

The rise of Hezbollah and Hamas has presented the Arab region with dilemmas that go beyond Lebanon and Palestine. Hezbollah and Hamas have become “models” for political and military action for a regional and Arab public that is sympathetic with both organizations, albeit not quite ready to pay the price for their political choices. To assess the regional influence of Hamas and Hezbollah, we must take into account several considerations.

The growing moral and political influence of Hezbollah and Hamas is largely due to the failure of moderate regimes allied with the US and the West. For example, during the Lebanon war in 2006, the Egyptian regime refused to get involved in any military escalation against Israel given that its national interests were not at stake. Yet it argued that also Syria, whose land is still under occupation, has consistently refrained from involvement in any confrontation with Israel since 1973. Critics of the Egyptian regime however did not accept this argument, pointing out that Egypt not only rejected the option of war but also failed to manage peace and offer the Arab public a moderate alternative to the course suggested by Hezbollah or Hamas. Indeed the ‘moderate’ Arab governments have failed to use peace with Israel for the enhancement of their democracy, development and international status. This is what has made armed resistance, however costly and risky, so attractive to the Arab public. It is hard for the Arab public to dismiss resistance out of hand, appreciating that Arab states have failed to achieve the necessary clout to deter their enemies.

Hezbollah’s popularity has nothing to do with how smart or practical its policies are. It has to do with its integrity, something that other regimes in the region lack. Arab regimes speak about prosperity, reform, and democracy, but fail to deliver; whereas “radical” regimes clamour steadfastness in their confrontation with Israel, but end up sending their armies into Lebanon and Kuwait. In other words, Hezbollah offers the only alternative to the failed policies of both “moderate” and “radical” Arab regimes. The steadfastness of Hezbollah’s fighters in the war with Israel was neither haphazard nor rhetorical. Hezbollah was fully aware of its military disadvantage versus Israel, yet by assessing carefully the capabilities of the Israeli army it was able to hold out. Hezbollah acted credibly and kept its word in the eyes of the public. This was quite a change from how things were done in the Arab world for the past three decades. Two models had dominated this region, and both have been deceptive. The first is that of ‘radical’ regimes that claim to be fighting Israel and imperialism, but end up fighting their own people and other Arab countries. The second is that of regimes that promise to bring prosperity, development, reform, and democracy, but fail to do so and remain as despotic as ever. It is important to understand that the phenomenon of resistance in the Arab world, as embodied by Hezbollah and Hamas, cannot be viewed in isolation of the crisis of the moderates. Likewise, the future of Hamas and Hezbollah hinges on the ability of moderate models to become effective and gain credibility. Both Hezbollah and Hamas have immense influence, albeit in different ways, on the Arab regional scene. But what kind of future and influence do Hamas and Hezbollah have?

One may assess the aftermath of Hezbollah’s battle with Israel from two angles. First of all, Hezbollah offered a model of resistance that is effective but costly in human as well as economic terms. Secondly, Hezbollah attempted to capitalize on the outcome of the war and bolster its standing within Lebanon. Hezbollah’s battle with Israel undoubtedly unleashed considerable sympathy across the Arab world

As Israeli pressures mounted against the Palestinian people, Hezbollah’s operation seemed to many Arabs as an act of protest against the events in the OTs, even if the operation did not change the balance of power with Israel and transform the Arab public into ardent supporters of the resistance model. One may say that Hezbollah’s battle with Israel ended the stagnation on the Arab scene, opening the way for larger sectors of the public to embrace resistance. But this did not lead to a change in the existing regional equations as Arab moderate countries were not inspired to adopt the model of resistance offered by Hezbollah and refrained from recognizing Hezbollah’s military achievement. Likewise, Arab public opinion, although sympathetic with resistance, was not ready to pay the price for it. As for resistance-supporting countries, such as Syria, they continued to talk tough but act pragmatically.

