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Hezbollah and the Syrian crisis:

Balancing on a Teeterboard

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As a result of the Syrian crisis, Shia'a and Sunni sporadic clashes are taking place mainly in northern Lebanon, including vindictive abductions and even arrests of politicians. Many analysts and politicians have been warning of a highly possible spillover of the Syrian crisis in Lebanon. First due to the intense sectarian character and vulnerability of Lebanon and second due to Hezbollah's influence - backed by Syria and Iran- in the Lebanese political arena. The domestic realities of Lebanon and the critical situation of Hezbollah's allies are bringing Hezbollah to a crossroad: will it join the fight to support Assad or not? The decisions to be made by the 'Party of God' at this point will be decisive not only for itself but for Lebanon as well.

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In order to have a better understanding of the upcoming events in Lebanon vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis one must examine Hezbollah's multi-dimensional character. Hezbollah's pillars are threefold: first pillar is the social dimension which is the provision of services in various sectors such as schools, hospitals, and infrastructure. This social services network provides Hezbollah with popular support. In this sense Hezbollah can be seen as a social-political organization similar to the Muslim Brotherhood. Nevertheless, Hezbollah, beside this socio-political dimension, remains an armed group with a strong military arm that is supported by the financial resources and arms coming from Iran and Syria. Constituting Hezbollah's only allies and facing critical circumstances, the two countries have increasing difficulties in providing Hezbollah with the necessary assistance. In other words, Hezbollah has lost a large percentage of its military and financial assistance. The military dimension exists to support the ideological pillar of Hezbollah. During the first years of the organization this consisted of the resistance to Israel occupation of Southern Lebanon and the empowerment and protection of the Shia'a community inside Lebanon. In the following years the nature of Hezbollah's ideology changed into a hybrid of the Shia'a Islamism and the nationalist sentiment. Hezbollah's endorsement of Islamic national identity¹ and its cross-sectarian² character has evolved hand in hand with the Party's role within the Lebanese political scene. The more involved the Party got -from 1992 onwards, and even more since Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon-, the more it constructed a nationalistic character. The Party managed to reconcile its Islamic character -inspired and influenced by Iran since the latter's 1979 revolution- with the Lebanese national interests. Unlike Hezbollah's foreign policy, which was always tied with the Shia'a arc and especially Iran, its domestic policy has come to be to a certain extent autonomous.

Within a period of 7 years (2005-2012) the 'Party of God' evolved from a guerilla organization into a parliamentarian party, without, losing its military character. Nevertheless, Hezbollah, together with the March 8 coalition³, holds a majority in Lebanon's parliament. The opposition, March 14 alliance⁴, consists of various parties led by former PM Sa'ad al-Hariri's Future Movement. The rivalry between the two is among others a reflection of the Lebanese division regarding Syria's involvement in Lebanon's domestic affairs. However, since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Hezbollah is hesitant to make any drastic and concrete moves since it is aware that such actions will cause turbulence that may alter the balance of power in the Lebanese political scene, which at this point is favorable to Hezbollah. The strategic relation of Hezbollah and Syria is not a matter of loyalty, but rather of common interest.

Hezbollah's central position regarding Syria has been that the crisis is a Zions conspiracy, which soon will come to an end in favor of Assad. Notwithstanding Hezbollah's support to Assad's regime, it is known that behind closed doors there are deliberations within Hezbollah regarding a new status quo in Syria.⁵ This can be seen in Hezbollah's reactions to certain incidents; namely, in the beginning of the almost 20-month-old Syrian crisis, Hezbollah's position was superficial. Its official statements were calling for Assad to pursue with reforms. Not only did they not expect that the crisis would not end in favor of Assad's regime, but they also did not expect its prolongation. Nevertheless, Hezbollah's hesitance has been rather noticeable in various occasions. As it is correctly reported by Muna Nagggar "there was no real resistance from Hezbollah when Michel Samaha, a former minister from the Hezbollah camp, was arrested in August on suspicion of planning attacks within Lebanon at Syria's request."⁶ Moreover, she adds "that Hezbollah also allowed the Lebanese army to conduct operations in the Dahye, traditionally a Hezbollah stronghold,

