Axis of resistance

Syrian uprising threatens Hizbullah’s strategic alliances

Vehicles burn on 14 February 2005 following a bomb attack targeting the motorcade of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, killing him and 22 others in Beirut, Lebanon. The attack led to a public uprising in Lebanon on 14 March 2005, known as the Cedar Revolution, involving one million Lebanese people calling for Syria to leave the country.
The relationship between Hizbullah and its key strategic partners – Syria and Iran – has evolved considerably since the 1980s. However, with the Syrian regime under sustained international pressure and engaged in violent clashes with armed opposition groups, Bilal Y. Saab examines the likely fallout from the Syria crisis on this three-pronged alliance.

**KEY POINTS**

- Hizbullah has received support from two primary benefactors since the early-1980s – Syria and Iran. Collectively, the trio have made up the so-called “Axis of Resistance”, working together to frustrate Israeli and Western ambitions in the region.

- If the regime of Bashar al-Assad falls – either through force or a negotiated political agreement – Hizbullah is likely to be forced to distance itself from Syria, thereby losing a key transit route for Iranian weapons to Lebanon.

- Hizbullah’s ties to Iran will likely remain intact, though the relationship will have to adapt to its changing environment. Hizbullah will struggle to survive as a coherent, ideologically motivated, politically influential and well-armed movement if Iran’s multi-dimensional support is disrupted.

As the conflict in Syria intensifies and the government continues to lose control over its territory due to the increasing strength and size of the armed opposition, scenarios of regime collapse are no longer distant. The question is no longer whether the Syrian regime will collapse, but rather a matter of how long that collapse will take. Regardless of its timing and nature, the fall of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad carries major strategic implications for the future of the Middle East. One actor that will stand to lose tremendously from the increasingly likely departure of Assad and his government’s support is Hizbullah.

Since its establishment in the early-1980s in opposition to Israel’s invasion in southern Lebanon, Hizbullah has received support from two primary benefactors – Syria and Iran. Collectively, the trio have made up the so-called “Axis of Resistance”, working together to thwart Israeli and Western ambitions in the region.

Over time, the relationship between Hizbullah with its chief sponsors has evolved. Initially, Syria took a lead role in developing Hizbullah’s political direction due to the large presence of its soldiers and intelligence officers inside Lebanon during the 1990s. At present, Syria serves more as a key logistics hub and safe haven allowing Iran to transfer critical resources – including weapons and funding – to Hizbullah operatives. This facilitation network presents a threat to Israel’s security, especially if Hizbullah were to start moving strategic weapons across the border into Lebanon.

A rupture in this bond will make life increasingly difficult for Hizbullah. With opposition forces reportedly gathering strength and targeting key Syrian cities including Damascus and Aleppo, Hizbullah is likely to be feeling increased pressure to remove its strategic assets from the country. While there are no reports in the open source confirming such action, another prevailing concern is whether Syrian officials would transfer chemical weapons to Hizbullah if the regime’s fall becomes imminent.

While the fall of the Assad regime will curtail Hizbullah’s involvement in Syria, its ties to Iran will likely remain intact, though the relationship will have to adapt to its changing environment. Iran is the chief provider of weapons, training and funding to Hizbullah, all activities which are largely conducted inside Syria. Without Syria as a key facilitation hub, Iran will be forced to identify a new location – one where it has a good relationship with the government, offers multiple transit routes and is in close proximity to Lebanon. In the short-term, the relationship between Hizbullah and Iran may recede as they seek to re-establish the support network outside Syria; however, their shared opposition to Israel is a common bond that ensures these two groups will continue working together.

**Hizbullah’s evolving relationships**

The links between Hizbullah and Syria are rooted in the strategic alliance between Syria and Iran – a relationship that has endured for over three decades. From the early-1980s
(when Hizbullah was created) to the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990, Iran and Syria have collaborated closely as well as competed, sometimes violently, for control over Hizbullah. This tension was largely a result of their differing objectives – Iran was set on spreading the Islamic revolution and projecting its power in the Arab world using its trusted surrogate Hizbullah, while Syria was focused on dominating Lebanese politics and regaining the Golan Heights, which it lost to Israel in the 1967 War. During these years, Syria carried more influence when it came to Lebanese politics and the armed struggle against Israel in southern Lebanon, largely due to its presence inside the country.

After signing the Taif agreement on 22 October 1989, which provided the basis for ending the Lebanese civil war, Syrian forces remained in Lebanon to “keep the fragile peace”. Syria was also able to leverage its continued presence to influence Hizbullah activities; in particular, the scope and pace of its participation in Lebanese politics. The Syrians stayed on long after Lebanon’s civil war ended, effectively becoming the political master of its tiny neighbor. Since 1992 (when Hizbullah participated in parliamentary elections for the first time), Hizbullah’s success in parliamentary elections has seemingly adhered to Syrian preferences of divide-and-rule in Lebanon and making sure no political actor becomes too powerful.

