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HEZBOLLAH AND THE LEBANESE POPULAR UPRISING: CONTAINING LOSS

POLITICAL ISLAM MOVEMENTS

IN THE SECOND WAVE OF **ARAB UPRISINGS**

الشرق
للأبحاث الاستراتيجية

AL SHARQ
STRATEGIC
RESEARCH

The paper is originally written in Arabic.

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Abstract

The Lebanese popular uprising against political authorities has posed a fundamental challenge to Hezbollah, given the entrenchment of its party and allies in parliament and governance after their victory in 2018. Therefore, Hezbollah perceived the uprising as an attempt to seize a long-awaited victory since the Syrian regime's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, which had been followed by two consecutive parliamentary elections bringing a strong opposition majority to power against Damascus and Iran. Elections in 2018 represented an opportunity to reshape Lebanon's political authority, in line with the party's regional alignment. For this reason, Hezbollah took a visible, opposing stance in confronting the popular uprising. The reality remains however, that the uprising yielded major rifts in the party's arrangements and alliances, while giving rise to renewed internal incongruities. More critically, it broke through the perception of Hezbollah's dominance and capability, and by extension that of the Amal movement, to represent the Shi'ite sect and define its political choices.

Introduction

Lebanon saw a widespread popular uprising in October 17, sparked by the government's decree to increase taxes and put additional fees into effect, particularly on 'WhatsApp' calls ungoverned by telecommunication providers, among others. Hezbollah adopted a negative stance towards the protests in the days that followed given the ramifications they posed to the political configuration of the nation, a by-product of the 2018 elections in the previous year.

Hezbollah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah played a pivotal role through his public speeches, specifically in guiding and fanning the opposition to protests that engulfed Lebanon in its entirety, and by extension the organization's spheres of influence. In his first speech, Nasrallah determined limits on the demands of the popular uprising, while confining its success to the demands for reform and the revoking of new taxes on citizens, while emphasizing that the ruling political authority and results of the 2018 parliamentary elections were to be left untouched. The vaunted elections of 2018, after all, granted Hezbollah and its allies an undeniable majority in parliament. Nasrallah's consecutive speeches were stridently cautionary in tone, warning of a political vacuum, or chaos and subversion, evoking his previous stances on the Syrian revolution against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

It soon became evident in his myriad of speeches and statements that the regime saw the necessity of containing the popular uprising and preventing it from gaining momentum into a political force that could contradict the party's interests, challenge its influence on Lebanon's political landscape, or turn back the clock to a time before the 2018 elections. However, the uprising, which transcended the traditional Lebanese divisions, along with the accompanying economic and financial crisis, shuffled the cards and increased pressure on Hezbollah and its political alliances. Specifically, it shook its enduring ties to the Amal movement known as the "unity of the Shi'ite line."

How did Hezbollah view the popular uprising

In its endeavor to contain the popular uprising, Hezbollah relied on varied toolkits. First, warning its supporters of infiltrations by suspect parties (embassies, intelligence apparatus, and hostile political parties). Second, resorting to violence and inciting

sectarian strife. Third, actively endeavoring to fragment the internal cohesion of protestors over controversial subjects.

In this regard, we witnessed a slight difference between the content and tone of the first and second speeches given by Nasrallah during the first phase of the popular uprising. In his first speech, Nasrallah adopted the demands of the popular uprising while employing a placating tone. He nonetheless warned of political, economic and financial consequences brought about by the collapse of the government.¹ In his second speech, Nasrallah openly spoke about his suspicions regarding the popular movement and the role being played by foreign embassies; calling on his supporters to withdraw from the streets. This had negative repercussions on the protests in the northern Bekaa Valley area, as well as in southern Lebanon. However, a significant segment of the protestors in the first days of the uprising were from areas where Hezbollah holds influence, specifically the southern district of Beirut, as well as the cities of Baalbek, Nabatiyeh, and Tyre where the majority of Lebanon's Shi'ite population resides. At the time, protests' slogans did not reflect any animosity towards Hezbollah or its militant arms; with the focus instead resting on the Amal movement and its figures, and to a lesser extent, a number of Hezbollah members of parliament.