where some Syrians were being held captive. The army arrested the kidnappers and was able to free some of the hostages.”⁷ On the other hand, the murder of Wissam al-Hassan on 19th October 2012 changed the pattern of the story. Being an important figure in the Lebanese security establishment, a strong sympathizer of March 14 coalition, as well as deeply involved in the Hariri investigation, his death was not only a warning, but a projection of Syrian power within the Lebanese territory as well. Even though Hezbollah does not have full control over all armed and non-armed pro-Syrian actions within Lebanon, one cannot rule out its possible involvement, not to mention Assad’s involvement. Any more similar incidents would spark a fire in Lebanon. These incidents indicate that the ‘Party of God’ is aware of its vulnerability and its vacillation between two conflicting agendas.

Hezbollah’s dilemma consists, on the one hand, of its regional objectives resisting the West and Israel on the side of the Shia’a arc and, on the other hand, of its role in the domestic politics of Lebanon.⁸ The matter is not choosing one and eliminating the other; but rather it is a matter of prioritizing. In case Hezbollah chooses at this point to openly join the fight to support Assad, it would have to militarily consolidate itself⁹ over Lebanon, since an overt military support to Assad would most likely cause a direct armed Sunni (and perhaps Christian Lebanese) reaction. This would inevitably trigger a civil war that may threaten its achievements. Many analysts believe that in case Hezbollah chooses its peripheral allies over Lebanese stability, the March 14 coalition will be able to attain the upper hand. Lebanon’s stability will surely be crushed and it will take time for Hezbollah to regain its potency and credibility within society, not to mention the damage it will cause to Hezbollah’s campaign in the upcoming elections of 2013. Eventually the Assad regime will most probably fall, leaving behind a vacuum of power. How sure can Hezbollah be that it will find a place in the new status quo?

Another factor that must be taken in consideration regarding Hezbollah’s decision to openly support Assad’s regime, is Iran. While Hezbollah can sacrifice its relation with Assad, it cannot easily do so with Iran. Iran’s decision to protect Hezbollah from the Syrian uncertainties and to preserve its last fort in the Levant would unfetter the ‘Party of God’ from its dilemma. However, Iran’s intentions regarding Syria and Hezbollah, on the long term, cannot be easily fathomed. In any case, Hezbollah has enough resources to adapt to an introvert policy and emphasize on its role in the Lebanese political scene; namely, evolving within the social services framework and developing a more stable political role and a concrete national agenda within the Lebanese parliament. This does not necessarily mean it will permanently detach from neither its regional aspirations nor its Iranian ally; but rather reconsider its priorities based on necessity. Realistically, Hezbollah will try to secure its power on a domestic level instead of performing a salto mortale on the side of Assad.

The situation in Lebanon is becoming more precarious by the hour due to the fact that to a certain extent the spillover has crossed the Syrian-Lebanese border. Torn between its traditional position and new prospects on the horizon, Hezbollah will try to sustain its power. Given that Hezbollah’s strength is conceived in its ability to sustain a certain level of stability -both on a political and popular level-, it will most likely lean towards a more introvert approach and partially distance itself from the Syrian crisis.

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2. The cross-sectarian character of Hezbollah can be proven by its collaboration with former Lebanese Prime Minister Michel Aoun's Christian Free Patriotic Movement, Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri's Shiite Amal Movement and other parties.
3. It includes the Shia'a party Amal and the Christian party, the Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun and many more.
4. A Sunni-Druze-Christian coalition which took its name from the date of the 2005 Cedar Revolution, when the Lebanese took to the streets in Beirut in large numbers demanding the end of Syrian influence in Lebanese domestic affairs
5. "Hezbollah Ponders an Uncertain Future", Aljazeera, (4/9/2012), <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2012/09/20129475548717676.html>
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7. Ibid
8. Yacoubian, Mona, "Hezbollah After Assad", Foreign Affairs, (1/12/2011), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136709/mona-yacoubian/hezbollah-after-assad>
9. Ibid