

Zealotry and Pragmatism: Hamas, Hizbullah, and Syria

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Balancing Zealotry and Pragmatism: Hamas, Hizbullah, and the Syrian Crisis

Introduction

“I salute all the nations of the Arab Spring (...) [and] I salute the heroic people of Syria who are striving for freedom, democracy and reform”.^[1]

With these words, on February 24, 2012, Gazan premier and leader of Palestinian Islamist movement *Hamas*, Ismail Haniya, openly withdrew his organization's support for long-time Syrian ally President Bashar al-Assad. Depriving the Syrian regime of its last Sunni Muslim ally, this move sharply contrasted Shi'ite Islamist movement *Hizbullah's* unconditional support for al-Assad. Analyzing this discrepancy, this essay answers the following research question: 'In the context of the presently-unfolding Syrian crisis, why has *Hamas* decided to oppose the al-Assad regime while *Hizbullah* has chosen to stand by it?'

Regarding its contribution to the study of Islamism, this essay has two particular elements to offer. Firstly, the bulk of academic research published on political Islam overlooks the heterogeneity characterizing different Islamist movements. Analyzing *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* separately, this essay contributes to countering such inclinations. Secondly, the author of this essay takes issue with the empirical focus of many works on political Islam. Albeit acknowledging that complex social phenomena do not necessarily fit in theoretical molds, a lack of theorization contributes to the Orientalist impression that Islamist movements constitute indecipherable enigmas falling outside any attempt at conceptualization. By means of introducing the concept of Islamist 'actorness', discussed below, this essay aims to overcome this bias.

In addition to its position *vis-à-vis* existing studies, it is important that this essay briefly establishes conceptual clarity. Albeit recognizing the lack of consensus amongst policy-makers and academics about the definition and meaning of the terms 'Islamism' and 'political Islam',^[2] a theoretical discussion on different conceptualizations hereof falls outside of the scope of this essay. For the purposes of this project, it suffices to render explicit that the terms 'Islamism' and 'political Islam' are used interchangeably, and refer to “the activities of organizations and movements that mobilize and agitate in the political sphere while deploying signs and symbols from Islamic traditions”.^[3]

The remainder of this essay is structured as follows. Section one presents the academic categorization of Islamist movements as ideologically- as well as strategically-driven actors, and introduces the notion of Islamist 'actorness' to conceptualize such interplay. Section two is structured similarly, and reveals the interaction between *Hamas'* and *Hizbullah's* adherence to Islamic dogma on the one hand, and their pragmatic, strategic behavior in daily political decision-making processes on the other. Finally, in section three such theoretical and empirical bases are combined and applied to the crisis in Syria. Answering this essay's research question, this analysis introduces the reader to *Hamas'* and *Hizbullah's* relations to Syria, discusses the Syrian crisis, and accounts for the movements' diverging political approaches towards the al-Assad regime. In conformity to the notion of Islamist 'actorness', it is thereby revealed that drawing up their response to the crisis, the movements emphasized different elements of their ideological basis and pursued concrete strategic interests unique to their particular political context. As such, *Hamas'* and *Hizbullah's* response to the Syrian crisis reflects a combination of ideological convictions and strategic interests.

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I. Idiosyncratic 'Otherness' versus Islamist 'Actorness'

Academic discussions on political Islam are generally polarized into two opposing camps. On the one hand, much of the literature is of an essentialist nature, and regards Islamist actors as ideologically-driven, unflappable "zealots trapped by rigid adherence to dogma".[4] Predominantly written after the end of the Cold War, studies of this type emphasize Islam's early history, and anchor their account of Islamism in a unitary understanding of the religion which assumes that Muslims "belong to a totality called the Muslim World".[5] Of emblematic value is the work of Samuel Huntington, who in the early 1990s predicted that the democratic West would increasingly be targeted by a largely homogeneous group of violent Islamists that indiscriminately believes the West has violated its most sacred norms.[6] Similarly, Bernard Lewis views the Islamic world as an entity with deeply rooted rage against the West and regards political Islam as a means to channel Islamic aggression.[7] Finally, Brian Farmer argues that Islamism is a religious fundamentalist dogma, and claims that Islamists tend to be uncompromising and inflexible on their political positions and prescriptions.[8]