While the limited targeting of Hezbollah came as a surprise at the time, it was largely a byproduct of accumulating grievances. Specifically, it followed criticism leveled against the party and its parliamentarians over the last elections and the party's agenda at the time. Prior to voting, the party and its leader, Nasrallah, promised his base and the electorate a change in political behavior and committed efforts to combat corruption. In the election manifesto, Nasrallah clearly stated that "the party's leadership has decided to create a special regulatory framework with the objective of confronting waste and corruption... it has become necessary for all to be involved in the issue of confronting corruption in all state institutions as it is a main cause driving the nation to the brink of disaster."

In his speech, Nasrallah depicted an impending conflict between the organization and its allies and opponents on an equal basis as a result of the planned crackdown on corruption which constitutes an absolute priority for him. He furthermore discussed the difficulties and animosities that lay ahead, adding, "but we can't be quiet about the matter", and "I will follow up on this matter personally."²

Nasrallah utilized his personal political capital in issuing these ultimatums, to ensure that Shi'ite opposition candidates would not gain any headway in areas under Hezbollah's spheres of influence. This was particularly the case for the Bekaa Valley, where people grew increasingly impatient with the performance of Hezbollah and its ally, the Amal movement, in state institutions, as well as the absence of development in the area, and the prevalent corruption.

Consequently, Hezbollah was forced to exert additional efforts to ensure widespread participation in the election, leading to its victory, as well as that of its allies which saw them control a majority of seats in the 2018 parliament. In reality, Hezbollah succeeded in preventing the infiltration or subversion of electoral regions, while guaranteeing a majority victory to its allies.

However, it was already a year and a half after elections when the Lebanese popular uprising erupted, while Hezbollah was unable to make any tangible efforts against corruption as per its election promises. The fact is no single corruption trial or charge was raised or held against any figure of authority since the end of the 1990's, in spite of the fact that Lebanon is ranked rather low on the Global Transparency Index on corruption (137th out of 180 countries).

In truth, Hezbollah's political and regional priorities overshadowed its domestic agenda, particularly given its preoccupation with confronting the United States and its Gulf allies. As a result, the organization made deals in the interest of its allies on the domestic level, so as to ensure legitimacy for its regional operations and its military wing.

To this end, the early stages of the Lebanese popular uprising saw signs of popular resentment towards the actions of the party's deputies. The most prominent of which was criticism and sarcasm directed against MP Hassan Fadlallah, the official in-charge of Hezbollah's anti-corruption initiative, who threatened to expose major corruption files.

The threat typified the party's political ineffectuality and its caution against alienating allies, much needed for securing national legitimacy. The fact that Fadlallah threatened to expose major corruption files, without reference to their content or the names implicated, indicated a relative lack of seriousness on the part of the party's reform and

anti-corruption bid. More critically, it highlighted the insincerity of its electoral promises. Possibly for this reason, Deputy Fadlallah's office was targeted on the second day of protests in the southern city of Bint Jbeil³, itself a reflection of the popular sentiment of blame and resentment towards Hezbollah's political behavior in parliament and in the government.

To this end, Hezbollah attempted to weather the shockwaves in Nasrallah's first speech (October 19), delivered only two days after the start of the protests. Initially, it welcomed the protests, while simultaneously delineating its objectives and aspirations, by attempting to steer the demands away from the fall of the Lebanese government or the presidency. The head of the party's executive council, Hashem Safieddine, took part in a protest in Beirut's southern suburbs to suggest that the organization was actually part of the ongoing wave of protests against the political class.⁴

However, the expansion of protests and their targeting of Hezbollah's allies prompted the party to adopt a negative stance towards the protests in an escalatory and hasty manner. In his second speech (October 25), nearly a week after the outbreak of the popular uprising, Nasrallah employed accusatory language to describe elements of the popular uprising.⁵ Nasrallah distinguished between two alleged groups in the popular uprising. The first being spontaneous, expressing the will of the people and adhering to Hezbollah's demands. The second being under the sway of foreign embassies and intelligence agencies, receiving funding from them and other shadowy figures. He demanded the popular movement to transparently disclose its sources of funding, as Hezbollah does in recognition of Iranian funds. Years prior, Nasrallah had described the Iranian funding he received as "clean and pure", as opposed to the "dirty" funding that his opponents received.