In addition to influencing Lebanese politics, Syria placed constraints on the timing and intensity of Hizbullah’s armed resistance against Israeli forces in the south. Syria was able to exercise such control because it had thousands of stationed soldiers and an extensive network of intelligence officers working inside Lebanon. While Syria supported Hizbullah attacks against Israeli targets in southern Lebanon, it did not want to risk a conflict with Israel.

Iran’s involvement in Hizbullah’s development during this period centered primarily on religious indoctrination, weapons training, and occasional transfers of finances and weapons. A central focus of Iran’s foreign policy strategy was to develop a non-Iranian surrogate to execute terrorist attacks on its behalf. The terrorist bombings in Argentina in 1992 and 1994 and the 1996 Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia are just a few examples where Iran leveraged its relationship with Hizbullah to execute terrorism abroad.

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Syria leaves Lebanon

In April 2005, Syria announced that its armed forces had left Lebanon in accordance with United Nations Resolution 1559 (adopted on 2 September 2004), which directed Lebanon to establish its sovereignty over all of its territory and called upon “foreign forces” (Israel and Syria) to withdraw from the country and cease intervening in its internal politics. The resolution also called on all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias to disband and declared support for a “free and fair electoral process”.

The UN resolution, however, was not the sole factor that forced Syria to end its 29-year stay in Lebanon. The catalyst that ultimately led to Syria’s departure occurred on 14 February 2005 when the motorcade carrying Lebanon’s ex-premier Rafik Hariri (1992-1998, 2000-2005) was bombed in Beirut, killing the former Lebanese official and 21 others. Immediately after the attack, a number of reports pointed to Syria’s involvement. This led to a public uprising in Lebanon on 14 March 2005, known as the Cedar Revolution, made up of one million Lebanese people calling for Syria to leave.

The Syrian departure resulted in significant changes to the relationship, although the axis of resistance remained relatively intact. First, Hizbullah regained freedom of action in Lebanese politics and consequently expanded its influence with continued Iranian military and financial sponsorship. At this time, Iran became Hizbullah’s undisputed caretaker, providing the majority of weapons, finances and training. While Syria was able to retain some influence over Hizbullah, its importance to the “Axis” has been as a weapons supplier and central facilitation hub for people and illicit materials transiting to Lebanon.
Damascus: a key support hub
Since Hizbullah’s inception, Iran and Syria have worked together to provide it with sufficient resources – primarily weaponry and finances – to defend Lebanon against Israeli occupation. The late Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad (who served as the President of Syria from 1970-2000 and is the father of current president Bashar al-Assad) imposed controls on the quantity and variety of arms he allowed Iran to send Hizbullah, according to Nicholas Blanford’s *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah’s Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel*. Hafez preferred to maintain a tactical alliance with Hizbullah and permitted a sufficient flow of arms through Syria to the group to resist the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in south Lebanon, but he drew the line at delivering game-changing weapons that could destabilize the Lebanon-Israel theater, possibly at Syria’s expense. Iran accepted these limitations as the price to pay for its strategically important alliance with Damascus, which served as a key node for weapons transfers from Iran to Hizbullah.

Following the death of Hafez al-Assad in June 2000, the relationship between Hizbullah, Syria and Iran intensified under the rule of Bashar, who reportedly viewed Hizbullah’s martial accomplishments with genuine admiration, according to an August 2004 article by the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Safir*. During his first year in office, Bashar lifted the arms control restrictions imposed by his father, allowing Syria to become a major weapons supplier to Hizbullah, according to a May 2008 article in the Lebanese newspaper *Al Liwaa*, and not just a transit area for Iranian weapons. While Syria would not be able to regain the same level of influence it once held over Hizbullah, this enhanced Bashar’s role within the tri-party relationship.

On 12 July 2006, a war between Hizbullah and Israel began after Hizbullah attacked an Israeli patrol inside the Blue Line – the border demarcation between Lebanon and Israel – and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. It ended on 14 August when a UN-brokered ceasefire took effect. During this conflict, the bulk of rockets larger than 122 mm that were fired into Israel were Syrian-supplied 220 mm Uragan rockets, with a 42-mile range, and B302s, a Syrian version of the Chinese multiple rocket launch system, according to Blanford’s *Warriors of God*.

Following the 14 August ceasefire, Hizbullah appears to have restocked its arsenal and surpassed its pre-2006 numbers in both quantity and quality of weapons, according to a May 2008 *Los Angeles Times* article citing Israeli and Western officials, as well as members of Hizbullah. This level of readiness would not have been possible without both Syrian and Iranian support. Western and Israeli officials have accused both countries of smuggling thousands of short-range rockets, as well as missiles that can strike deep into Israel, into Lebanon via known smuggling routes, including flights from Tehran to Damascus International Airport and a rail line through Turkey.