While the shocking events of 9/11 largely amplified these simplistic notions, they also underlined the importance of more thorough understandings of political Islam. Consequently, increasing attention was paid to authors who criticized the above type of scholarship for obscuring the complexity and diversity characterizing political Islam, and who adopted a more nuanced approach. Particularly, instead of categorically dismissing Islamist movements as dogmatists, these authors argue Islamists' activities are simultaneously driven by tactical and strategic considerations, and that their choices reflect conscious evaluations of whether decisions achieve goals within different contexts. Reflecting such critical context-specific positions, Mohammed Ayoob, in his comparison of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Pakistani *Jamaat-i-Islami*, underlines that both movements are inspired by the seminal ideas of their main ideologues while simultaneously acting in response to concrete regime policies and restraints imposed on them.[9] Also, in a daring analysis of *al-Qaeda*, Michael Doran points out the interplay between fervent devotion to a radical religious ideology and rational political behavior conforming to the dictates of *realpolitik*. [10] Finally, even Stathis Kalyvas, making sense of the 1990s Algerian civil war, stresses that the Islamist-led massacres were justified by radical interpretations of Islamic doctrine, yet also constituted strategic assaults intended to deter civilian defections.[11]

Importantly, and as alluded to in this essay's introduction, studies of political Islam are of a highly empirical nature, and generally fail to place their findings into a grander theoretical framework. On first sight, such a factual nature can be lauded for its proximity to and representation of realities on the ground. Truthful as this may be, a failure to theorize Islamism also contributes to Orientalist perceptions of Muslim societies as unpredictable and inherently idiosyncratic collectivities of 'Otherness'. In an effort to counter such surely-unintended consequence, and fill the theoretical void characterizing the study of political Islam, this essay introduces the notion of Islamist 'actorness'. [12] Islamist 'actorness' consists of two central tenets. Firstly, it erodes above-outlined essentialist assumptions and instead highlights the multiplicity and heterogeneity inherent to political Islam. Secondly, and also in line with the critical context-specific view on political Islam, it emphasizes the interaction of Islamist movements' ideological underpinnings with their strategic responses to specific social and political realities.

The remainder of this essay places the critical context-specific view of Islamist movements under the banner of Islamist 'actorness'. Its tenets are incorporated in the second and third section of this academic project, and ultimately guide the reader towards an answer to its central research question. Indeed, its application reveals that while drawing upon ideological foundations, the characters of *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* are simultaneously determined by strategic operations undertaken in their respective milieus.

II. Crown Jewels of Islamic Resistance: *Hamas* and *Hizbullah*

Hamas and *Hizbullah* are complex and multidimensional groups, simultaneously military organizations, political parties, and social movements. Analyzed in the West predominantly for their terrorist infrastructures, they have also developed social, political, and cultural structures. In the following, the empirical basis for the answering of this essay's research question is provided. Importantly, this section does not constitute a chronological historical overview of *Hamas* or *Hizbullah*. Instead, and in conformity to Islamist 'actorness', it reveals that *Hamas* and

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Hizbullah are movements traditionally composed of ideological as well as strategic underpinnings.

Hamas

In 1987, Sheikh Yasin and other Muslim Brotherhood leaders created *Hamas* – an acronym of *harakat al-muqawama al-islamiyya*, the Movement of Islamic Resistance.[13] In historical accounts of *Hamas*, it is often overlooked that this decision was preceded by a combination of ideological and strategic considerations. Particularly, upon the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987, the Muslim Brotherhood found itself increasingly conflicted over whether or not to partake in the uprising. A uniquely ideological argument would vote against participation, and would state that as a non-activist movement that worked towards Islamization mainly through education and socio-cultural activities,[14] the time for *jihad*[15] would only arrive after society had been reformed along Islamic principles.[16] However, faced with increasing criticism from rivaling organizations such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Islamic *Jihad*, as well as from the younger strata of the organization, eager to participate, the Brotherhood became strategically interested in abandoning its inaction.[17] Safeguarding the ideological integrity of the Brotherhood while simultaneously competing with rival organizations and appealing to Palestinian youth, the impasse was overcome by the creation of a separate organization that would partake in the uprising. As such, in a way that mirrored ideological as well as strategic interests, *Hamas* was born.