In this manner, Hezbollah's Secretary-General brought into question the existence of hidden leadership and funding behind the protests. The second speech given by Nasrallah marks a stark difference in Hezbollah's relationship with the popular movement, after which pro-Hezbollah groups and members of the Amal movement stormed the streets on motorcycles and started attacking demonstrators, trying to force roads open and silence the protests.⁶

Here, it becomes necessary to refer to the regional context in which the popular uprising is taking place, for Hezbollah and Tehran quickly perceived the protests as part of a larger conspiracy against Iranian influence. This was particularly the case in light of the American campaign to encircle Tehran and its regional networks both financially and politically. In this respect, the regional context partially explains the motive behind Hezbollah supporters participating in protest repression, as well as the outbreak of sectarian and partisan slogans. Similarly, it also explains the active role of pro-Hezbollah media in launching an accusatory campaign against the protests, despite that leading to the resignations of a number of journalists, in protest of the negative editorial policy against the uprising.

Consequences of the popular uprising for Hezbollah: Breaking the Fear Barrier

The Lebanese uprising had direct implications for Hezbollah in Lebanon. The most important of these repercussions was that it frustrated Hezbollah's plans to normalize relations between the Lebanese state and its institutions on the one hand, and the Syrian regime on the other. More critically, it also derailed plans to enhance ties with Iran and Iraq.

This had been made possible due to the majority parliamentary victory won by Hezbollah and its allies for the first time since the withdrawal of the Syrian forces, and the alignment of regional and local factors making such moves conducive. Restoring close relations with the Syrian regime was one of Hezbollah's top priorities, which was justified on the grounds that it offered a solution to the issue of Syrian refugees, and specifically to the Lebanese economy which was deeply affected by the closure of land borders with Syria.⁷ Hezbollah also associated this normalization with the rebuilding efforts in Syria in the future. After Hezbollah's successful elections, allies of the group, such as Elie Ferzli, expressed their sentiments that "a historical error has been corrected and things have returned to their rightful course," in reference to the Syrian Army's departure and end of influence 15 years prior. With the formation of a Hezbollah bloc majority in parliament, pressure was on the rise for the normalization of ties with the Syrian regime. The popular uprising however, thwarted any movement in this direction.

The second immediate effect of the uprising was reducing the chances of Gebran Bassil, a strong Hezbollah ally, from ascending to the presidency of the Republic, and succeeding his uncle Michel Aoun. Bassil, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Foreign Minister at the time, was a main target in the slogans chanted by the protesters and was turned into a symbol of the despised power. Therefore, it became necessary to remove him from office given the provocation he posed to demonstrators and the burden he would be on any future government. In this regard, Hezbollah lost a significant ally in the foreign ministry, besides the far-reaching impact on Hezbollah's ability to maintain control over Lebanon beyond the Shiite community.

Third, Saad Hariri's resignation from the post of prime-minister marked a turning point in Lebanese politics. Despite his declining popularity during the past years, Hariri remained the most significant representative of the Sunni community, and by taking the post of prime ministry he secured a cross-sectarian consensus for Hezbollah over its weapons arsenal. As such, Hariri helped remove Hezbollah's considerable weaponry from the fierce public debate that was ongoing in the decade following the assassination of his father, former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. To that end, Hariri's departure from the government, along with that of the Progressive Socialist Party led by Walid Jumblatt and the Lebanese forces, had negative ramifications for Hezbollah. It threatened to revive old political line-ups that Hezbollah had not had to contend with after their mitigation many years ago. Hariri's exit realized one of the demands of the protesters and further focused the uprising on confronting Hezbollah and its pro-government allies in the coming stages. This is arguably the reason why Nasrallah, in more than one speech, warned his political opponents against attempting to exploit the uprising and reminded them of their liability for the state of affairs in Lebanon.

Fourth, the popular uprising movement brought about a network of local relations capable of mobilizing protests in Shi'ite areas. This effectively broke an important barrier- the fear of the Shi'ite duo, chiefly Hezbollah and the Amal movement. It thus became possible for new organizations or movements to be born outside of this duo. Here, social and political networks manifested an audacity to act and protest

whenever necessary, contrary to the will of Hezbollah. This dynamic did not exist before the uprising, and will possibly give rise to political leaders and candidates in upcoming elections capable of breaking through Hezbollah's majority, however limited or symbolic.

