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FATWA WARS CONTINUE AS SAUDI CLERIC BANS JIHAD IN SYRIA

As both clashes with rebels and punitive violence increase in intensity within Syria, there have been numerous accounts of foreign jihadis entering Syria to exploit the struggle in furtherance of global Salafist-Jihadi objectives. However, such efforts encountered resistance last week from the official Saudi religious establishment. Shaykh Ali Abbas al-Hikmi, a member of the Saudi Council of Senior Scholars, issued a fatwa (religious ruling) on June 7 forbidding Muslims from initiating or participating in a Syrian jihad. While acknowledging that Syrians were “facing injustice, persecution and the force of an arrogant and haughty regime,” al-Hikmi made it clear that the decision to launch a jihad could only be made “under the authority of the guardian” (i.e. responsible authorities) in harmony with a nation’s foreign policy: “Everything is linked to a system and to the country’s policies and no person should be allowed to disobey the guardian and call for jihad” (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 7; *al-Akhbar*, June 7). The senior cleric’s decision appears to have been spurred by growing calls on Saudi social media for individuals to travel to Syria to partake in a jihad against the Assad regime (*al-Shorfa*, June 7).

Similar anti-jihad fatwas have had little impact in the past, as Salafist-Jihadis tend to regard members of the Saudi religious establishment as compromised scholars and respect only those rulings issued by scholars sympathetic to their movement and its aims. Most relevant to those Salafi-Jihadis entering Syria are the three fatwas regarding the status of the Alawite community (to which the Assad clan and many of Syria’s ruling class belong) issued by Shaykh Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), the intellectual hero of the Salafi-Jihadist movement. Issued while Muslim Mamluk rule of Syria was threatened by Mongol invasion,

these *fatwas* collectively describe the Alawis as “deceptive unbelievers” whose rejection of Islam is greater than that of the Jews and Christians: “Their religion externally is [Shi’ism] but internally it is pure unbelief.” [1]

The Alawi community has been the subject of more favorable *fatwas* in the past, though these are unlikely to influence the Salafi-Jihadists. A *fatwa* issued by Grand Mufti of Jerusalem al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husayni (best remembered now for his pro-Nazi sympathies) recognized the Alawis as Muslims and played a large role in their acceptance into the Islamic community of the region. [2] Musa Sadr, the influential Iranian-born founder of the Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniya (AMAL – Lebanese Resistance Detachments), issued an important *fatwa* in 1974 affirming that Alawis were members of the Twelver Shi’a community (the dominant Shi’a faction in both Iran and southern Lebanon) before he and two companions disappeared during a 1978 visit to Mu’ammar Qaddafi’s Tripoli. [3]

The Saudi government has been generally supportive of the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) and would like to see foreign support directed to that group rather than encourage another round of radicalization of young Saudis in militant jihadi organizations, as happened in Afghanistan and Iraq. This position was supported by another member of the Council of Senior Scholars, Shaykh Abdullah al-Mutlaq, who emphasized that it is the FSA that is “in charge of fighting and jihad in Syria and should be supported” (*al-Akhbar*/AFP, June 7). However, the Saudi position has been characterized elsewhere in the Arab world as too close to the stance of the United States – typical of these characterizations was the recent suggestion by an Israeli-based Arab daily that the Saudis and the Arab League were trying “to victimize Syria and sacrifice it on the shrine of colonialism. We don’t know which Arab country is going to be next” (*Ma’a al-Hadath* [Tamra], June 8). On February 26, popular Saudi scholar Dr. A’id al-Qarni used a television broadcast to issue a *fatwa* calling for the death of Bashar al-Assad, whom he described as a heretic who had lost his legitimacy as a ruler and “a murderer who killed hundreds of children and destroyed mosques instead of protecting the Golan Heights.” [4]

Syrian authorities have in the past gone out of their way to mock the *fatwas* of the Saudi religious scholars as both backwards and dangerous. On April 5, Syria’s permanent representative to the United Nations Dr. Bashar Ja’afari told a press gathering:

I have good news for you. The Saudi Mufti... has issued a *fatwa* saying young people now have the right to enter the malls and supermarkets... Could you believe it? We are on April the 5th, 2012, and the Saudi Imam is still thinking about whether the young people should have access to the malls or not. The second good news, another *fatwa* from the same Imam, saying that women could attend football matches but in separate places, and they should not raise their voices when they get excited by the game, and they should abstain from attracting the attention of the males... The third good news... the same Imam said that all churches in the Gulf area should be destroyed and that a Christian or a Jew should not have the right to be buried in the area of the Gulf States. We are April the 5th, 2012, and we still hear such ridiculous and provocative statements coming from Saudi Arabia on behalf of people who call themselves the Custodians of the Holy Shrines. [5]

Official Syrian media has also suggested that the recent Saudi *fatwa* calling for a ban on new Christian churches in the Arabian Peninsula and the demolition of existing churches “could also give a boost to the armed Islamists within Syria, who already persecute, kidnap, torture and kill Syrian Christians” (Syria News, March 24).