Hezbollah gambled everything in its war with Israel. It understood that full victory was impossible – and perhaps even undesirable – for it would upset the current Lebanese and Arab fabric. It also knew that total defeat would be devastating to the cause of resistance in Lebanon and the Arab region. In the end, Hezbollah managed to achieve something that transcended mere victory or defeat. Yet after the war, Hezbollah acted like any other Lebanese group, hoping to bank on its steadfastness in the war in order to change the way things are done in the country. That is why the demonstrations held by Hezbollah against

3. Hezbollah and Hamas: A perspective from the region

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3.1 Hezbollah’s “victory” and how it affected the region

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Siniora's government brought the group little Arab sympathy. As and when Hezbollah played local politics, its allure to Arab public opinion began to fade. Moreover, Hezbollah's retention of arms has also generated tensions and criticisms across the region. No Arab or non-Arab country, democratic or not, could allow such an exceptional situation to persist. The current situation is highly exceptional, considering that Lebanon is not under occupation. The fact that Israel is an "exceptional" state does not justify Hezbollah's claim to remain an "exception" too. This explains why, whereas Hezbollah's popularity may have grown in the Arab world, inside Lebanon its support has dwindled. Hezbollah has already run into much opposition over its recent policies and must reconsider its attempt to overthrow a legitimately elected government. Instead of sending its supporters on the streets and exacerbating factional tensions, Hezbollah needs to formulate a political discourse that is more open to the world around it. Hezbollah needs to find a "calculated" hard-line approach, one that is in harmony with international norms, and that appeals to non-Shiites and non-Muslims.

3.2 Hamas in "power" and implications for the region

Hamas' accession to "power" in Palestine represented a new challenge for the countries of the region. Hamas formed the first "Muslim Brotherhood" government in the Arab world. It did so through democratic means, and thus embarked on a new phase. Hamas was required to deliver "non-ideological" services to its people and take international and regional considerations into account. Yet the strategy of "undermining Hamas," which the US administration adopted, was unhelpful to serve these ends. It induced Hamas and other Islamic movements to think in terms of "conspiracy" against the Palestinian people and to harp on western hostility to Islam and all Muslims. This caged Hamas further into a mindset of extremism and conspiracy. The US sees Hamas as a threat to Israel's security, just as Arab countries see all Islamic movements, including Hamas, as a threat to their own security. No one wants to admit that Hamas came to power through a democratic process and no state in the region exerted real efforts to integrate Hamas into the international and regional scene. The desire to isolate Hamas was shared by international as well as regional powers, although regional powers were often hesitant to reveal their true intentions.

The policies of the West have also been highly contradictory debilitating further Western credibility in the eyes of the Arab public. While refusing to talk to Hamas, the US has adamantly engaged with various Sunni Islamic currents in Iraq, chief of which is the Iraqi Islamic Party, that embraces the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood. Washington even approached some of Iraq's most violent Islamic groups, including those which committed terrorist acts against innocent civilians. But in Palestine, the US rejected the outcome of the democratic process, and shunned Hamas – which is far more moderate than some of Iraq's Sunni organizations. Had Hamas reached a US-sponsored agreement with Israel, a new phase would have started in the Arab world in which other Islamic movements would have had to recognize Israel and change their doctrines in a drastic manner. Progress in the peace process would have changed the manner Hamas and other Islamic movements approach the Arab-Israeli conflict. Ways of peaceful resistance would have had to be explored, and a humanitarian way of dealing with people of other creeds established. The creation of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza would have altered the doctrinal and political attitudes of Hamas and other Islamic factions, opening the door for a new Islamic humanitarian discourse, a discourse that seeks new allies on a non-religious basis and seeks a world based on justice, equality, and freedom. However, the US and Europe chose to exclude and dismantle Hamas. These are the circumstances that prompt some to argue that terror is the only way ahead for "resistance," that suffocate any attempt for a just solution of the Palestinian problem and that keep the Arab world hostage to either moderate regimes that do not dare challenge US policy or radical Islamists who are willing to engage in violence and terror, al-Qaeda included. As for those groups in between - like Hamas - they are being denied a place on the international and regional scene.

Movements such as Hamas could have offered such an in between in so far as its intellectual and political ideas represent a sequel to Arab liberation ideas championed by Abdel Nasser in the 1960s. It was the defeat of the Nasserist quest in 1967 that gave birth to political Islamic movements. The Islamists have simply inherited the mantle of leftist pan-Arabism. Indeed Hamas has reproduced the Arab discourse of liberation and given it an Islamic coating, wanting to revive the potential of the Arab and Islamic people in the face of external challenges. Hamas certainly has the potential to develop into a movement that is democratic and still hardline on the question of independence. You need to hardline to counter the policies of the US administration and Olmert's Kadima. The US and Israel are both hardline, but they have the power and the international clout to present their policies as if they were the "benchmark" for gauging the rest of the world.

