

Hezbollah: enter the Arab Summer

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/waronterror/2012/02/01/hezbollah-enter-the-arab-summer/

Posted by AD Brown

This week Meor Alif examines Hezbollah and a Middle East changed by the Arab Spring. From its modest beginnings, Hezbollah has emerged as an eminent force in the region bolstered by Iran but this alliance faces a number of challenges. Hezbollah and Iran, argues Meor Alif, will have to adapt to a post-Arab Spring that has reshaped the political landscape in the region.



Very few fighting units in the course of modern history can boast to have such an impressive portfolio than that of Hezbollah in waging effective asymmetric warfare. It doesn't take much to realize that given the right time of day and the right weapons in their hand, Hassan Nasrallah's band of brothers can make a Thermopylaic stand against any incoming hoard. There is no doubt that it has traditionally been able to hold its own despite all sorts of geopolitical changes that has occurred in the Middle East. In recent weeks however, as we have witnessed in the news, there have been interesting developments in the politics surrounding the Sparta they live in. Hezbollah might be facing their toughest challenge to date with the slow but certain demise of the Assad family in Syria. This regime change seems to be ebbing away against Hezbollah's traditional power base and draws out a very intriguing point to consider; what is the future of Hezbollah in Levant? And will they be able to adapt to the changes to continue to be the force that they are in the axis of resistance?

It wasn't too long ago that Hezbollah was just another reactionary group that emerged from the abyss of Palestinian refugee camps in Southern Lebanon. The creation of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent Arab-Israeli war that ensued the same year, created a backdrop of the Nakba which would give birth to many attempts to salvage the conditions of the several thousand Palestinians who were pushed into Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. Hezbollah's meta struggle against Israel was in no means a cause that it took upon itself without any precedence. Before it, there was the PLO and although they were far from being joined at the hip as organizations, both were nevertheless associated through their struggle against Israel. It was Operation Galilee, a full scale invasion attempt by Israel in 1982, in retaliation to prior PLO attacks, which really brought Hezbollah to the fore.

The literature on Hezbollah is nothing short of diverse. However, a running consensus from the differing views appears to suggest that the foundation of Hezbollah rests on a few notable factors. Among those include the explanation of a structural imbalance that existed in the Lebanese National Pact which in the late 1970's and early 1980's no longer reflected an accurate demographical breakdown in Lebanon at the time. During this period the Shiite population was no longer the small confessional group that it was during the early years post Lebanese independence. In fact, it had grown to become the largest Lebanese confessional community, rendering the old arrangement and the outdated context it was created in, almost obsolete in terms of representation in the legislative, executive and military positions in Lebanon.

The poor living conditions of the Shiite community, especially in the south, and the lack of development for them further entrenched the feeling of communitarian isolation. Hence, having always seen itself until this very day as the protectors of the Lebanese Shiite community – at its conception, the identity crisis plaguing the Shiites in the context of the broader Lebanese society is argued by many to be an important factor in precipitating the creation of Hezbollah. The overwhelming battering which the Shiite community had to endure as a result of military defeats, like that of Operation Litani, and the injuries inflicted as a result of Operation Galilee combined with the feeling of helplessness, contributed to the fostering of militant movements. But more importantly, as the world witnessed in 1979 – the Iranian revolution carried out by fellow Shiite clerics in Tehran gave the Shiite community in Lebanon the impetus to take domestic matters into their own hands. The eviction attempt by Israel on the PLO brought together organizations like the Islamic Jihad, the Organization of the Oppressed on Earth and the Revolutionary Justice

Organization to assimilate and form what is known today as Hezbollah. Either way, what was clear then and is still clear now, is that this Iranian sponsored organization is essentially an armed organization hell bent on expelling Israel from Lebanon and fighting them in the long haul.

Hezbollah has, till this day, managed to claim several victories in the cause of fighting Israel. Starting with the 1984 American pull-out from Beirut, the subsequent Israeli pull-out under Ehud Barak in 2000 and its most recent 'victory' against Israel in 2006 – all of which have contributed to Hezbollah fame and the almost mythical status of Hassan Nasrallah.

More importantly, Hezbollah's efforts in the social and development programs that it provides for its people and the substantial electoral gains it has achieved over the year has made it a force like no other.

However, in these past few weeks, Hezbollah's existence and its future has been called into question. Their close tie with Damascus is an open secret. With the regime in Syria slowly inching into disrepute, what can be said about the future of Hezbollah?