While accurate figures are not openly avail-
able, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported that on 17 July 2012 Israel’s military intelligence chief, Major General Aviv Kochavi, revealed in remarks before the Israeli Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that Iran and Hizbullah are preparing for the day after Assad’s fall from power. “In Lebanon, there are today between 70,000-80,000 rockets that could hit Israel,” he said.

Support for Assad’s regime
The Syrian crisis began in March 2011, when the army was deployed to quell extensive protests demanding the Assad family end its five decade rule. To date, around 17,000 anti-Assad protestors have been killed (although these numbers have not been confirmed), and the violence continues throughout Syria. During his July 2012 comments to the Israeli Knesset, Major General Kochavi said the clashes in Syria are worsening on a daily basis, with 500 to 700 people being killed every week.

Given its strategic alliance with Syria, Hizbullah’s political rivals, including members of the Future Movement and the Kataeb Party, were quick to accuse the group of active involvement in the Syrian conflict and assisting the regime in its crackdown on the protestors.

Hizbullah has been accused of dispatching dozens of its members to arrest, kidnap, and kill Syrian rebels that have set up bases in northern Lebanon, detect and counter arms trafficking across the Lebanese-Syrian borders that could aid the rebels, and engage in sniping against protestors inside Syria. In an interview with Al-Arabiya in late-August 2011, Youth Coalition of the Syrian Revolution leader Wahid Saqr accused Hizbullah of having deployed armed militias in Syria, assisting the regime there in the brutal crackdown on pro-democracy protesters. And on 6 April 2012, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported that Hizbullah and Iran had “significantly” increased their aid to the Syrian regime amid anti-regime demonstrations throughout the country.

While Hizbullah has clearly been vocal in its support of the Syrian regime over the past 18 months, no concrete evidence is available that confirms physical or material involvement by Hizbullah in the Syrian conflict. In January 2012, Riad Kahwaji, a political analyst with the Near East and Gulf Military Analysis Institute
(Beirut), told Iran’s Press TV: “So far no proof has been presented like arresting Hizbullah members dressed in Syrian army uniforms, carrying weapons, and helping the regime... Therefore, these allegations remain allegations only.”

In addition, in mid-April, Hizbullah Deputy Secretary General Sheikh Naim Qassem denied reports concerning the deployment of Hizbullah fighters in Syria to support the regime, according to the Lebanese news site NOW Lebanon. “Everything that [is being] said is not true because whenever we do something we do it [plainly] in front of everyone, with no fear from anyone,” he said. He said the regime did not need Hizbullah fighters because “[it is supported] by strong people and strong leadership.”

Politically, the Syrian crisis has complicated the partnership and placed Hizbullah in a difficult position. Despite praising the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, Hizbullah and its leader Hassan Nasrallah have chosen to stand by the Syrian regime, even as it kills thousands of its own people to stay in power. Hizbullah’s backing of the Assad regime has tarnished its image as a “resistance movement” that claims to be a voice for the underprivileged and champion of the oppressed, but it is still too early to examine the extent of the damage to the movement’s brand, especially as the conflict continues.

Given Hizbullah’s priorities of resisting Israel and protecting Iran’s strategic interests – inter-related goals that are aided by Syria’s intermediary role – Hizbullah’s leadership judges that it cannot afford to abandon the Assad regime.

Nasrallah’s 18 July 2012 televised speech addressing a mass rally organized by Hizbullah at Al-Raya Stadium in Beirut and marking the sixth anniversary of the 2006 war with Israel, was a clear indication of the group’s continued support for Syria. Nasrallah said Syria, under Assad, was the main backer of the resistance against Israel, not only at the popular and political level, but also at the military level. “The most important weapons in which we fought Israel during the [2006] July war came from Syria,” he said.

Still, Nasrallah seemingly chose his words carefully so as to avoid any further loss of domestic support in Lebanon. In addition to praising Assad, Nasrallah also reiterated his call for dialogue between the Syrian regime and opposition to end the 16-month unrest. “We renew our call for the protection of Syria, its people and army. The only solution is through the acceptance of dialogue and this should be done swiftly,” he said.

**Fallout from the Syrian crisis**

So long as the balance of power tilts heavily in favor of Assad’s forces, the costs of siding with Syria for Hizbullah are tolerable, according to a senior Hizbullah member who spoke to this author by phone in January 2012. However, if the situation drastically worsens in Syria, with opposition groups becoming better armed and organized, and Assad’s international allies – Russia, China, and Iran – distancing themselves from Damascus, the costs of supporting what could be a falling regime will be much higher for Hizbullah. Therefore, it is possible the group will revisit its policy to defend its interests – protecting its arms supplies and aiding Iran should come under attack.