Last February, 107 prominent Islamic scholars signed a statement denouncing the Syrian regime with the following rulings and calls for action:

- Members of the Syrian security forces are forbidden to kill citizens or discharge weapons in their direction. It is their duty to desert and disobey orders, “even if that means being killed.”
- Members of the regular army and security forces should join the Free Syrian Army to protect civilians, cities and public institutions.
- It is a duty for all Muslims to support the revolutionaries in Syria “so that they can successfully complete their revolution and attain their rights and their freedom.”

- Arab states must take a firm stand against those members of the international community, such as Russia and China, which continue to support the Syrian regime.
- In a gesture of magnanimity towards the Alawi community and a warning to Islamist radicals, the scholars said it was essential to “protect the ethnic and religious minorities which have lived for more than a thousand years as part of the Syrian people,” noting that only the regime bears responsibility for its crimes, “and not the minorities they may belong to.”

Among the signatories were Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi of Qatar, Shaykh Ali Guma'a (Chief Mufti of Egypt), Shaykh Rashid Ghanouchi of Tunisia, and Shaykh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani of Yemen. [6] Al-Qaradawi, a highly-influential Doha-based member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, recently condemned the pattern of hereditary succession intended or achieved in Arab republics such as Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Syria before predicting the “downfall and annihilation” of Bashar al-Assad (Gulf Times Online [Doha], June 9).

Notes:

1. See Yvette Talhamy, “The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 46(2), 2010, pp. 175-194; Nibras Kazimi, *Syria through Jihadist Eyes: A Perfect Enemy*, Washington, 2010.
2. For the full broadcast, see Al-Arabiya, February 25, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAx4H0RCnCE>. For al-Qarni, see Terrorism Monitor Brief, December 1, 2011.
3. For new light on this case, see Terrorism Monitor Briefs, September 22, 2011.
4. See Paulo Boneschi, “Une fatwà du Grande Mufti de Jérusalem Muhammad Amin al-Husayni sur les Alawites,” *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 122(1), July-August 1940, pp. 42-54.
5. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33_SqXvmoFs
6. For the full text, see <http://www.islam21c.com/editorials/2407-fatwa-on-syria-by-107-scholars>.

SECURITY OF LIBYAN INTERIOR CHALLENGED BY STRUGGLE FOR SMUGGLING ROUTES

A new round of inter-tribal clashes in southern Libya has drawn in northern militia units loyal to Libya's Transitional National Council (TNC) in the latest episode of the struggle to control Libya's borders in the absence of a centralized, national army.

At least 29 people are dead and scores more wounded after two days of intense fighting in the strategically important Kufra Oasis in southeastern Libya, near the borders with Chad, Egypt and Sudan. Fighting began on June 9 when members of the indigenous African Tubu ethnic group clashed with members of the Kata'ib Dera'a al-Libi (Libyan Shield Brigade) commanded by Wissam Ben Hamid. As fighting spread power was cut to the desert city and water was reported to be in short supply (Tripoli Post, June 11; Libya Herald, June 10). The Libyan Shield Brigade had been sent to Kufra earlier this year to stabilize the Oasis after a vicious round of fighting that left over 100 dead took place between the Tubu and the Arab Zuwaya tribe, who have contested control of the Oasis for over 170 years (see *Terrorism Monitor* Briefs, February 23; May 5). There were also battles in April between the Tubu and Arabs of the Qaddadfa and Awlad Sulayman tribes in Libya's southwestern Oasis city of Sabha in April (see *Terrorism Monitor*, April 12). Though the violence in Kufra was brought under control in March, tensions remained high between the Tubu and the Zuwaya, who claimed the Tubu were cooperating with their cross-border cousins in Chad to take control of important smuggling routes that pass illegal immigrants, cigarettes, drugs and various other types of contraband through Kufra from the African interior. In response to the tribal violence, Tubu military leader Isa Abd al-Majid revived the dormant Tubu Front for the Liberation of Libya, complaining that TNC militias and the Zuwaya sought to “exterminate” the Tubu (AFP, June 10). Abd al-Majid said the Tubu neighborhood in Kufra was shelled by the Libyan Shield Brigade on June 10 (*El Moudjahid* [Algiers], June 10; *L'Expression* [Algiers], June 10).

