



CAN HEZBOLLAH COPE WITH A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST?

By Benedetta Berti

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While the Middle East undergoes fast-paced, dramatic social and political change, Hezbollah has been trying its best to shield itself from the process that has been redefining the balance of power and reshuffling the political cards in the region—focusing instead on consolidation and continuity.

However, despite the organization's repeated reassurances to the contrary, the level of popular and political support for Hezbollah is not as solid as Hassan Nasrallah, the group's Secretary General, would like us to believe.

Backed by its formidable military strength and by its unshakable strategic partnership with Iran, Hezbollah has spent the past few months repositioning itself at the center of the Lebanese political arena, which has recently seen both the rise of a friendly government under PM Najib Mikati as well as the *de facto* marginalization of the "pro-Western" March 14 forces and their "Cedar Revolution."

A remarkable island of stability in a rapidly changing region, the Lebanese-Shiite militia seems to have managed to overcome several important challenges and maintained its position of relative strength and control over Lebanese political life. Firstly, the group has deftly dealt with the so-called Arab Spring by adopting an enthusiastic—albeit selective (the exception being of course Syria)—endorsement of the "revolutions," combined with a propaganda campaign linking the protests to the group's agenda of "resistance." Secondly, Hezbollah's bet on the Assad regime's capacity to ride out the ongoing protests within Syria has paid off so far, as the regime is still standing and Hezbollah continues to benefit from its alliance with its longtime partner.

Finally, the group has been able to withstand the blow dealt by the UN Special Tribunal's indictments against four Hezbollah militants, now formally accused of participating in the assassination of former PM, Rafic Hariri. The delays and shortcomings of the investigations, combined with Hezbollah's intensive domestic campaign to undermine the legitimacy of the STL, have managed to convince the backbone of Hezbollah's constituency—the Lebanese Shiite community—to continue to stand by the Party of God.

However, the current success of the Lebanese-Shiite organization in dodging bullets may well prove to be ephemeral.

Ideologically, the contrast between the discourses on the Arab Spring—one which is centered on rights and freedoms and the other, Hezbollah's, which pays lip service to the importance of establishing a free society despite its own staunch support for political repression in Syria—is stark. Hezbollah strongly rejects the accusation of applying a *de facto* double-standard and argues that the Syrian regime is significantly different from other regimes affected by the Arab Spring. In fact, Hezbollah asserts that Syria is the only country able to go against U.S.-Israeli interests in the region, and it is also the only country where the population is strongly divided between pro-Assad and anti-Assad forces.¹ What's more, in the words of Nasrallah, Assad has been willing to engage in an internal process of reform, thus complying with the demands of the protesters.² In this sense, the continuation of the demonstrations is more a consequence of Assad's unwillingness to "bow" to U.S.-Israeli interests than the result of concrete and unaddressed social and political grievances, according to Nasrallah.³ However, despite these attempts to rationalize its stance, there has been widespread criticism with respect to Hezbollah's defense of the bloodshed in

¹ "The interview made with Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah by Al-Manar Channel," October 24, 2011, *Hezbollah Press Statement*, October 25, 2011.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Syria. In turn, this has led to Syrian demonstrations against Nasrallah and his group (during which Hezbollah's flags were burned), as well as to harsh criticism within Lebanon as well as in the Gulf countries.

With time, this may translate into a progressive decline of the group's appeal within the region. Put simply by the pro-March 14 newspaper, *Now Lebanon*, "Any ally of a dictator is an enemy of the Arab street."⁴

Moreover, from a strategic perspective, even though Assad has been able to stay in power, the regime is still very much hanging on by a thread. If the Syrian regime were to fall, Hezbollah would lose a crucial ally in the region and may have hard time establishing good relations with the same opposition forces that it accused earlier of being on the U.S.' payroll. In addition, regime change could provide the "Cedar Revolution" and Hezbollah's political opponents in Lebanon with a powerful second-wind.

But, aside from these very real regional concerns, the most serious challenge that Hezbollah now faces is domestic, and it is largely a product of the organization's own hubris in dealing with its political allies.

In the past few weeks, Hezbollah has in fact taken a series of positions that may lead the group to lose the support of its own political allies, while potentially further alienating the non-Shiite Lebanese population.

First, Hezbollah has firmly stated that it will not allow the Cabinet to approve funding to the STL—a position that openly mocks PM Mikati's pledges to the international community to fulfill all of Lebanon's international obligations. With the Sunni PM having already been accused by his political opponents of being a puppet in the hands of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite organization's intransigence with respect to funding the STL puts the PM in an quite the predicament: either to concede to Hezbollah's dictates regarding the STL—thus losing both credibility in front of the international community as well as the support of his own community—or resign and allow Lebanon to fall into yet another political crisis.