The interplay between ideology and strategy underlying the creation of *Hamas*, i.e. the confirmation of Islamist 'actorness', is also reflected in the organization's violent opposition to the peace process. From an ideological perspective, such resistance is born out of the obligation to defend the Islamic territory of Palestine, and out of the conviction that giving up parts of it is sinful.[18] This interpretation notwithstanding, *Hamas'* engagement with *jihad* against the peace process may also be regarded as the result of strategic decision-making processes. Highlighting such ambiguity is the attempted suicide bombing after the signing of the 1996 Palestinian-Israeli Wye Accord. In addition to representing an expression of an Islamic duty, this undertaking has been regarded as an instrumental action against the Accord's condemnation of Palestinian forms of incitement, which would threaten the continuation of one of *Hamas'* main modes of operation.[19]

Also of concern to this essay's central argument is *Hamas'* tradition to propose *hudnah* – truces – with Israel. Ideologically, *hudnah* refers to a principle in Islamic jurisprudence that enables the conclusion of legitimate and binding contracts that call in a cease-fire for an agreed period of time without requiring the recognition of one's enemy.[20] Additionally, insofar as *hudnah* produce a certain level of peace and stability, and usher in a period during which *Hamas* can concentrate on social activities, it can also be analyzed as reflecting a strategic interest in alleviating Palestinian hardship and ensuring popular support.[21] Thus, *Hamas'* tradition to propose *hudnah* is revelatory of ideological and strategic considerations.

A final issue of importance to this section's argumentation pertains to *Hamas'* decision to partake in the 2006 legislative elections, despite its longer-standing argument that as a product of the Oslo peace process, they were illegitimate.[22] From a strategic perspective, this move reflects a political window of opportunity following the 2004 death of Yassir Arafat, *Hamas'* most-effective critic. Indeed, participating in the elections enabled the movement to trump its secular rival by exposing *Fatah's* problems with corruption and nepotism and by presenting itself as the cleaner, more attractive alternative. Additionally, *Hamas'* participation in the elections represented a reaction against increasingly vocal calls from *Fatah* in the 2000s to disarm all Palestinian opposition movements, and constituted a means to defend the core of *Hamas'* resistance program.[23] Importantly, these strategic rationales have not undermined or overshadowed *Hamas'* ideological positions. On the contrary, *Hamas'* political program is saturated with doctrinal elements, which are used to clearly introduce an Islamic element to mainstream Palestinian electoral processes. More precisely, *Hamas'* electoral scheme reiterates the movement's refusal to recognize the Israeli state, its regular declarations of the Islamic obligation not to negotiate on this issue, and its continuing assertions that *jihad* is the dutiful effort against the unlawful occupation of Palestine.[24] As such, even *Hamas'* decision to participate in the 2006 legislative elections is composed of strategic as well as ideological elements.

As this section has revealed, although often depicted in the West as emblematic of Islamic zealotry, *Hamas'* foundation, its recourse to *jihad* against the peace process, its tradition of proposing *hudnah*, and its decision to

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partake in Palestinian legislative elections, are thus also underpinned by strategic thinking. The following sub-section assesses whether the same type of ambiguity, i.e. the notion of Islamist 'actorness', is applicable to *Hizbullah*.

Hizbullah

As elaborated upon by Kepel, the establishment in 1982 of *Hizbullah* – Party of Allah – can be attributed to an immediate internal need for defense combined with a structural external search for political influence. More specifically, *Hizbullah* is generally said to constitute a by-product of Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982 and an expression of Khomeini's determination to project his Islamic Revolution beyond the frontiers in Iran and into Lebanon, where Shi'ite Muslims, ever since the installment of the 1943 National Pact, had been structurally underrepresented and oppressed.[25] In congruence with the concept of Islamist 'actorness', each of these constitutive pillars are composed of ideological as well as strategic underpinnings.