In mid-May, fighting broke out in the ancient Saharan city of Ghadames along the border with Algeria, some 600 km south of Tripoli. The conflict began over control of a desert checkpoint along a traditional smuggling route used by Tuareg tribesmen (al-Jazeera, May 16; Reuters, May 16). Nine people were killed in the fighting, including Libyan Tuareg leader Isa Talaly (Libya Herald, May 18). Local Tuareg have been at odds with local

Arab tribes since the Tuareg were expelled from the city in September 2011 following allegations the Tuareg were supporting the late Libyan president Mu'ammarr Qaddafi against rebel forces. TNC mediation efforts have been unsuccessful and local Arabs have burned the homes of Tuareg residents to prevent their return. Some Tuareg are planning to build a new settlement at the nearby Oasis of Dirj, while others remain across the border in Algeria, vowing to return to Ghadames (Libya Herald, April 7).

The inability of both Libyan and Tunisian security forces to rein in rampant smuggling across their mutual border has forced the closure of the most important border crossing between the two nations in recent days. Libya's TNC again turned to the Libya Shield Brigade to bring the situation under control at the Ras Jedir crossing point, where members of the Brigade forced out Libyan border police who are accused of assisting the smugglers (Libya Herald, June 10). Tunisian border guards complain they are forced to give way to Libyan smugglers who are highly armed with RPGs and automatic weapons (Reuters, May 2).

Smugglers on both sides of the border have become incensed with recent efforts to crack down on the illegal trade, leading to attempts to physically smash their way through the border with groups of as many as 150 vehicles at a time. Food from Tunisia is a major form of contraband, as is subsidized petrol from Libya and subsidized phosphates from Tunisia. Tunisian smugglers are known to resort to violence when their trade is interfered with by authorities. So deeply ingrained is smuggling in the border regions (which suffer otherwise from high unemployment), that the military was recently forced to fire into the air to subdue an angry mob in the southeastern town of Ben Guerdane unhappy with a new anti-smuggling campaign (TunisiaLive.net, May 14). Tunisia is now planning to build a fence along the border with Libya to halt the smuggling trade and the influx of illegal refugees (Libya Herald, June 3). South of Tunisia, Algerian authorities have recently arrested seven Libyans transporting two vehicles loaded with arms including assault rifles and Katyusha rockets. The arms were believed to be on their way to al-Qaeda elements (*El Khabar* [Algiers], June 12).

Egypt has become especially alarmed with the scale of smuggling along its border with Libya, where large quantities of arms have been intercepted, most of which are believed to be on their way to fuel a simmering insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula. Aggressive bands of

smugglers are reported to have set fire to farms in Egypt's western Siwa Oasis in retribution for local cooperation with security forces (Middle East News Agency [Cairo], May 10). Egyptian security forces have suggested the smuggling of arms may be funded by Iran in the hope of sparking a confrontation with Israel in the Sinai that could bring Egyptian and Israeli military forces into conflict (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 9).

The collapse of internal security in Libya has also led to the smuggling of a new commodity – Roman-era antiquities which are found in abundance throughout Libya but are no longer protected by government security forces (*The National* [Abu Dhabi], May 28).

Once Feared Kurdish Hizbullah Making Transition to Politics in Turkey

Emrullah Uslu

Kurdish Hizbullah, a violent Islamist movement that is known for its violent clashes against the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK), has finally made a much anticipated announcement that it will establish a political party. Turkey's Hizbullah group largely abandoned its armed struggle back in 2004 (see *Terrorism Monitor*, January 25, 2008).

Sitki Zilan, a well-known lawyer and unofficial spokesman of Kurdish Hizbullah, announced that the new party will be based in Diyarbakir. "As we define the party as 'Kurdistani,' our target is going to be the voters in the Kurdish region. We define the party as 'Kurdistani,' but it does not mean that the party is going to be the party of Kurds because in the Kurdish region other groups live too," the group said (CNNTurk, April 30). Zilan told Jamestown that the party will be against any forms of violence, including the PKK's armed struggle. The main agenda of the party will be justice and freedom: "We want to challenge Turkey's religious parties, such as the AKP party [the ruling Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi], with our Islamic arguments and challenge the Kurdish parties with our Kurdish arguments," Zilan noted, adding that the new party will be Kurdish nationalist and moderate. [1]

When asked whether the Islamic party will be the party of Kurdish Hizbullah, Zilan expectedly denied this and said, "Religious people will dominate the party; however, this party will not be the political wing of Kurdish Hizbullah. We are neither against the Kurdish Hizbullah nor the PKK, nor are we obligated to act as their political wing. We do not act based upon any request or the direction of any movement" (CNNTurk, April 30).