If the Assad regime falls, either through force or a negotiated political agreement, Hizbullah will likely be forced to distance itself from Syria, thereby losing a key transit route for Iranian weapons to Lebanon, as well as a safe haven where Hizbullah operatives have been able to operate with impunity.

In addition, Syria stockpiles a number of strategic weapons for Hizbullah at storage facilities on its military bases. Reported gains made by Syrian opposition groups in mid-2012 have led to speculation that it is a matter of “when” and not “if” the Assad regime falls. Consequently, one of the immediate concerns for the international community and neighboring countries is preventing Hizbullah from transferring a number of their strategic weapons from Syrian storage sites across the border into Lebanon.
According to a June 2012 article in French newspaper *Le Figaro*, Hizbullah has moved hundreds of missiles from storage sites in Syria to bases in eastern Lebanon. Citing a Western expert who closely follows relations between Hizbullah, Iran and Syria, Hizbullah moved the missiles over fears that a successor to the failing Syrian regime could sever ties with the organization.

In late July, a senior Israeli official indicated the county is planning for possible military operations against Syria if missiles or chemical weapons are transferred to Hizbullah. “I have instructed the military to increase its intelligence preparations and prepare what is needed so that... we will be able to consider carrying out an operation,” the Associated Press quoted Israeli Minister of Military Affairs Ehud Barak as saying on 20 July.

While Hizbullah is unlikely to intentionally provoke another war with Israel, the loss of its logistics hub and supply line in Syria would place Hizbullah at a significant disadvantage in the event of another conflict. Whereas in 2006 the group benefited from the strategic transit route through Syria, which allowed the group to quickly replenish its weapons supplies, the loss of Syrian support could cause Hizbullah to hold on to its larger, strategic weapons if they cannot be easily acquired and replaced. Unless Hizbullah and Iran can build a similar capability in another location, Hizbullah will likely face challenges to resupply its rockets and missiles in the near-term.

**Ties to Iran remain intact**

Unlike its pragmatic relationship with Syria, Hizbullah’s organic partnership with Iran is based on deep trust, shared interests, common values and identical beliefs. Hizbullah has great faith in Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and is a major part of an axis led by Iran that seeks to defeat Israel and disrupt US goals in the region.

The fall of Assad’s regime would present new challenges for Hizbullah and Iran, but the relationship will most likely survive. For several years, Iran has leveraged its relationship with the Assad family to use Syrian territory to facilitate weapons transfers, provide training on weapons systems and deliver funding to Hizbullah. Without the regime’s support, Iran will...
have to identify new routes to supply Hizbullah with these resources, or risk losing its most capable surrogate group.

In the past, Iran has attempted to use maritime shipments to facilitate weapons transfers to Hizbullah, but this method is time consuming and is vulnerable to interceptions. One possible scenario is that Iran transfers its facilitation network from Syria to Sudan, from where Iranian authorities reportedly provided weapons to Hamas during Operation Cast Lead in early 2009, according to a leaked US diplomatic cable cited by The Guardian in December 2010. Without Iran’s constant and multi-dimensional support, Hizbullah will struggle to survive as a coherent, ideologically motivated, politically influential and well-armed movement. Conversely, Iran would lose an essential piece of its terrorist network should Hizbullah’s capabilities erode. The shared and common interest of these two groups ensures that this relationship will survive in some form, regardless of the outcome of events in Syria.

Conclusion
Since its establishment in the early-1980s, Hizbullah has faced numerous challenges from Israel, the US and the international community that have threatened to undermine its campaign and longevity. However, the group has managed to overcome each of these obstacles to survive. The reason for its success in prevailing in difficult circumstances is that it could always fall back on the support of its Shia constituency and non-threatening Lebanese politics. However, new political dynamics are developing in the region, forcing Hizbullah into a dangerous and unpredictable environment more ominous than any it has ever experienced.

If the Assad regime falls and is replaced by an anti-Iranian government, Hizbullah will lose its valued strategic depth as well as an important conduit for arms transfers. The group has other means of ensuring weapons flow into its arsenal using Lebanon’s air and sea ports, however its ability to quickly and substantially rearm in the aftermath of another conflict with Israel will be constrained compared to 2006.

Lebanon’s political players sense that the Syrian crisis is weakening Hizbullah and are seeking to gain maximum benefit. As the conflict develops and the Assad government falters, Hizbullah is likely to be much less accommodating in government and could decide to reassert itself in the face of new threats by calling for demonstrations and deploying its fighters and supporters in parts of the capital, as happened in May 2008.

An escalation in the Syrian conflict could also embolden Hizbullah’s Sunni political opponents in the Future Movement of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri as well as the Salafist community, and encourage them to provoke a confrontation with Hizbullah militants in Beirut. This situation would be difficult for Hizbullah to control, and the leadership may well be dragged into a conflict whatever its stance.

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