In addition, Hezbollah's behavior has also been problematic with regard to its unwavering support for the Syrian regime. While Mikati has been quietly attempting to downplay Lebanon's support for Syria to the international community (for example, by abstaining in the UNSC vote on the European draft resolution condemning the events in Syria); Hezbollah is making no mystery of its own support for the Syrian regime. Nasrallah has had a decidedly muted response about the ongoing cross-border Syrian incursions.⁵ Likewise, Hezbollah's ministers have been contesting the investigations by Lebanon's Internal Security Services into the kidnappings of Syrian dissidents within Lebanon.⁶ This divergence within Lebanon's political circles indicates, once again, a growing tension, both between the government and the opposition forces as well as within the government itself.

In this context, while the PM continues to clash with the Lebanese-Shiite group over Lebanon's international standing and its pre-existing obligations, other voices from within Hezbollah's political coalition have started to sound more ambiguous regarding their commitment to the current government. One such voice is that of Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, who, while waiting to see how things turn out in Syria, has thus far decided to remain in the Hezbollah-led coalition. Jumblatt has, however, emphasized his personal differences with Nasrallah's organization, including on STL funding and on the relationship with Syria.⁷

At the moment, the group's most solid cross-sectarian ally is certainly Christian leader Michel Aoun, and his Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). However, given Aoun's growing unpredictability and his increased political demands, it is not entirely clear whether this alliance is solely an asset to Hezbollah. In addition, and despite their long-standing political partnership, recent reports in the news have given voice to criticism from within the FPM, quietly questioning some of Hezbollah's tactics and practices.⁸

In parallel, Hezbollah's uncompromising attitude with respect to both the STL and to Syria have also brought existing differences to the fore between the Lebanese Shiite group and the March 14 coalition and their political supporters. These tensions further escalated in the past weeks after Hezbollah allegedly tried to extend its own telecoms network into the town of

⁴ Hanin Ghaddar, "A New Resistance, A New Enemy," October 24, 2011.

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=325376#ixzz1cv6lf9Av>

⁵ "The interview made with Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah by Al-Manar Channel," October 24, 2011. *Hezbollah Press Statement*, October 25, 2011.

⁶ "Fatfat Holds Hezbollah Responsible for Threats against Him," *The Daily Star*, October 25, 2011.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/2011/Oct-25/152172-fatfat-holds-hezbollah-responsible-for-threats-against-him.ashx#ixzz1cv9TGVOc>

⁷ "Jumblatt to Al-Manar: To Remain within Majority Ranks, but With My Own Views," *Al-Manar*, October 15, 2011.

<http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?eid=31486&cid=23&fromval=1>

⁸ Imad Marmal, "Aoun: The resistance is not enough to be immune from the corruption eating [the group] from inside. Thus, this is the reason behind increased difference between the Free Movement and Hezbollah," *As-Safir*, October 18, 2011. [Arabic]

<http://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionId=1981&ChannelId=46840&ArticleId=1792&Author=%C3%9A%C3%A3%C3%87%C3%8F%20%C3%A3%C3%91%C3%A3%C3%A1>

Tarshish, south-east of Beirut in the predominantly Christian district of Zahle. On that occasion, the alleged attempt by Nasrallah's group to extend its own private communications network to the town of Tarshish led to both tensions with the residents, who actively intervened to stop the Hezbollah members from continuing their work, as well as to sharp criticism by the March 14 forces.⁹

These recent clashes, together with mounting internal criticism of Nasrallah's group, seem to indicate that the level of popular dissatisfaction with Hezbollah is growing within Lebanon, and that the party's current attitude with respect to both the Syrian regime as well as the STL may end up backfiring.

The possibility of the Party of God losing its current political backing and of the country falling into yet another political crisis deeply threatens the group's political power and position within Lebanon. It also calls into question Hezbollah's capacity to remain relevant in a rapidly changing region. This would be especially true in the case that the group's longtime ally and partner, the Assad regime, were to fall. In this sense, the Party of God is now facing one of the most serious challenges since its foundation in the early 1980s.

Could Hezbollah attempt to initiate a conflict with Israel to diffuse growing internal tensions? It is possible, although it seems unlikely that the group would risk entering another round of hostilities with Israel while in a position of internal weakness and regional ambiguity. Given the alternative scenarios, Hezbollah may be stuck with trying to preserve the current uneasy status quo, while hoping that Syria rides out the political storm.

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⁹ "Hezbollah's Land Communication Network Stops at the Borders Of Tarshish..." *Al-Rai al-Aam*, October 23, 2011. [Translation by MideastWire]