It is no coincidence that when Sidki Zilan announced the establishment of a religious Kurdish party, journalists asked whether the political party would be affiliated with Kurdish Hizbullah because the idea of establishing such a party has been circulating among the members of Kurdish Hizbullah in recent years. Back in 2011, Sidki Zilan mentioned on Turkish television that the Kurdish Hizbullah should consider establishing a political party

(NTV, January 8, 2011).

The reasons for Zilan's denial of the proposed party's affiliation with Kurdish Hizbullah are largely political. Zilan himself admits that Kurdish Hizbullah is a political actor, which could lead such a political party. However, there are also many religious people in Turkey's Kurdish region who are not affiliated with Kurdish Hizbullah. Thus the new party will need to be inclusive of all other Islamic religious groups (*Haber Diyarbakir*, May 9).

Zilan outlined why it is necessary to establish a religious Kurdish political party when there are already four Kurdish political parties in Kurdistan: the Barî ve Demokrasi Partisi (BDP - Peace and Democracy Party), the Hak ve Ozgurlukler Partisi (Hak-Par - Rights and Liberty Party), the Katalimci Demokrasi Partisi (Kadep - Participatory Democracy Party) and the Ozgurluk ve Sosyalizm Partisi (OSP - Freedom and Socialism Party). According to Zilan, because none of these Kurdish parties have an Islamic affiliation and all of them are secular and leftist, half of the Kurdish people do not vote for them. Conservative Kurds vote instead for Islamic Turkish parties, such as the Saadet Partisi (SP - Felicity Party), Halkın Sesi Partisi (HAS Parti - People's Voice Party) and the AKP. These voting patterns show the true potential for an Islamic Kurdish Party (*Haber Diyarbakir*, May 9).

Zilan also asserts that the pro-PKK BDP has become the party of the Kurmanci Kurds, a faction of the Kurdish community, and the AKP has become the party of the Sunni Zaza Kurds. Alevi Kurds, on the other hand, support the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP - Republican People's Party). Thus, Zilan believes that a new party with both an Islamic and Kurdish affiliation would attract voters from the Kurmanci and Zaza Kurdish communities who simultaneously identify with Islam and their Kurdish backgrounds. [2]

Establishing such a party, however, is no easy task. Kurdish Hizbullah is currently busy with the fact that its umbrella association, the Mustazaf Der (Association of the Oppressed), was shut down by the Turkish Supreme Court (*dogruhaber.com.tr*, May 12). Hizbullah is now debating whether it needs to organize yet another association to bring all of Hizbullah's activities under one umbrella or whether the movement needs to establish a political party. People like Sidki Zilan argue that if Kurdish Hizbullah was a political party it would not be so easy for the government to shut it down. The counter argument to this view is that a political party would

lessen Hizbullah's ability to reach out to people who do not share similar views with the party. A leading figure in Kurdish Hizbullah told Jamestown that some Hizbullah leaders are concerned that the announcement was a bit premature and wonder whether it will negatively affect the Hizbullah movement. [3]

In response to the banning of Mustazaf-Der, Mehmet Goktas, one of the leading figures of Kurdish Hizbullah and the editor-in-chief of *Dogru Haber* (a Hizbullah-affiliated newspaper), wrote, "Those who think they could stop this river by shutting down the association will soon see that they are wrong. Those who think Kurdish Hizbullah requires umbrella organizations will see that they are wrong. Kurdish Hizbullah will form whatever types of organization that are necessary and will carry out whatever work is necessary" (dogruhaber.com.tr, May 18).

Kurdish Hizbullah organized a demonstration on May 27 in Diyarbakir to protest the shutting down of Mustazaf-Der, which is well known for organizing an annual public event to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad attended by hundreds or thousands of people each year. However, many critics argue that the size of the crowd at these public events is never a fair indication of support for Kurdish Hizbullah because BDP voters also attend in order to celebrate the Prophet's birthday (T24.com.tr, May 14).

Unlike the celebrations of the Prophet's Birthday, the May 27 demonstration was designed to clearly show Kurdish Hizbullah's ability to bring people into the street. Kurdish Hizbullah wanted to test their organizational abilities before announcing the establishment of a political party. The successful and unsurprising mobilization of hundreds of thousands of people in the streets led the movement to announce the launch of its new political party. On June 10, Hizbullah made the formal announcement of the formation of a new party to be known as Azadi Insiyatif (Freedom Initiative) (haberdiyarbakir.com, June 10).