Fifth, the uprising attracted Hezbollah's former allies, and relocated them within the complex configuration of Lebanese politics, at least for the interim. The most prominent of these are the Nasserite Popular Organization led by MP Oussama Saad and the Lebanese Communist Party, which faced outcries of treason for joining the popular uprising. In the aftermath of the last elections, Saad was considered a Sunni breakthrough for Hezbollah, given his historical alignment against the Future Movement and among the axis of resistance. However, the deterioration of living standards in Lebanon prompted Oussama Saad to align himself with the popular uprising and actively participate alongside his supporters from his stronghold in Sidon.

On the other hand, the Lebanese Communist Party led by unionist Hanna Gharib, chose to stand with the uprising, despite the opposition of leaders close to Hezbollah. Former leaders of the Communist Party pointed to a schism within its ranks regarding the popular uprising and the stance from Hezbollah. The rift between the two parties quickly manifested in the streets, largely because the communist party enjoys a significant cross-sectarian geographic distribution that also includes Hezbollah's spheres of influence. As such, this schism manifested in Nabatieh and Kfar Remen, as well as in Tyre and Baalbek. In practice, this meant a disintegration of parts of the network of alliances and relations that the party had weaved and through which it was once able to extend broad influence over the southern regions and the Bekaa valley.

The most recent and direct ramifications are linked to the worsening financial and economic situation. Today, Hezbollah must actively plan and prepare for a post-meltdown period in the country and provide assistance in light of high levels of unemployment, inflation and poverty in society.⁸ In this context, the party resorted

to municipal councils under its direct control and that of its allies; tasking them to work to expand agricultural lands and encourage self-sufficiency. At the time, reports circulated about food storage operations taking place. In effect, the deteriorating situation in Lebanon poses a fundamental challenge, not only to Hezbollah, but to all the organizations and parties with a clientelist relationship to their base.

In addition to these direct repercussions and/or consequences, a set of fundamental changes took place in the Lebanese political landscape following the uprising. First, comes the regional and international variable. The assassination of the leader of the Al-Quds Force, of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Qassem Soleimani, earlier in the year had direct reverberations on the organization, particularly so given the prominent role it played in the political scene in Iraq. Several media reports, some overlapping, attribute to Nasrallah himself a role in persuading the Shi'ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr to adjust his political position away from the Iraqi uprising, and in choosing a new head of Iraqi government, who was later replaced by Mustafa al-Kadhimi known to have a closer relationship with the United States. This role was made evident in Nasrallah's speeches after the assassination of Soleimani, with its focus on the Iraqi issue, and specifically the need to respond by removing American forces from Iraq, and eventually the entire region. The stalemate brought about with the US administration reflected negatively on the possibilities of US assistance to the new government headed by Hassan Diab. This was in spite of the efforts of Hezbollah and its allies to form the same government, without causing any provocation to the United States. Washington however, stayed true to its policy of sanctions and was thus accused of withholding support from Lebanon for political reasons, suspecting Diab's government of being loyal to Hezbollah.

Moreover, the popular uprising and accompanying economic and financial crisis came at a sensitive time domestically, amid a critical transition process in the main sectarian leadership in the country (as well as on the level of deputies). This is seen in the transfer of power from the head of the Progressive Socialist Party, Walid Jumblatt (70 years old) to his son, MP Taymur, as well as the President of the Republic, Michel Aoun (85-year-old) to his son-in-law, Gebran Bassil and Member of the House of Representatives Nabih Berri (82 years old, no specific heir determined). Hezbollah was primarily concerned with the

transfer of power in the last two positions, but the transfer of power was by no means smoothly accomplished, and the popular uprising effectively shuffled the cards.

Relations with the Amal Movement

The weakest link in Hezbollah's alliances is the organization's ties to the Amal movement, given its costs on the party as the Amal movement has played a primary role in governance since the 1990s, and is liable alongside other entrenched parties for the current financial and economic situation. The renewal of the momentum of the uprising is likely to increase the demands in party ranks to reconsider this relationship given its negative impact on the image of Hezbollah.

