



Hezbollah and the Syrian uprising

James Sater

Due to Lebanon's multi-sectarian composition and relatively liberal political system, the country is often viewed as a mirror of contemporary Arab politics. As much as this remains true in 2012, the uprising in Syria is pushing the fragile political balance to breaking point. This analysis of contemporary events and Hezbollah's domestic position with regards to the Syrian uprising underlines the fragility of Lebanese domestic politics. It aims to illustrate that the position of one protagonist, Hezbollah, has substantially been weakened over the past 12 years, and that the Syrian uprising has therefore the potential of substantially radicalizing all Lebanese political groups.

The car bomb that killed General Wissam al-Hassan on October 19, 2012 once again put Lebanon in the headlines of international news. Unrests have erupted across the country. Prime Minister Najib Mikati offered to resign, and the Sunni-led Future Movement, *tayyar al-mustaqbal*, of Saad Hariri immediately pointed fingers at the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and what they perceive to be his proxies in the Lebanese government, the Shi'a Hezbollah party. In an interview with reporters in Washington DC, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also implied Hezbollah's responsibility in the killing, due to its apparent protection of, and support for the Syrian government. In her words, "they [the Lebanese people] deserve to have a government that reflects their aspirations, [and does not] act as proxies and agents for outside forces."¹

The current conflict may well push Lebanon one step closer towards another civil war. Since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on February 14, 2005, the specter of sectarian confrontation has been looming and the cycle of violence has barely been kept under control. After the deadly conflict from 1975-1990 that left about 120,000 Lebanese people dead and many more wounded and displaced, the reasons and factors that led to this dangerous situation deserve special analysis. While most commentators emphasize Syrian as well as Iranian influence over Hezbollah which would execute orders that come from Damascus or Tehran, a thorough analysis includes Hezbollah's domestic position vis-à-vis other political groups. In fact, Hezbollah is now domestically much more fragile compared to twelve years ago when it succeeded in pushing Israel out of occupied South Lebanon.

When Hezbollah emerged in the 1980s, its primary *raison d'être* consisted of resisting Israeli forces which had occupied Southern Lebanon since 1982. Supported by its Iranian, religious counterparts and partially trained by Iranian militias, the Shi'a clerical leadership of Lebanon provided religious and moral guidance to Shi'a armed resistance in the South. In the name of the broad idea of resistance, *muqawama*, all political and military acts were evaluated and justified, sometimes even that of kidnapping Western civilians. After the end of the civil war in 1990-1 few people questioned Hezbollah's right to retain its weapons as the only militia given the continued Israeli occupation of the South. Those who did question this would not only face ideological criticism in the face of the Israeli occupation, but also the Syrian secret service. After all, the

¹ Bassem Mrou: 'Lebanese Opposition Blame Syria for Assassination,' 24 October 2012. ABC News: accessible at <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/lebanese-opposition-blames-syria-assassination-17553046#.UI5ADGdP6Vo>.

Syrian *mukhabarat* was very active after the civil war and Syrian troops were stationed in about two-thirds of the country.

After the May 2000 withdrawal of Israeli forces from Southern Lebanon, the question of Hezbollah's arms became more controversial. The party appeared to be yielding disproportionate political power inside Lebanon with a militia that dwarfed the military capabilities of the regular Lebanese armed forces. With US military campaigns raging in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the threats issued towards Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah in the aftermath of 9/11, Hezbollah's domestic political involvement increased. This was to protect its broader concept of *muqawama*, i.e. to refute further Israeli aggression, and with it its arsenal of conventional weapons. After all, a more narrow understanding of *muqawama* would suggest that with the withdrawal of Israel, there was little to resist against and therefore no need for Hezbollah's arsenal of conventional weapons. The still 'occupied' Sheba farms may resemble a badly needed pretext.

Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon after the ill-fated assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005 made things worse for Hezbollah. Even if Hezbollah redefined *muqawama* to now emphasize defensive resistance and, potentially, even the disappearance of Israel from all Arab lands with its support for Hamas, it lost its political support in the government. More than that, after the assassination of Rafik Hariri and the strong emotions that this event triggered among the Lebanese, a Sunni-led and partially Christian supported bloc called Future Movement became powerful, largely supported by the West and Saudi Arabia. It was led by Rafik Hariri's son, Saad Hariri, and it openly questioned Syria's role and influence in Lebanon as well as Hezbollah's weapons. From Hezbollah's and the perspective of many Shi'a, the Future Movement thereby threatened *muqawama* itself. Hence, starting in 2006 it not only participated in government, but it also occupied the commercial centre of Beirut for 18 months in ways that openly threatened political stability. It thereby aimed at obtaining a controlling influence over the government, as part of its broader *muqawama* ideology to counter what it perceived to be an accrued Saudi-Western influence on the Lebanese government. While the July 2006 Israel-Lebanon war somewhat confirmed Hezbollah's thesis of a broadened *muqawama* and the necessity to be armed given the lack of meaningful defensive capabilities of the regular Lebanese armed forces, it also raised Hezbollah's responsibility in the devastation that occurred. After all, the war was precipitated by the July 12, 2006 abduction of two Israeli soldiers and the killing of eight by a Hezbollah operation across the Lebanese-Israeli border.² As Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah himself confirmed on Hezbollah's TV station al-Manar on

² <http://www.haaretz.com/news/8-soldiers-killed-2-snatched-in-hezbollah-border-attacks-1.192833>