The emergence of an Islamic Kurdish political party will change Kurdish politics permanently because it will directly affect both the ruling AKP and the BDP. For this very reason, the secular BDP has lately inserted religious terminologies into its rhetoric and even organized protest Friday prayers to distance Kurds from state-controlled mosques. In addition, the Kurdish people are the most conservative people of Turkey and have been heavily politicized over the past three decades. A

Kurdish Islamic Party would likely reduce the public support of the BDP, which would not make the PKK happy, and reduce the AKP's support from the Kurdish region as well.

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Notes:

1. Author's phone interview with Sitki Zilan, May 20, 2012.
2. Author's phone interview with Sitki Zilan, May 9, 2012.
3. Author's phone interview with a leading member of Kurdish Hizbullah, May 20, 2012.

Proposed Saudi Arabia-Bahrain Union Reflects Intensifying Persian Gulf Rivalry

Chris Zambelis

In the new Middle East, formerly suppressed political parties, movements, and ideas are increasingly shaping a political and ideological discourse that departs from previous paradigms. An equally important trend that is receiving less attention, however, is the mobilization of counterrevolutionary and reactionary forces opposed to the changes taking place in the region. In this regard, Saudi Arabia's proposal to forge a formal union with Bahrain, a subject that topped the agenda at the May 14 summit of the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states in Riyadh, warrants a closer look (al-Jazeera [Doha], May 14).

The collective call for freedom and democracy that has toppled despots in Tunisia and Egypt and threatened the survivability of other autocracies, including key Saudi allies, has not sat well with Riyadh. The onset of public demonstrations in Bahrain in February 2011 elicited the Kingdom's most forceful response to date. At the official request of the Bahraini royal family, a Saudi-led contingent of the GCC's Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) entered Bahrain on March 14, 2011 to crush democratic opposition protests under the auspices of the GCC's Peninsula Shield defense pact (al-Jazeera, March 15, 2011; see Terrorism Monitor Brief, March 24, 2011).

The start of protests in Bahrain raised particular alarm in the Kingdom for three reasons:

- The expressions of dissent in a fellow Arab monarchy and GCC member demonstrated that the GCC was not immune to the brand of democratic activism being exhibited elsewhere in the Arab world.
- Bahrain is led by a Sunni monarchy that presides over a largely impoverished and underserved Shi'a majority that makes up at least 70 percent of the country's total population. While the grievances and demands of the Bahraini opposition were articulated by a wide segment of society, Bahrain's demographics raised the

specter of similar events occurring within the Saudi Kingdom. Bahraini Shi'a face widespread discrimination in what is largely viewed as a minority Sunni dominated society. Bahrain's geographic proximity to Saudi Arabia's Shi'a minority in the Kingdom's Eastern Province, where most of the Kingdom's oil wealth is concentrated, amplifies the perceived threat emanating from the uprising in Bahrain. As a result, Saudi Arabia worries that its own restive Shi'a minority will take a cue from their kin in Bahrain and rise up. Like their counterparts in Bahrain, the Saudi Shi'a also endure persecution by the ultraconservative Sunni regime that regards them as heretics. In the face of violent crackdowns by the Kingdom's security forces, the Shi'a organized demonstrations in Saudi areas such as al-Hasa, al-Qatif, and Safwa to protest the Bahraini crackdown against opposition forces. The Kingdom's Shi'a also voiced anger over their predicament in Saudi society and demanded that Riyadh withdraw its military from Bahrain (Press TV [Tehran], March 23, 2011).

- Saudi Arabia believes that the unrest in Bahrain and elsewhere in the region strengthens the hand of its rival, Iran. The sectarian narrative underlying the protests in Bahrain that describes a largely Shi'a majority demanding greater freedom and human rights of the ruling Sunni monarchy reinforces Saudi Arabia's position relative to Iran. For Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a in Bahrain and other Persian Gulf countries represent an Iranian-directed fifth column ready to act at Tehran's behest. Saudi Arabia often relies on inflammatory sectarian rhetoric to paint Iran and Arab Shi'a in the region as hostile forces. Just days before Saudi-led GCC forces entered Bahrain, for instance, the Saudi daily al-Jazirah published a series of articles entitled "Safavid Iran's plans for the destruction of the Gulf States" (al-Jazirah [Riyadh], March 12, 2011).

As the unofficial leader of the GCC, a body that includes fellow monarchies Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia is a longtime proponent of expanding the group's mandate into a formal union. The GCC was founded in 1981 during the Iraq-Iraq War (1980-1988) and in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The establishment of the GCC represented an attempt by the six Persian Gulf Arab monarchies to encourage closer political, economic, and security relations amid regional instability and the perceived threat posed by Iran. Beyond their monarchical character, GCC members share other attributes in common. GCC members host a number of U.S. military installations, including the regional headquarters of the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) in Qatar and the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. Each GCC member also maintains close ties with the United States. Save for Bahrain, the GCC is also rich in oil and natural gas. GCC capital in the form of sovereign wealth funds has propelled its members into the upper echelons of global financial power.