Israel's invasion not only precipitated *Hizbullah's* efforts towards the liberation of southern Lebanon, but also fuelled the belief that Israel is an illegitimate entity which ought to disappear from the map by means of the liberation of the whole of Palestine. As in the case of *Hamas*, the practical manifestation of this stance has traditionally been *Hizbullah's* opposition to direct peace negotiations and its focus on resistance.[26] Importantly, alongside such ideological adversity towards the 'Zionist entity', as Israel is consistently and pejoratively referred to,[27] lies an element of strategic reasoning. Specifically, due to the great asymmetry in military power between the two parties,[28] *Hizbullah* has developed a strategic interest in preventing an escalation of the conflict and indirectly negotiating with Israel.[29] These negotiations have taken place either along the lines of adherence to practical 'rules of the game', agreed upon in 1993 when Israel committed itself not to attack civilian targets in Lebanon and *Hizbullah* dedicated itself to confine its resistance to the south Lebanese 'Security Zone',[30] or in the form of a specific set of prisoner exchanges agreed upon since 1996.[31] Together, these strategic mechanisms coexist with ideological rationales.

Additionally, *Hizbullah's* attachment to the Iranian Revolution embodies ideological and strategic rationales, and conforms to the notion of Islamist 'actorness'. The facts that *Hizbullah* openly subscribes to the theory of *wilayat al fakih* – or rule of the jurist – takes spiritual guidance from Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei, shares its struggle against secularism and oppression of Muslims by the US and Israel, and concurs that *jihad* is a sacred imperative to restore Muslim lands, reveal that part of *Hizbullah's* sympathy for the Revolution is certainly ideological.[32] However, due to its connections to Tehran, *Hizbullah* has enjoyed military training from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which has bolstered its position against Israel.[33] Also, its access to Iranian funds has allowed it to pour money in Shi'ite-inhabited areas and check the ascent of Amal, its largely secular rival contending over Shi'ite sympathies.[34] As such, *Hizbullah's* ties to the Iranian Revolution are not uniquely doctrinal, but also impinge upon strategic rationales.

In addition to discussing *Hizbullah's* two constitutive pillars, a final issue of interest to the efforts of this essay concerns *Hizbullah's* decision to enter mainstream Lebanese politics after the signing of the Ta'if Accord and the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1989. On the one hand, some have concluded that *Hizbullah*, by participating in municipal and general elections, has forgone its Islamic principles in favor of accommodation into post-Ta'if Lebanese diverse political realities.[35] These adherents to the 'Lebanonisation of *Hizbullah*' thesis thereby claim that the movement has given up its ideological agenda and has integrated into national politics with pragmatic strategy.[36] Although intuitively plausible, this strand of analysis overlooks the ways in which *Hizbullah's* move to mainstream politics is also infused with ideological underpinnings. Firstly, while taking part in the Lebanese political process, *Hizbullah* has remained loyal to its ideological *raison d'être*, and has fervently opposed the efforts of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri to prepare Lebanon for peace with Israel.[37] Secondly, *Hizbullah* parliamentarians have veiled their call for the elimination of political confessionality and establishment of an Islamic state in obscurity so as to strategically avoid the alienation of non-Shi'ite Lebanese, who view such ideas with suspicion, yet simultaneously ensure formal ideological adherence to *wilayat al fakih*. [38] From a holistic perspective, *Hizbullah's* entry into mainstream Lebanese politics thus exemplifies ideological and strategic thought-processes.

This sub-section has established that *Hezbollah's* ties to the Iranian Revolution and its ongoing struggle with Israel

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are illustrative of ideological clamor and political strategies. Additionally, even its recent move into mainstream Lebanese politics, as opposed to implicating the forgoing of its ideological positions, appears to be symbolic of *Hizbullah's* engagement in a delicate act of balancing strategic with ideological interests. As such, *Hamas'* ambiguous nature appears to be shared by its Lebanese ally. In the next and final section of this essay, the validity of this characterization of these crown jewels of Islamic opposition, i.e. of their Islamist 'actorness', is assessed in the analysis of their distinct responses to the currently-unfolding crisis in Syria.