August 27, 2006, had he believed that there would be just a one percent chance that Israel would respond to the abduction with all its military might, he would never have ordered the July 12 operation.³

Its ambition to control the government and to seek of veto power was accentuated when the government allowed the international tribunal to further enquire into the assassination of Rafik Hariri. A potential Hezbollah involvement as indicated by the indictments issued in 2011 would substantially undermine Hezbollah's political credibility. In addition, the government's decision to sack the chief of Beirut airport security in 2008 made Hezbollah and *muqawama* arguably vulnerable to foreign intelligence services, as controlling the airport is one of Hezbollah's most strategic assets. Consequently, it triggered Lebanon's worst domestic crisis since the end of the civil war: Hezbollah militias occupied Sunni controlled parts of West Beirut in April 2008. This forced the government to agree to a veto-yielding participation of Hezbollah in national unity governments. Effectively, after the 2008 Doha agreement in which this right was settled, Hezbollah controlled the government. This control allowed the group to block the international tribunal's investigation⁴ and even to topple Prime Minister Saad Hariri when it refused to participate in his government in January 2011. Its veto power reached unprecedented heights.

Yet, it would be wrong to conclude that all of this made Hezbollah more powerful. To the contrary, it has sought more governmental control because of the vulnerability of the *muqawama* in its broader definition. There is now less societal and governmental support for Hezbollah, as well as the International Tribunal's indictments which raised important questions about Hezbollah activities. In addition, the usefulness of Hezbollah's weapons with respect to the Israeli army is one issue. A completely different issue is the use of its weapons in the 2008 power struggle in the streets of West Beirut, which left 11 mostly Sunni pro-government Lebanese militiamen dead and 30 injured. A taboo was broken: Hezbollah openly used its weapons against other Lebanese for the sake of ensuring its resistance ideology vis-à-vis Israel and other Western powers. In addition, Hezbollah's social power has substantially faded. The streets in Dahiyeh, the main Hezbollah-dominated suburb in south Beirut, have become badly policed, and control appears to have slipped away from Hezbollah to mafia-like gangs. One of Hezbollah's traditional fiefs, Baalbek in the Beekaa valley, has become the symbol of lawlessness in the entire country.⁵

³ http://www.meforum.org/2054/nasrallahs-defeat-in-the-2006-war#_ftn15, footnote 16

⁴ Heiko Wimmen: 'The long, steep fall of the Lebanon Tribunal', Middle East Research and Information Project, 1 December 2010, accessible at <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero120110>.

⁵ Martin Dick: 'Hizballah's Domestic Growing Pains' Middle East Research and Information Project, 13 September 2010, accessible at <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero091310>.

In this context, the Syrian uprising against the Alawi-led minority government of Bashar al-Assad brought the Sunni-Shia conflicts to breaking point. After all, sectarian conflicts between Shi'a and Sunni in Lebanon saw its first round of escalation with the 2008 take-over of West Beirut, which was felt as a slap in the face for the Future Movement and its Sunni sectarian base. Hence, while the spillover of the Syrian uprising was mostly felt in the Sunni-dominated Northern town of Tripoli with its important Alawite minority, it also raised the stakes for Hezbollah. Nasrallah's support for Bashar al-Assad, rumors of Hezbollah involvement in Syrian pro-government militias, and the rejection of receiving Syrian refugees in Lebanon are all indicative of how much Hezbollah is standing with its back to the wall.⁶ More than anything, the assassination of General Wissam al Hassan and the accusations that Hezbollah's Western supported rivals brought up, further weakened its position.

No party inside of Lebanon has an interest in an escalation of sectarian conflicts. The main lesson learned after the civil war is that no one single group yields hegemonic power over the country. Co-habitation is not a choice, but a necessity. Yet, with the definition of *muqawama* broadened, Hezbollah is not likely to suddenly backtrack. Nasrallah's interviews of support for Bashar al-Assad, and the rejection of Syrian refugees on Lebanese soil make this clear. Yet, in its ambition to see a Lebanon ruled by a civilian government without Syrian and Iranian influence and without stockpiles of arms that target Israel, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other governments need to remember some important principles of Arab politics: Any interference, including that of international tribunals as well as support for pro-Western and Saudi-sponsored political groups such as the Future Movement ultimately backfires as it only increases already existing rivalries. From a Western perspective, if there is one lesson to be learned from the Lebanese civil war, then it is that the more it gets involved, the stronger the ideological, political, and military repercussions inside Lebanon. In 2012 as in the 1970s and 1980s, the conflicts inside Lebanon remain a reflection of the larger Middle Eastern conflicts that have little to do with idealized arguments of freedom vs. autocracy: Saudi-Iranian rivalries; Shia-Sunni conflicts; Israel's meddling in Arab affairs in order to guarantee its own narrowly defined security interests. In this situation, a narrow understanding of Lebanese politics as friends vs. foes, which appears to underlie US poli-

⁶ Giorgio Cafiero 'Hezbollah hedges its bets on Assad' in Palestine Chronicle 21 October 2012, accessible at http://palestinechronicle.com/view_article_details.php?id=19647; The Daily Star: 'Hezbollah rejects Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon', accessible at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/Mar-10/166204-hezbollah-rejects-syrian-refugee-camps-in-lebanon.ashx#axzz2BGGw5Xif>.

cies, not only remains highly reductionist but also counterproductive and dangerous.