At the same time, the GCC is also beset with internal rivalries on a range of issues. While GCC members agree in principle on the utility of a confederation, there appears to be little serious interest within the body to unite at this stage outside of the embattled leadership in Manama. Saudi Arabia nevertheless feels compelled to proceed with creating a union with Bahrain (*Gulf News* [Dubai], June 4). Saudi Arabia has also led the way to extend the prospect of GCC membership to two Arab monarchies located outside of the Persian Gulf area, namely, Morocco and Jordan (*al-Arabiya* [Dubai], September 11, 2011). To various degrees Morocco and Jordan, authoritarian states in their own rights, have also experienced protests demanding greater freedom and reform.

Precise details surrounding Riyadh's plan to unite Bahrain with the Kingdom are unclear. While national sovereignty and decision making powers will be protected in a federal system, the proposed union between a vastly larger and stronger Saudi Arabia and a relatively tiny and weak Bahrain is difficult to envisage in practice. Overall, Saudi Arabia's intentions towards establishing a union with Bahrain are shaped by its rivalry with Iran. Similarly, Bahrain's relative weakness is also pushing it into Saudi Arabia's fold. The strategic undercurrents of Saudi Arabia's drive to unite with Bahrain have not been lost on Iran, which has criticized the move in harsh

terms. Iranians have also staged protests against the proposed confederation (Press TV [Tehran], May 18). In a reference to Iran's historical territorial claims over Bahrain, an Iranian parliamentarian lashed out against Saudi Arabia's plans: "If it [Bahrain] is supposed to be annexed, it will go to the Islamic Republic not [the] al-Saud [family]" (*Financial Times* [London], May 15). In a more official response, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast suggested "The crackdown on people, military and security intervention by neighboring countries like Saudi Arabia, and plans like the proposal for the formation of a union between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are, in our view, ill-advised measures, which will deepen the crisis" (Mehr News Agency [Tehran], May 28). Given the stakes involved, Bahrain will remain a crucial strategic battleground between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the months ahead.

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Preparing for a Post-Assad Middle East: Hezbollah's Syrian Dilemma

Jean-Loup Samaan

In the spring of 2011, everything seemed to be going right for Hezbollah (“the Party of God”) in Lebanon. Five years after the war with Israel, its forces in the south of the country were not only reorganized, but also reinforced. In Beirut, the new government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati was distancing itself from the pro-western agenda that had been promoted by the government of Sa’ad Hariri, temporarily relieving the pressure on Hezbollah with respect to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, charged with probing the 2005 killing of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Finally, the movement was creating a symbolic parallel between the “Arab Spring” and the Lebanese Shiite narrative of struggle by the oppressed against the powerful, of the impoverished against the dominant minority. Put simply, in the first few weeks of the “Arab Spring” Hezbollah found a beautiful opportunity to recall its own revolutionary origins.

Nevertheless, the current swing in Syria towards a civil war opposing the regime of Bashar al-Assad, historically a political and financial supporter of Hezbollah, has jostled the political strategy of the Lebanese movement and left it facing a crucial dilemma: In light of the disturbing violence in Syria, the question is how far can Hezbollah support Assad’s regime and preserve an important regional alliance without eroding its image as a social force struggling on behalf of the oppressed?

Hezbollah’s Strategic Debt towards the Syrian Regime

As a result of the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1983, Hezbollah emerged from Lebanon’s Shi’a community in the span of just three decades to become one of the most powerful non-state organizations in the world, both politically and militarily. Hezbollah was able to grow thanks to its relations with two regional allies who play key roles in the often turbulent politics of Lebanon - Iran and Syria. The movement modelled itself from the start on the Iranian revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini, who wished to see it spread to Lebanon. However, Hezbollah showed itself to be more pragmatic after the civil war of the 1990s so as not to become alienated from the Lebanese political scene.