However Hamas has not done enough to come up with a new political discourse capable of dialectic interaction with the international community. It needs to repackage its hardline policies in a manner that is accessible to others. Today Hamas may control Gaza, but that does not put it in the same league as other ‘enemies’ of the West, such as Iran. The latter is a country with some clout, and it can use this for political purposes. Hamas cannot achieve anything unless it can talk persuasively to the world. Also in the region, major Arab countries, with the exception of Syria, expressed reservations over Hamas’ control of Gaza. As political and media pressure mounted on Hamas, some in Egypt argued that the Hamas saga proves that Islamists are not ready for integration into the political process and that they are inherently anti-democratic. Egyptian writers spoke derisively of Gazastan, saying that Hamas’ control of Gaza is a threat to Egyptian national security. Saudi Arabia voiced similar reservations, albeit in a calmer tone. In Egypt, the conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian regime influenced the reaction to the Hamas-Fatah rivalry. Some Arabs undoubtedly hoped for Hamas to fail all along – in so far as a failure on Hamas’ part could be used to discredit other Islamic currents in the region. A Hamas failure would present the existing regimes in a better light to the West and the US. The battle for Gaza prompted Arab countries to turn their back to Hamas. Some newspaper headlines are noteworthy in this respect: “The Democracy of the Brotherhood: Hamas Drops the Mask,” “Endless Violence... for Arab Islamists.” Today, Hamas is in greater trouble than Fatah, with no end in sight to its regional and international isolation. Hamas needs a drastic revision of its policy. It needs to formulate a new political and cognitive discourse, one that can appeal to the world and interact dialectically with existing international values. Hamas can use its transparency, integrity, and appeal to the masses to develop such a discourse.

States in the region generally showed little if any sympathy towards Hezbollah and Hamas. The general view of Arab moderate countries was that Hezbollah went for an “adventure” that was too costly for the Lebanese people and that Hamas failed because the “Islamic option” was doomed. Yet Arab moderate countries did not succeed in influencing the regional scene either, with the possible exception of Saudi Arabia which offered considerable support to the Siniora government in Lebanon and firmly opposed Hezbollah’s “adventure.” Some Sunni clerics in Saudi Arabia opposed Hezbollah on the grounds that it was a Shiite group, something which the Egyptians refrained from doing. In Egypt, Hezbollah was admired by the opposition, including the conservative Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, but vilified by the government and its supporters.

The way Arab moderate regimes dealt with the Hezbollah and Hamas sagas provides further evidence that those regimes have little regional clout. Arab regimes could not stop Hezbollah or Hamas from doing what was on their mind. Conversely, Arab regimes were relatively unscathed by what Hamas and Hezbollah did. The fact that Hezbollah proved itself in the battlefield and won the admiration of the Arab street did little to threaten the legitimacy of any of the region’s moderate regimes. Likewise, Hamas acceded to “power” but failed to bring the Palestinians the liberation and prosperity they expected. Therefore, Hamas failed to ignite the imagination of the regional public or challenge the authority of conservative Arab regimes in any way. A “silent conflict” exists between Arab regimes and Islamic opposition forces. This conflict is yet to be resolved in a democratic manner, and so far has not brought victory to either side. Furthermore, the western blockade perpetuated this “silent conflict” and thus undermined the region’s chances for democracy.

The duality of extremism and moderation in the Arab world lacks a democratic solution. Meanwhile, democratization in the Arab world is hampered by the US and European support of so-called moderates in the region. Moderates, in the western lexicon, are those regimes which enjoy good relations with the West, recognize Israel, and are tolerant of the US global strategy as outlined by the Bush administration. Those moderates do not have to be democratic or credible in the eyes of their public. As for extremists – occasionally called terrorists – they are those Islamists who have relatively efficient and non-corrupt organizations. Often, they are more active and appealing to the public than moderate regimes. Hezbollah, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and some radical leftist groups, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, are often called extremists. Surely, these groups need to revise part of their discourse. But this will not happen unless EU countries engage them in talks and put pressure on them through contact. Unless serious dialogue with Hamas and Hezbollah starts, the chances for true democracy in the Arab world will remain grim. Hamas and Hezbollah are not just local groups, but role models for extremism. Many Hamas members and its sympathisers need to communicate with outsiders to discover the values of democracy, values which have been put on hold in Palestine due to the occupation. Only in this way can democracy proceed, with moderates

3.3 Conclusion