

Oct 21 2013

Hizbullah: the quagmire of Syria

LSE IDEAS

By [Dr Dina Matar](#), Director, Centre for Media and Film Studies, SOAS.



Syria's agreement last month to disclose and destroy its chemical weapons and the subsequent easing of tensions between the US and Iran raise a crucial question about geo-strategic and geo-political relations in the region: what do these developments mean for the domestic and regional image and political trajectory of the Lebanese political party Hizbullah?

Iran and Syria are long-term strategic allies that have provided key financial and military support to Hizbullah, whose military wing the European Union classified [as a terrorist organisation in July 2013](#) after it became evident that it had sent fighters in support of the Syrian regime in its ongoing internal battle against its opponents. [Iran has also been involved in some of the key](#)

[strategic decisions](#) that Hizbullah has taken since its inception in 1982, such as its decision to formally enter the Lebanese political system in the early 1990s and the recent military involvement in Syria in 2013.

To date, Hizbullah has publicly remained silent about the rapprochement between Iran and the US, preferring to adopt a 'wait-and-see' attitude – instead, Hizbullah has turned its attention to rallying the Shiite community in Lebanon behind it and to dealing with the increasingly fragile domestic security situation marked by attacks against some of its strongholds in Lebanon and shootouts with domestic opponents. The shift in attention was starkly evident in a [speech given by Hizbullah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah](#) on 2 August 2013, in which he invoked the most significant religious figure in Shiite history to emphasise Hizbullah's Shiite and resistance identity: '[We are the Shiites of 'Ali bin Talib who will not give up Palestine or the resistance'](#)'. However, while the language is a stark departure from the drive by the group to project its image as a national Lebanese entity, it does not signal a change in Hizbullah's long-term political aims. Rather, it is part of the group's consistent strategy to adapt its language and image to suit particular historical contexts in order to increase its power and reach in Lebanon while retaining support within its main constituency—the Shiites of Lebanon.

Hizbullah's credibility and popularity in Lebanon and the larger Arab world reached unprecedented heights following the 2006 war with Israel, but soon fell victim to Hizbullah's attempts to expand its hegemony in Lebanon, where diverse political and confessional interests have long competed for control. Its domestic standing also suffered after the indictment of four of its members by the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon over their alleged involvement in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005. Hizbullah had replenished its arsenal in the period since the 2006 war and had emerged as a majority partner in the Lebanese Cabinet under Prime Minister Najib Miqati. Nonetheless, it was Hizbullah's involvement in the ongoing Syrian conflict that dealt a serious blow to its image as a pan-Arab resistance movement and a champion of the downtrodden, particularly after admitting that its fighters had taken part in battles against regime opponents and had played a central role in the [recapture of the Syrian city of Qusair in June 2013](#). Hizbullah's intervention in Syria and support for the Syrian authoritarian regime has also been partly blamed for several attacks against some of its strongholds in Lebanon in recent months and a reported rift within its core membership. Several press reports quoted former [Secretary General Subhi al Tufayli](#) as stating that the decision to intervene in Syria was a miscalculation that had detracted from Hizbullah's *raison d'être* – resistance to Israel and the US – and that might eventually drag Hizbullah into a quagmire and increase sectarian tension across the Middle East. Opponents of Hizbullah have also spoken out against its support for the Assad regime, with some comparing Hizbullah to the authoritarian regimes that were rapidly collapsing throughout the region between 2012 and 2013, and others arguing that this would eventually result in a serious threat to its own power in Lebanon.

Hassan Nasrallah, whose visibility and presence has increased since the 2006 war with almost weekly television addresses and televised public appearances has repeatedly argued that the fight alongside Syria was part of an existential battle against the US, Israel and against the *takfiris* – a reference to the motley of Sunni jihadist groups that have aligned themselves against the regime in Syria. Such groups had indeed been involved in the battle against the Assad regime and Hizbullah in Qusair and elsewhere in Syria, thereby lending a degree of credibility to Hizbullah's efforts to present its military involvement as being a defensive tactic against the *takfiri* threat before it reached Lebanese soil. In a speech on 25 May 2013, the day commemorating the liberation of the south of Lebanon, and at the height of the battle of Qusair, Nasrallah called the *takfiris* a

'disease' that would spread to Lebanon if the group simply stood by and did nothing, and went on to describe the territories in Syria adjacent to Lebanon as a critical area whose control by Hizbullah would [prevent jihadi groups from reaching Lebanon](#).

Recent reports in some Arab media outlets indicate that Hizbullah is [preparing to withdraw 1,200 fighters from Syria](#), a move that coincides with a rise in sectarian tensions in Lebanon that led to the deployment of Lebanese security forces at checkpoints within and around the group's eastern stronghold of Baalbek after a Shiite-Sunni shootout killed four people few days before. Hizbullah has traditionally had [significant influence over the Lebanese army](#) – for example, it is reported that [Hizbullah discharges some of its recruits](#) after they serve for two years in its military wing and goes on to enlist them in the Lebanese army, allowing Hizbullah to maintain loyalty within the ranks and file. For its part, the army wants to avoid an armed confrontation with Hizbullah because of fears of defection by Shiite army personnel. In a [speech on 23 September 2013](#) Nasrallah called on his followers to support the deployment and stressed the need for Lebanese national unity, signalling a renewed public relations campaign that hopes to recapture Hizbullah's image as a national Lebanese force concerned for the safety and welfare of Lebanese citizens. Since his appointment as secretary-general in 1992, the articulate and charismatic Nasrallah has largely managed to attract support and bridge the gap between Hizbullah's perceptions of itself and its fundamental policy aims and others' perception of it. However, how and whether Nasrallah and Hizbullah will be able to bridge the growing gap in perceptions is unclear.

Dina Matar is director of the Centre for Media and Film Studies at SOAS.

This entry was posted in [Middle East](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).