According to one party leader⁹, the Shi'ite unity between Hezbollah and the Amal movement is the main obstacle to the effective implementation of the anti-corruption policy. This relationship, or the so-called united Shi'ite rank, remains a matter of deep controversy within the party. The debate surrounding it has only gained momentum with the uprising and the deepening of the economic crisis.

Hezbollah has endured a bloody history of fighting and competition with the Amal movement. Close cooperation between the two only recently began in 2005, when Hezbollah played a key role in supporting the Syrian regime in confronting the March 14 political bloc, which emerged from protests following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005.

The pace of the economic meltdown

A few months after the formation of the Lebanese government and the Coronavirus lockdown, the dollar exchange rate recorded a historical increase from two thousand pounds at the beginning of this year to eight thousand pounds in the middle. With this increase, the purchasing power of Lebanese citizens has decreased greatly, and pressure has increased in the streets for the resignation of the current government. Yet again, Hezbollah has emerged as the sole defender of this government, as some circles of the "Free Patriotic Movement" moved to criticize the current government performance, and demanded its resignation and replacement.

As a result of these divisions, the government has so far failed to show a united position before the International Monetary Fund whom it asked for assistance, with no solution on the horizon. Therefore, a new wave of protests against the deteriorating living conditions is expected to erupt. It will be difficult for Hezbollah to succeed in countering this new wave, especially since its allies are not united anymore in light of the increasing American pressure.

Conclusion

Hezbollah developed and eventually crystallized a negative stance towards the popular uprising, only days after its eruption, due to the danger it posed to the political scene entrenched by the 2018 Lebanese parliamentary elections which saw a majority victory for the party and its allies. This was the first victory of this scale that Hezbollah had achieved since the departure of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005. Hezbollah saw in the uprising an attempt to overturn the results of these elections and the reign of Lebanese President Michel Aoun, one of his most prominent allies. For this reason, the party led a campaign against the uprising on two levels; first, through a media campaign accusing unnamed protesters of receiving shadowy external funding; and second, through direct suppression by attacking protesters and escalating sectarian strife against them in conjunction with his allies.

However, the uprising affected the political choices of Hezbollah itself. The organization lost a number of its allies in the battle against the popular uprising, including the Lebanese Communist Party and the Nasserite People's Organization. More importantly, the organization failed to complete its political program following the 2018 elections, which required establishing close relations with the Syrian regime after its setback through the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005. The popular uprising effectively thwarted efforts in this direction.

In addition, the organization's areas of influence have witnessed protests against a government that it both supports and participates in, indicating a radical transformation of political options for the Shi'ite environment. This opposition is expected to crystallize politically as the country's economic and financial crisis deepens, and moreover as the organization and its allies respond to protests, either through violence and pressure, or through a radical change in their political approach. The most important question remains: will Hezbollah sacrifice Shi'ite unity to contain popular resentment over policies of power that have existed since the 1990s?

Endnotes

- 1- Statement by Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary-General of Hezbollah, October 19, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/vmmg9pej>
- 2- "Hezbollah announces election manifesto: Priority to countering waste and corruption", *Al-Mayadeen*, March 21, 2018. [Access date: 22 February 2020] <https://tinyurl.com/y7ru3y9u>
- 3- "Attack on office of Deputy Hassan Fadlallah in Bint Jbeil by Protestors", *Lebanon 24*, October 18, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/t34twp4>
- 4- Head of Hezbollah Executive Council Hashim Safi Al Din takes part in protests in outlying districts", October 17, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/v8wsg74>
- 5- Statement by Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary-General of Hezbollah, regarding latest developments, *al-Manar Channel*, October 25, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/ryndp23>
- 6-At the beginning of the Lebanese uprising, blocking roads was considered a successful means to influence political power, as this disrupted daily life. However, Hezbollah and its allies criticized these actions, and their supporters participated in operations to forcefully open the roads.
- 7- In this context, Russia launched an initiative to solve the refugee issue, and linked it to the return of Lebanese-Syrian relations to their previous times.
- 8-According to some estimates, the poverty rate in Lebanon is set to exceed half of the population. In one report, the World Bank indicated that 40 per cent of the population fell below the poverty line.
- 9-Interview with a Hezbollah official who requested anonymity, Beirut Southern Suburb, January 20, 2020.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT AL SHARQ STRATEGIC RESEARCH

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