-interference started to crumble. First, both Assad and his main regional ally, Iran, soon began to feel displeased by Hamas’ lack of direct support for the regime.¹⁷ Already in August 2011, a number of reports claimed that Iran had begun to punish Hamas for its silence on Syria by withdrawing some of its funding to the group.¹⁸ Second, Hamas began to become increasingly uncomfortable being associated with the brutal Syrian regime. In turn, this led the group to gradually distance itself from Damascus, first by decreasing its presence in the Syrian capital and then by quietly vacating the premises.¹⁹

The relocation of the political bureau from Syria has indeed been one of the most important consequences of the Arab Spring for Hamas. However, the weakening of the group’s relations with the Assad regime and its main backer, Iran, should not only be characterized as a threat to the group. Hamas’ refusal to strongly back Assad in the course of the protests weakened the group’s relations with both Syria and Iran, in turn opening a window of opportunity to partially redefine its regional alliances by moving away from the “Axis of Resistance.”

This could be an opportunity to intensify Hamas’ ties with the Gulf countries, while deepening its relationship with the ascendant Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In June 2012, Hamas’ political adviser Ahmad Youssef declared:

We will all be looking at Egypt in order to determine the path we will be following, and Hamas will always seek advice from the new Egyptian leadership. We will listen to what they have to say in regard to the Palestinian cause and more specifically in regard to the reconciliation file.... We will listen to them and we will follow their valuable advice. I must also say that under [Egyptian President Muhammad] Morsi’s leadership, the Hamas Movement will adopt a more moderate course and we have received during the last stage many pieces of advice, saying we should adopt a moderate position. Even the Muslim Brotherhood organization leadership considers that it would be better if we followed a more moderate attitude, has been asking us to avoid any military clashes with the Israeli enemy and pushing us to go ahead with the reconciliation file.²⁰

In sum, when looking at how the Arab Spring has influenced Hamas, it is possible to see that the group has invested effort in rebranding itself and rethinking its strategic relationship in the MENA region as a direct result of the ongoing regional changes. In contrast to Hizbullah, Hamas seems to have been more receptive to the shifting political and security environment in the Middle East and as such, the Arab Spring could in the long term represent more of an opportunity than a threat for the group, provided the organization is willing to undergo the necessary internal and strategic changes.

Therefore, even if both Hizbullah and Hamas have been directly affected by the Arab Spring, the balance sheet is different for both organizations, with the Lebanese-Shi'ite group having been more directly affected—and in a negative way—than the Palestinian Hamas. The reason for this is to be found in the groups' different political discourses, level of flexibility, and capacity to adapt. Their pre-existing relations with other MENA players as well as with Iran is also a factor, and one that bears close monitoring in the future.

Notes

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