



ALEX ROWELL
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When resistances collide



While **reports** last week of Hamas members in Lebanon being ordered by Hezbollah security officials to leave the country have

since proven false, they have nonetheless revived questions about the state of relations between the Palestinian Sunni Islamist militia-cum-party and its Lebanese Shiite Islamist counterpart.

Having both firmly sided with opposing camps in the Syrian conflict raging next door, the two nominal allies appear to be straining to preserve what they can of a relationship increasingly challenged by political and sectarian differences.

The official line was summed up by former Hezbollah MP Hassan Hoballah, who **said** Friday that, “What brings us together, in terms of our hostility toward the Zionist entity, is greater than a dispute over the [...] situation in Syria.” This was echoed by Hamas’ spokesperson in Lebanon, Ali Baraka, in a phone call to NOW.

However, Baraka also admitted to NOW that, “Of course, relations are not like they were in previous years.” Moreover, he explicitly condemned Hezbollah’s now-publicly acknowledged military intervention in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime, saying: “We are against [it], just as we are against any foreign intervention in the Syrian conflict.”

That includes intervention by Hamas, Baraka added, responding to **allegations** that the group is training and even fighting alongside the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Damascus and Aleppo. While no hard evidence has surfaced to support the accusations, they appear to be believed by some Hezbollah fighters themselves. Upon returning from the recent battle for Qusayr in Homs province, one such militant **told** a newspaper, “There’s a kind of irritating familiarity [in the rebels’ tactics]. Hezbollah taught Hamas all those tactics to fight the Israelis. Hamas apparently decided to transfer their experience to *takfiri* groups [Hezbollah parlance for the FSA].”

Whether true or not, there are certainly other indications of a deepening divorce between Hamas and its fellow members of the so-called ‘Resistance Axis’ – Hezbollah, and the Syrian and Iranian regimes. The London *Telegraph* **reported** last Friday that Iran has almost entirely ceased its financial support to Hamas – said to total some £15m (\$23m USD) per month – as well as all military cooperation, in retaliation for the latter’s opposition to the Assad regime. A subsequent article **denying** this was in turn also **denied** by Hamas’ official website - which, significantly, describes the Syrian uprising as a “**revolution**” and has issued **condemnations** of regime “massacres” of Palestinian refugees.

Such developments follow the broader pattern that has emerged since the Syrian uprising began. One month after Hamas’ politburo chairman Khaled Mashaal quietly **left** his Damascus headquarters in January 2012, the group’s Prime Minister Ismail

Haniyah “saluted” the Syrian opposition in a Cairo speech. Mashaal has since based himself in Qatar, whose Emir Hamad al-Thani later paid a visit to Gaza in what was widely interpreted as a message that the Gulf state would henceforth be Hamas’s primary patron.

This new bond with Qatar – which is also among the most forthright sponsors of the Syrian opposition – is likely one reason why Hamas’ relations with the ‘Resistance Axis’ continues to deteriorate, according to Dr. Yezid Sayigh, senior associate at the Carnegie Middle East Center and former negotiator with Palestinian delegations in peace talks with Israel in the 1990s.

“Clearly Qatar has pledged lots of assistance [to Hamas],” Sayigh told NOW. “It’s possible that there’s been some sort of quid pro quo.”

However, Sayigh said equally significant are domestic pressures on the group in Gaza from friends and rivals alike, most of whom have welcomed the Syrian uprising.

“Having supported the Arab Spring in other countries, especially Egypt, I guess [Hamas] just found it awkward to be supporting the Assad regime, [especially] given that they’re trying to meet challenges in Gaza from people like the Salafists who are more openly supportive of the rebels in Syria.”

Ultimately, beyond Syria, perhaps the larger question is what will become of the ‘Resistance Axis’ now that it appears to have fragmented along political and sectarian lines.

“It’s certainly been weakened,” said Sayigh. “And it’ll be weakened further if the perception grows that this is basically a Shiite axis, or Shiite crescent, connecting the Shiites of Lebanon, Iraq and Iran with the Alawite regime in Syria. If Hamas is the odd one out, that would be very uncomfortable because they really can’t afford anything that would undermine their [alliances] with Egypt in particular, but also with the Saudis who are [still] upset about their takeover of Gaza in 2007. I guess they just don’t have the choice of staying in the Axis of Resistance when almost everyone else sees that in a sectarian way.”

Or, as Dr. Nadim Shehadi, associate fellow at Chatham House, put it to NOW more bluntly:

“Without Hamas, the Axis of Resistance is reduced to a mere sectarian alliance.”

Yara Chehayed contributed reporting.