Hezbollah’s current leader, Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah, is the political craftsman responsible for the “Lebanonization” of the movement. At 51 years of age, Nasrallah has embodied the Party since taking its reins in 1992 after the assassination of its previous Secretary General, Abbas Moussawi, at the hands of Israeli forces. A charismatic orator, Nasrallah quickly became an icon within the Arab community as the prow of the resistance against Israel. In 2006, his armed forces even succeeded in inflicting a level of damage upon Israel that no Arab army had done beforehand. [1]

During these years, the very political and military basis of Hezbollah was made possible thanks to a marriage of convenience with the Syrian regime, which has played a hand in making and unmaking governments in Beirut since its 1976 military intervention in Lebanon. Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current Syrian president, looked with suspicion not only at the Islamic rhetoric which adorned Hezbollah’s propaganda but also at the connections between the movement and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards. Although Hafez al Assad had allied himself with Khomeini’s Iran, he clearly indicated to Tehran that Lebanon remained within the Syrian sphere of influence. It is for this same reason that Hafez al-Assad maintained a certain distance with Hezbollah, despite having agreed to authorize the passage of Iranian supply convoys across Syrian territory to Lebanon. Indeed, numerous observers affirm that Assad met only twice with Hassan Nasrallah. [2]

The relationship between Hezbollah and Syria changed substantially when Bashar al-Assad became head of the Syrian nation in June 2000. Nasrallah became a regular visitor to Damascus and the new Syrian president did not hesitate to be seen publicly with him. The Syrian regime cast aside the elder Assad’s restraint and developed the idea of an anti-imperialist axis represented by Syria, Hezbollah and Iran. As a sign of this evolution, the streets of Damascus and Homs were littered with flyers during the 2006 summer war between Israel and Hezbollah proclaiming the glory of the movement and Nasrallah in particular.

On top of this political support, Syria has lent considerable logistical support to the Party of God’s military structure, particularly by maintaining the supply corridors used by Iran to supply missiles and other arms to Hezbollah. If Hezbollah’s current missile strike force constitutes a real tool of dissuasion to the Jewish state rather than a simple nuisance to northern Israel, it is largely thanks to Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian

regime.

Hezbollah's Unwavering Support for Bashar al Assad?

On several occasions during the last decade, Hezbollah has assumed the risk of losing its popular base by supporting Bashar al-Assad. As early as 2005, the assassination of Rafiq Hariri unleashed a wave of protests against Damascus. The demonstrations only subsided with the departure of Syrian troops and the formation of a government based on an anti-Syrian political alliance. Throughout these events, Hassan Nasrallah never hesitated to express his unwavering support for Bashar al-Assad and Hezbollah oversaw multiple counter-demonstrations in Beirut, placing itself at risk of being accused of betraying Lebanon's national interests. Nasrallah's acrobatic politics, attempting to find a balance between Hezbollah's identity of resistance to external influence and political reliance on its regional allies, presented a potentially fatal challenge. Only the following summer's war against Israel offered Nasrallah an opportunity to overcome Lebanon's internal divisions by standing up to the Israeli Defense Force.

Now more so than in 2005, Hezbollah's strategy of "Lebanonization" finds itself at an impasse. During the first months of the Syrian crisis, Nasrallah and his close advisors preserved their traditional posture by offering full support to the Syrian regime. Before March 2012, many of the speeches given by the Hezbollah Secretary General concerning Syria denounced the predatory strategies of external powers (namely the United States and Israel) directed at the Syrian regime and increasingly diverted the attention of his audiences to the seemingly more urgent Palestinian cause. In other words, the movement developed a narrative of the crisis which was identical to that presented by the government of Bashar al-Assad. Meanwhile, the movement has consistently denied all implications stemming from certain media coverage, notably emanating from the opposition Free Syrian Army or Israeli sources, which has conjured up charges of Hezbollah's role as a logistical and military supporter of the Syrian repression (*Haaretz*, April 6; *Jerusalem Post*, May 30; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], February 8; *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 16; for denials, see *Daily Star* [Beirut], April 15; *NOW Lebanon*, April 14).

In contrast to Hezbollah's expectations, the Syrian crisis has not subsided and, to the contrary, has progressively transformed into a civil war. Since February of 2012, the Syrian offensive on Homs has aroused international

approbation. More and more, protesters condemn the support of Hezbollah and videos have circulated on the internet showing Syrians accusing Nasrallah by name or burning the flag of Hezbollah. [3]

A notable shift in Nasrallah's approach to the Syrian question emerged during a March 15 speech ostensibly concerning Lebanon's educational system. For roughly ten minutes, Nasrallah turned to Syria and called, for the first time, for the regime and the opposition to take an approach that would peacefully resolve their differences (*An-Nahar* [Beirut], March 17; *As-Safir* [Beirut], March 19). In effect, Nasrallah's call for settlement suggested that there is an alternative party within the opposition that would be capable of negotiating with the Syrian regime. For the first time, the Hezbollah leader had placed the Syrian regime and its opposition on the same plane. Nasrallah went so far as to add that the government in Damascus must bring the truth about the months of confrontation to light, implying that the regime must recognize its accountability in the repression. Although some observers may hasten to see this as Nasrallah's total desertion of Assad, this speech is clearly an indicator of the Lebanese leader's support taken to the limits of his conscience.