As the entire international community peers into the country, almost unequivocally, there is a consensus that a toppled Assad regime would create a more democratic Syria – something which Hezbollah would not necessarily welcome as openly as it did in Egypt and Libya. We know now that a few months ago, Hassan Nasrallah was quick to condemn the two 'dictators' but has since refused to say the same about Assad. A joint statement between Hezbollah and Amal claiming "firm support for the Islamic Republic in the face of American and Israeli threats" in November highlights Hezbollah's stance with regards to the issue of Syria, as part of the statement read;

"What is happening in Syria is an international conspiracy targeting Syria's rejectionist position and its policies which support the Arab and Muslim resistance movements, particularly in Palestine." It goes on to reaffirm that Lebanon will never be "a conduit for a conspiracy against sisterly Syria"

In simple terms, a new, more democratic Syria would most likely be more reflective of the Syrian demographic, hence, in all likelihood a Sunni government will be formed in place of Assad's Alawite regime. There is a fear for Hezbollah that a new Sunni government in Syria would be disinterested in shaking hands with them, especially seeing how Hezbollah has grown to become the face of Shiites in the contemporary world. Although the new Syrian government would be united with Hezbollah, in so far as fighting Israel is concerned, the religious divide between them will prevent and stand in the way of Syria continuing to support Hezbollah in the way they previously used to. Furthermore, given this change in leadership, Syria would also be likely to review all its long standing relationships with its neighbours, including Iran, and position itself more moderately on different issues so as to gain as many new allies – including those previously alienated by Assad.

Given the atmosphere of revolution that the Arab spring has brought to the several countries that endured it, it would make sense for a new Syria to be interested to continuing its relationship with Iran and Hezbollah (albeit less vigorously in terms of ideological commitments) while balancing that out along more Arab nationalist overtures, which could bring together Egypt, Palestine and all the other Arab countries coming out of dictatorships over the last few months against Israel.

It would be interesting to also consider if the Muslim Brotherhood will play any part in a new Syria and how that would affect Hezbollah in the long term. Nasrallah's continued support of Assad at the present moment is not doing itself any favours. The more Hezbollah continues to pledge unfettering support for Assad, the dimmer its post-Assad future will be, because such a move will only result in Hezbollah positioning itself in direct contradiction to the Syrian opposition, as disorganised as they may be. Even if for some reason the new Syrian government does decide to take Hezbollah in as an ally in the future, it would surely never forget or lose sight of Hezbollah's past and their staunch support in favour of the dictatorship at this present time. Either way, the way forward, presumably for

Hezbollah, is to keep this consideration in mind and attempt to manufacture some sort of new relationship with the Syrian opposition as early as it can in anticipation of the crumbling of Assad and his government.

However, all of the above is not the worst case scenario – it's far from it. The worst case scenario for Hezbollah is the possibility of the installment of a new Syrian regime that while fighting Israel, would also simultaneously crack down on Hezbollah viewing them as nothing more than the dangerous religious splinter militant group they are. Moreover, the cold hard reality is that, without Assad in the picture, Hezbollah will find it very difficult to transfer arms into Lebanon. Keep in mind that for decades now, the Levant area has always teetered on the brink of war and the prospect of it has, and always will, play in the back of the minds of Hezbollah leadership. In the event of war, anything less than a cooperative and supportive Syria would spell bad news for Hezbollah.

Unsurprisingly, on the other hand, the conflict which has engulfed Syria has definitely rung some bells in Israel. The changes in Syria have forced Israel to be more vigilant about the Hezbollah threat. Hezbollah has managed to add the SA-8's (a Russian truck mounted tactical surface-to-air missile system that has a range of 30 kilometers), several dozen M600 (the M600 is a clone of the Iranian Fateh -110, has a range of 300 kilometers, and can carry a half ton warhead with great accuracy) long-range missiles, and additional 302 mm, Khaibar-2 rockets (with a range of 100 kilometers) to its arsenal. This is to be added to the large quantity of shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles and the already significant arsenal of M600s that Hezbollah already possess.

There is also a growing fear that in the state of chaos, Syrian chemical weapons could fall into the hands of Hezbollah. The heightened sense of insecurity following the thought that Israel would be encircled on different fronts from a better armed Hezbollah and a trigger happy Iran will put the hawks in the Knesset at the edge of their seats and more ready to commit to war or self-defence.

It will definitely be a big few months ahead for Hezbollah. Its traditional position in the old political order will be challenged and both Hezbollah and Iran will have to find a way to fit in a post-Arab spring Middle East. The emergence of Turkey and Erdogan's efforts to reassert influence over what it sees as its old Ottoman playground, alongside the rise of Egypt from the ashes with the Muslim Brotherhood at its helm trying to reclaim Egypt's dominance in Arab politics will be a stern test to Hezbollah's and Iran's staying power in the coming months. What is certain, is that there will be a genuine power struggle for the leadership position in the Muslim world to be the defenders of Palestine and to lead the push for the fight against Israel. It would be careless to assume that the veteran players, the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey, Iran or Hezbollah, would just give in without a fight – watch this space, enter the Arab summer.

Meor Alif Meor Azalan is currently completing a MSc Comparative Politics (Conflict Studies) at LSE and works as a research assistant at the Henry Jackson Society. Meor Alif has previous experience working at the Asian-African Legal Consultative Organization (AALCO), assisting the Secretariat in research work on issues pertaining to international law. Meor Alif's area of expertise is on the subject of terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa.