A Comparative Analysis of Hezbollah and Hamas Responses to the Syrian Uprising

Nasrin Akhter, University of St Andrews

Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the contradictory responses of Hezbollah and Hamas towards the Asad regime in light of the Syrian uprising. As Islamist groups united in their opposition to the state of Israel, both movements should have supported Syria, the third member of the so-called ‘axis of resistance’ against opposition attempts to destabilise the current administration. In addition, given the level of Syrian strategic support to both actors, serving as a conduit for Iranian arms to Hezbollah and providing a safe haven for Hamas’s political leadership under Khaled Meshaal, the fate of both movements is inevitably tied up with the survival of the Syrian regime. However, despite their common foreign policy agendas and dependence on Damascus, both movements have taken markedly different approaches towards the Syrian uprising, with Hassan Nasrallah’s open support for Bashar at odds with Hamas’s reluctance to align itself with the Syrian government position. The paper therefore attempts to uncover possible reasons for the divergence, the regional consequences of their actions and effects that this has had on their own domestic political standing.

Hezbollah

If we look first at Hezbollah, it is clear from the outset that the movement has placed itself firmly in the Asad camp, emerging perhaps as the regime’s staunchest supporter. Although Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, was quick to endorse Arab uprisings elsewhere in the region and welcomed the challenge to pro-US regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain, in contrast, no such support was offered to Syrian protesters and instead, the movement has put its weight fully behind the regime. Thus, in a narrative which almost parallels the regime’s discourse since the start of hostilities in the southern city of Deraa, in which a nefarious combination of armed criminal gangs, al-Qaeda terrorists, Israeli intelligence and other foreign-backed conspirators have been blamed for stoking up the insurgency, Nasrallah has denounced the Syrian uprising as part of a US-Israeli plot to bring about regime change. In this, Syria is simply being punished for what Nasrallah calls its ‘steadfast’ policies of resisting US-Israeli plans to create a neo-Middle East by supporting Hamas and Hezbollah,
opposing the US invasion of Iraq and refusing to sign a separate peace treaty with Israel along the
lines of those concluded with Egypt, Jordan and the PLO.

This is not to say of course that Hezbollah rules out the need for some civil and political reforms
within the Syrian polity. However, according to Nasrallah, any reforms should be implemented
gradually through a process of ‘dialogue and not open confrontation,’ which would only serve to
destabilise the Syrian state, open it up to sectarian strife and undermine its capacity to take on Israel in
the resistance struggle. Moreover, for Hezbollah, what makes the regime worthy of support is the fact
that unlike leaders elsewhere in the region affected by the events of the Arab uprising, the Syrian
government is, in its opinion, open to reform and willing to negotiate –reflected perhaps in the repeal
of the much-hated Emergency Law, the start of a national dialogue with key domestic opposition
figures in June and the referendum on a new draft constitution expected to be held in February 2012.
Crucially, Nasrallah also contends that the regime still enjoys the support of the majority of its
citizens. It is for this reason that Nasrallah, in a speech to commemorate Martyr’s Day in November,
cautioned against banking on the government to collapse arguing to those that do, that ‘this wager will
fail as their previous bets had failed.’

However, by coming out so strongly in support of Asad as he does and refusing to back the Syrian
opposition, this has not necessarily furthered Nasrallah’s cause, but has in many ways been
counterproductive. At a regional level, Hezbollah’s alignment with the Syrian government- a regime
responsible for the brutal crackdown and deaths of over 5,000 civilians, has only undermined the
resistance credentials of the movement, whose very ideology is rooted in championing the rights of
the weak, downtrodden and dispossessed, and has made it appear increasingly irrelevant and out of
touch in the struggles of ordinary citizens. Much of the goodwill which the movement generated after
the 2006 war with Israel when it successfully withstood the month-long attack by Israeli forces and
was hailed as the vanguard of the Arab and Islamic cause, has therefore simply dissipated. Instead, in
a clear sign that the movement has lost a lot of its legitimacy on the Arab street, Nasrallah’s first
speech on Syria in May, a full three months after the start of the uprising, in which he called for
Syrian’s to back their leader, only led to charges of double standards- given Nasrallah’s early support
for resistance elsewhere, and fuelled widespread resentment, coming as it did a day after the brutal
death in custody of the 13-year old school boy, Hamza al-Khateeb.

In addition, Hezbollah’s unwavering support for the Syrian regime has also provoked a powerful
domestic backlash that threatens to undermine the standing of the movement in the Lebanese political
arena. Much of the anger which has expressed itself at Friday demonstrations in Syria, with protestors
burning the iconic Hezbollah flag, has spilt over the border in Lebanon, erupting in deadly Sunni-
Alawite clashes in the northern city of Tripoli in mid-June and again in February 2012. This has put
pressure on Hezbollah’s fractious coalition with the Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, openly calling in
December for the movement to distance itself from Damascus. Sensing a shift in momentum away from Hezbollah, this has merely encouraged a resurgence of the opposition March 14 coalition, led by the former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, whose government was brought down by the group in January 2011. Highlighting Nasrallah’s resolute support for Asad, Hariri has taken the Hezbollah-backed government to task over a policy that has effectively weakened Lebanese sovereignty, by failing to prevent cross-border raids and incursions by Syrian security forces in pursuit of supposed al-Qaeda operatives, and put Lebanon at odds with much of the rest of the Arab world in voting against Syria’s expulsion from the Arab League in November. All of this has simply compounded Hezbollah’s growing domestic crisis in the wake of the UN indictment in June and expected trial in absentia of four Hezbollah suspects for the assassination of the former Prime Minister, Rafiq al-Hariri.

Considering then the negative repercussions of its alignment with Syria at both the domestic and regional level, this raises the obvious question of why Nasrallah has continued to side with the Syrian government when this has seemingly produced so few tangible results. One possible answer may lie in a natural affinity the movement has with the Alawite regime- an offshoot of the Shiite faith, and common sectarian fears in the face of the regional ascendancy of Sunni parties in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, brought to power as a result of the events of the Arab Spring. However, this hardly seems plausible when it is remembered that Nasrallah remains a staunch supporter of Hamas- which has its origins in the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood movement, and Hezbollah’s March 8 coalition is a broad-based alliance, including Christians, Druze and some notable Sunnis, which does not define itself in narrow sectarian terms. Neither has the Syrian Ba’athist state ever set itself up along religious lines. What is perhaps more plausible is the broader strategic shift in the balance of power that a collapse of the Asad regime would bring about and very real concerns about the prospect of US-Israeli-Saudi hegemony in the region.

In this, the comments made in an interview with the Wall Street Journal in December by Burhan Ghalioun, leader of the Syrian National Council (SNC) - Syria’s largest opposition bloc and a group recognised by Saudi Arabia as the country’s legitimate representative, in which he claimed that his group would seek to break the special military strategy alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, a relationship described as ‘abnormal’ and ‘unprecedented’ prove alarming. By effectively taking Syria out of the resistance equation and placing it firmly within the US-Israeli orbit, in calling for a negotiated settlement over the Golan Heights, this would leave Hezbollah very much isolated and alone in its campaign to roll back Israeli influence. Without Syria’s vital military and logistical support and in the absence of the transit of arms from Iran, worth an estimated $100 million, there is no guarantee that Hezbollah would be able to survive intact or recover militarily in the event of any renewed hostilities with Israel as it did in 2006. Seen in this way, with its very survival at risk, in an increasingly militarised region, the Syrian uprising is therefore being contested as something of
a zero-sum game, where the demise of the Asad regime constitutes a gain for Israel and the US, and an existential threat to Hezbollah itself.

Hamas

If we turn to Hamas now, on the face of it, there is arguably every reason for Hamas to have come out in support of Asad just as much as Hezbollah. With its political bureau based in Damascus since the late 1990s and almost total dependence on Iranian largesse, Hamas appears equally reliant on the resistance axis and certainly more vulnerable to Syrian retaliation if it deviated from the common stand. However, despite these factors, in marked contrast to Hezbollah, Hamas has in fact taken a very measured approach, failing to openly endorse Asad and adopting what it describes as a strictly ‘neutral’ position. Perhaps mindful of becoming too embroiled in the domestic affairs of any Arab state, given the fate of the movement in Jordan and Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s, the Hamas political wing, under Khaled Meshaal, has instead sought to occupy the middle ground between the Syrian leadership- which has supported it in its endeavours against Israel, and the Syrian people- in what is seen as their legitimate demand for basic civil and political rights. Thus, in a carefully calculated strategy of equidistance, Hamas officials issued a statement in April declaring that ‘what is currently taking place in Syria is a strictly internal affair’ and that ‘Hamas does not interfere in Syrian internal affairs.’

However Hamas’s policy of non-intervention and reticence regarding Asad should not be taken to imply any kind of tacit support for the regime. Far from condoning the massive human rights violations and rallying behind the actions of the Ba’thist state, the movement has in fact attempted to put distance between itself and the Asad government. Unlike Hezbollah then, Meshaal has consistently refused to issue a public statement in support of Asad and despite apparent Iranian pressure, rejected all calls to organise pro-Asad rallies in any of the Palestinian refugee camps in Syria, even while anti-Ghaddafi protests were arranged in Gaza. Much to the chagrin of Syrian authorities, and in contrast to claims made to the contrary by the Syrian media, Hamas also failed to disavow statements made in a Friday khutbah, or sermon, in March by the Qatar-based Sunni cleric, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, widely perceived to be the spiritual head of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, in which he openly denounced what he called the ‘atrocities’ committed by the ‘suppressive’ Asad regime- pointing towards the attack on unarmed protestors at the al-Omari mosque, and called for the collapse of the government.

However, by failing to unequivocally position itself behind the Syrian regime and exhibit the same level of support as that demonstrated by Hezbollah, this has only led to punitive action by the Syrian state, which many in the movement had perhaps feared. At the political level, Al Hayat reported in April that Hamas’s policy of neutralism and reluctance to openly back the government had resulted in the movement being ordered to leave the capital and relocate its headquarters. With Egypt and Jordan
both declining to host the politburo however, this has led to the fragmentation of Hamas’s political base and a gradual dispersal of its members over a number of states thought to include Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, Qatar, Tunisia and the Hamas-run authority in Gaza, with only a minimal staff remaining in Damascus. In addition, in what appears to be an unofficial sanction by the regime, by the end of the year, all direct contact between senior level Syrian authorities - including the President himself, and Hamas officials had effectively been frozen, with all subsequent attempts at dialogue apparently rebuffed by the regime.

Moreover, on the economic front, Hamas’s Syria policy has also had negative repercussions and impaired the ability of the movement to provide for its own people. In a gesture intended to demonstrate its displeasure at the group for failing to side with regime, Iran - Hamas’s principal patron and sponsor, was said to have either cut or suspended much of its bilateral aid in August, thought to amount to some $250 to $300 million dollars. This forms a large part of the $540 million needed to run the Gaza, with income from local revenues only generating $55million. Without this valuable Iranian lifeline and with continued international sanctions following Hamas’s take over of the Gaza and expulsion of the rival Fatah group in 2007, Meshaal is confronted with an increasingly desperate situation. This was brought to the fore in July, when in a measure of its impoverishment, the movement was unable to pay the salaries of around 40,000 government employees and security personnel in the Gaza Strip, with none of the Arab states, perhaps preoccupied with their own domestic unrest, stepping in to fill the funding shortfall.

Given the very real economic and political costs of its policy, it is important then to understand why Hamas has taken a position that has put it so much at odds with its Syrian and Iranian allies. One obvious answer has to do of course, with the risk to its resistance credentials and the desire of the Hamas leadership not to be tarnished, like Hezbollah, with too close an association with the Syrian government. This dilemma is made all the more acute for Hamas, considering that much of the violence perpetrated by the regime is being carried out against its co-religionists and Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in predominantly Sunni areas of Homs, Hama and Deraa, and against Palestinian communities themselves living in Syria, with the government’s massive assault on the Raml Palestinian refugee camp in Latakia in August, causing some 10,000 refugees to flee their homes. With such levels of state-sanctioned abuse against members of its own constituency, Hamas can therefore hardly be seen to be siding with the Asad regime. However, what is different from Hezbollah is that unlike Nasrallah, who arguably has few strategic options other than to rely on the resistance axis, the events of the Arab uprising have completely transformed the regional dynamics, by bringing Sunni parties to power, giving Hamas greater scope to establish alternative ties, which require less dependence on Damascus.
In a sign of its policy of strategic outreach and the diversification of its alliances, the Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, for example, conducted a tour in December of newly-elected governments and Islamist regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan and Turkey, in what was his first foreign trip outside Gaza since 2007, with the Turkish authorities reportedly pledging to provide the group with $300 million in aid. It is perhaps Egypt’s transformation though which has had the most profound effect for Hamas. With the collapse of the pro-US Mubarak regime, this has led to a shift in the policies of the Egyptian state, more in line with Hamas’s interests, reflected for instance in the opening of the Rafah crossing to ease the blockade of Gaza, the establishment of a fledgling Hamas office in Cairo and Egypt’s critical role in mediating the Hamas-Fatah unity agreement signed in May, which effectively brings Hamas out of the cold and paves the way for its inclusion in the PLO. Even Jordan, which at one time arrested Meshaal and expelled the movement form Amman, is seeking rapprochement, with the Jordanian Prime Minister describing the 1999 expulsion as a ‘political and constitutional mistake’, and welcomed a visit by Meshaal in January 2012. All of this suggests then that while the Syrian uprising has led to a distancing of Hamas’s relations with Damascus, this is being mitigated by alliances elsewhere.

Conclusion

A final question needs to be asked then- where does this leave the resistance axis? With Hezbollah and Hamas seemingly pulling in different directions, does this spell the end of the tripartite alliance with Syria? Although there is undoubtedly a divergence between the two non-state actors regarding their approach towards Asad, it is perhaps too premature to conclude that this signals the end of the alliance itself. For its part, Hezbollah, having been so steadfast in its support of the Syrian regime and seeing its own regional fortune bound up with the fate of the Syrian government, is unlikely to change its position significantly in the months ahead. If anything, a worsening in the strategic environment, with the consolidation of Israeli military power corresponding to the collapse of the Syrian state and mounting international pressure on Iran over its alleged nuclear weapons programme, means that Nasrallah will only rally to the cause of his embattled allies. As for Hamas, while the Arab uprising has undoubtedly expanded the group’s strategic horizons and given it greater options for forging new alliances, it does not necessarily follow that this implies a definitive break from the resistance front. With its nominal base still in Damascus, much will depend on the composition of the Hamas leadership in the post-Meshaal period, the outcome of Fatah-Hamas rapprochement, developments in the Arab-Israeli front and events in Syria itself. Like much else in a region in flux, Hamas’s ultimate direction therefore remains uncertain.