

## Hizballah Backs Assad – and Pays The Price

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In early January, 2011, Hizballah and its allies took up the reins of government in Lebanon, having ensured the collapse of the coalition led by March 14 leader and then Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri. Hizballah needed a coalition which it thought would staunchly oppose the Special Tribunal on Lebanon, investigating the killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.

But many at the time discerned a more significant meaning in the rise to government of the March 8 coalition. It looked like the latest stage in the inexorable rise of the Lebanese Shia Islamist movement, founded under the patronage of Iran's Revolutionary Guards in 1982. Hizballah had survived Israel's onslaught in 2006, and gone on to successfully intimidate its internal opponents in the mini civil war of May, 2008.

With a reputed yearly donation of \$200 million from Teheran, Hizballah had built a state within the state. It had developed a matchless military and security capability, independent of the organs of the Lebanese government, and in most ways more powerful. By January 2011, Hizballah looked set to absorb its host.

Today, however, much of this is open to question. Hizballah no longer looks so unassailable. The movement has been one of the less remarked upon victims of the Arab upheavals of 2011. Let's take a look at how this has happened.

Over the last two decades, Hizballah defined itself along a number of parallel lines, each of which before 2011 appeared to support the other. The movement was simultaneously a sectarian representative of the Lebanese Shia, 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, these various lines, which seemed mutually supportive, have begun to contradict one another. This is diminishing Hizballah's position – though it remains physically unassailable for as long as the Assad regime in Syria survives.

When the 'Arab Spring' first broke out, Hizballah was able to happily endorse it. This is because in its first three significant manifestations – in Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain – the 'Arab Spring' was directed against pro-western, anti-Iranian regimes. And in Bahrain, even better, a Shia populace was rising up against a pro-western, Sunni monarch.

The problems began with the outbreak of the revolt against the Assad regime in Syria. Syria is a charter member of the pro-Iranian regional alliance to which Hizballah also belongs. It is also a vital strategic conduit for the organization, providing a hinterland, a potential safe haven in the event of war with Israel, and a route for the supply of Iranian arms. For all these reasons, Hizballah is determined that Assad survive. Reliable sources suggest that Hizballah men are involved in infiltrating opposition groups in Syria and providing intelligence.

This investment in the survival of Assad indicates which of the four aspects of Hizballah's identity mentioned above are most important to it. The link with the Iran-led alliance and maintaining the ability to wage war against Israel are the cardinal interests. To maintain these, Hizballah has to a great extent sacrificed its more nebulous self-image as a leader of pan-Islamic 'resistance.' Syrian Sunnis leading the uprising against Assad now count Hizballah among their enemies. The movement's flag has been burnt at opposition rallies.

So the uprising in Syria has served to remove the veil of 'resistance' from the face of Hizballah. The sectarian visage beneath has been revealed. Hizballah has been exposed as a sectarian, Iran-aligned Shia force, backing a vicious, non-Sunni dictatorship in its war against its own, largely Sunni people.

Polls show the resulting disappearance of the high regard in which Hizballah was once held across the Arab world.

Of course, for as long as the Assad dictatorship survives, this has no immediate physical implications for Hizballah. And despite the overenthusiastic predictions of some westerners and Israelis, the Assad regime may well be around for some considerable time to come.

But in Lebanon, there are already signs that non-Shia communities, long chafing under the heel of Hizballah, are beginning to grow restive. The governing coalition is no longer unified on Syria. The perennial political weathervane, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, now supports the Syrian dictator's departure.

More ominously, there are signs of growing Sunni restiveness on the ground. The sectarian nature of the conflict in Syria is spilling across the border. Hizballah operatives have been engaged in the arrest of Syrian oppositionists seeking refuge in Lebanon, and their despatch back to Assad. The Lebanese government is claiming that the border town of Aarsal has become a haven for 'al-Qaeda' elements. In the town of Tarshish, local residents in October physically prevented Hizballah from extending its telecommunications networks into the town.

Hizballah is also engaged in putting down opposition within its own community. Two Shia clerics are set to face charges of ‘conspiring with Israel’ later this month. The two, Sheikh Hassan Mchaymech and Sayyed Mohammad Ali al-Hussein were known for their independent and critical positions toward Hizballah.

None of this portends the imminent demise of Hizballah. What it does reveal is a nervous, diminished organization, which has shed most of the region-wide charisma it earned through its fight against Israel.

The logic of the emerging post 2011 Middle East is one of Islamism and sectarianism. In this context, Hizballah is now exposed as a gendarme in the Levant for Iran and the Shia Islamism it adheres to. The movement, like its friend Bashar Assad, increasingly holds power by force alone. This can be maintained while it is the stronger party. For as long as Bashar is in his seat, it will be so. If he falls, Hizballah’s enemies in Lebanon (and Syria) will be waiting.