During a May 12 ceremony in Beirut, Shaykh Nasrallah warned Syrians that their nation was on the brink of plunging into a state of sectarian violence reminiscent of the Iraqi insurgency: "We leave the answer to the Syrian people... either they go for the model of dialogue, reform, elections, participation or cooperation, or go for the model [of violence] being presented now..." Nasrallah added that his party was "increasingly convinced that there are some who want the downfall of Syria only because they want to get rid of the main supporter of Palestine and the resistance in Lebanon" (*Syrian Arab News Agency*, May 12; *Daily Star* [Beirut], May 12; *al-Bawaba* [Amman], May 12; *Guardian*, May 18).

Consequently, Hezbollah is today in a critical situation: maintaining its support for Assad, whose end may only be a matter of time, could alienate the party from a majority of the Lebanese population as well as the eventual successors of the regime in Damascus. The position held by Nasrallah seeks to reconcile support for the Syrian regime and recognition of the legitimate protests. This rhetorical change may nevertheless have arrived too late to allow Hezbollah to exit the Syrian crisis fully intact.

Hezbollah without the Assad Regime

If a regime change in Damascus were to have repercussions on the makeup of the Middle East, beginning with Lebanon, we should not fool ourselves with simplistic images, such as a domino effect that would quickly see the collapse of Hezbollah. If the rule of Bashar al-Assad were to come to an end, the Syrian supply routes between Iran and the Party of God would assuredly be affected. In fact, many Syrian opposition figures, such as Burhan Ghalioun, have made it known that the Damascus-Tehran alliance would be re-examined (*al-Hayat*, February 3). A realignment of post-Assad Syria may thus cut Iran's strategic access to the Middle East and may equally affect Hezbollah, which would lose a reliable ally, both militarily with regards to Israel and politically with regards to those who oppose the movement in Beirut. Hezbollah could find itself in a position of weakness considering the accusations made against its members by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. One has difficulty imagining that the government of Najib Mikati could survive in the face of such regional game changers.

For all that, a new Syrian regime would be unlikely to deprive Hezbollah of its military capabilities. In reality, the Party of God currently possesses an arsenal in the south of Lebanon that is sufficient to deter Israel or the movement's Lebanese rivals. According to Israeli military authorities, the movement has also been trained by Syrian advisors in matters of anti-air defense; allowing Hezbollah to defend itself against eventual Israeli strikes (*Haaretz*, March 18).

Nevertheless, in the absence of new avenues of resupply between Iran and Hezbollah – maritime routes being too vulnerable to Israeli attacks – this balance of power could degrade; tempting internal and external foes of Hezbollah to launch an offensive against the organization. For example, Israeli forces could attempt to conduct a quick full-scale operation to decapitate the movement by targeting its infrastructure in the south and its nerve centers in the suburbs of Beirut. Hezbollah could then respond by attempting to scale up the conflict vertically by launching rockets as well as short-range missiles on Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and horizontally by calling for a simultaneous front across the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. For the time being, this scenario remains unlikely, as Israel has adopted a prudent political approach since the triggering of events in Syria and is well aware of Hezbollah's ability to absorb a 2006-style military attack.

Nonetheless, the coming months will be decisive for the survival of Hezbollah. Whether or not Assad remains in power is no longer the central question: whether he remains or not, Hezbollah will have to make do with a decreasingly reliable regional ally. Tomorrow the true issue for the movement will be to preserve what remains of its long process of Lebanonization under Nasrallah's leadership in the 1990s, a process which has been weakened by the political crises of 2005, 2008, and those occurring today. In other words, Hezbollah's survival after a collapse of the Assad regime does not depend on its military strength – again sufficient enough to maintain the movement, even in the face of Israel or any Lebanese rival – but on its political support, and more particularly its future ability to defuse the impact of the Syrian crisis on the on-going Lebanese Sunni-Shi'a rivalry to avoid the movement's complete alienation from Beirut's political scene. Eventually this might require more than Nasrallah's recent displays of subtle rhetoric.

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Notes:

1. See Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and The Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy*, Washington, Strategic Studies Institute, 2008; Avi Kober, "The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War: Why the Poor Performance?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31(1), February 2008, pp.3-40.
2. Among others, see: Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty Year Struggle against Israel*, New York, 2011; Emile El-Hokayem, "Hizballah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship", *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2007, pp.35-52.
3. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBw6E8NtA0A>