III. The Syrian Crisis as Emblematic of Islamist 'Actorness'

In this final section of the essay, an answer to its central research question is provided. Particularly, this section looks into why, in the context of the Syrian crisis, *Hamas* has chosen to distance itself from the al-Assad regime, while *Hizbullah* has preferred to align itself hereto unconditionally. The direct answer to this question is preceded by a brief overview of Syria's relations to *Hamas* and *Hezbollah*, and a general introduction to the Syrian crisis.

Iranian-Syrian Relations to Hamas and Hizbullah

No discussion of Syria's relations to *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* is complete without the inclusion of the significant role played by Iran. Indeed, it is only via understanding the Syria-Iran axis that sense can be made of its connections to these two Islamist movements. Relations between Syria and Iran are particularly strong, and date back to the start of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, when Damascus aligned itself with Tehran.[39] Since then, the relationship has been based on the shared convictions that fundamentally oppose Israel, reject Western policies in the Middle East, and contest pro-Western Arab status quo powers.[40] Importantly, for the Iran-Syria axis, *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* constitute powerful tools to exude regional influence. More specifically, via the provision of ideological and strategic support to *Hamas* and *Hizbullah*, Syria and Iran have generally subtlet their stakes in the AIC to Mediterranean surrogates.[41]

Hamas' alliance with Syria was traditionally founded upon an ideological basis. Indeed, despite Syria's overall hostility towards the Muslim Brotherhood, membership of which is still punishable by death,[42] its support for *Hamas* is based on a shared belief that resistance is the principal weapon to fight for liberation from Israeli occupation.[43] In addition to ideological support, the partnership with Syria has also brought *Hamas* strategic benefits. More specifically, since the mid-1990s, Damascus has been the operational headquarters of *Hamas* and a nexus for the transfer of external funds and weaponry from Iran to *Hamas* operatives in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.[44] What is more, *Hamas'* basis in Damascus also proved ideal to access Lebanon and recruit Palestinian refugees living in south-Lebanese refugee camps.[45]

Overall, *Hizbullah's* ties to Syria much resemble those connecting Syria to *Hamas*. Indeed, *Hizbullah-Syria* relations depart from an ideological concurrence on the illegitimacy of Israel and the importance to jointly curtail its ambitions.[46] Similarly, as does *Hamas*, *Hizbullah* largely relies on Syrian permission for the transit of its weapons from Iran.[47] Importantly, these similarities stop at the movements' different attribution of importance to Iran. As opposed to *Hamas*, *Hizbullah* is more clearly a derivative of the Iranian Revolution, and it is obvious *Hizbullah* does not regard Syria with the same type of loyalty.[48] Exemplifying this is a specific set of incidents in the 1980s, in which *Hizbullah* acted under Iranian direction but without or against commands from Damascus, consequently infuriating the Syrian regime.[49]

In recent years, the difference setting apart *Hamas* and *Hizbullah's* relations to Syria has intensified. Indeed, whereas the land, air, and sea blockade of the Gaza Strip by Israel and Egypt has inhibited *Hamas* from more independent subsistence, *Hizbullah*, especially after Syria's 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon and its 2006 'Divine Victory' over Israel,[50] has been enabled to become more of an autonomous actor whose activities can no longer be dictated by Damascus.[51] With such discrepancy in mind, this essay now moves to the currently-unfolding Syrian crisis, to which *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* have also adopted divergent responses.

The Inconvenient Syrian Truth: Internal Complexities and External Polarization[52]

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What started out as a popular uprising resembling greatly those having swiftly toppled the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, today constitutes a protracted conflict increasingly assuming the characteristics of a *de facto* civil war. Indeed, although sharing with Tunisia and Egypt its largely unexpected eruption, its foundations in socio-economic distress combined with political oppression and no prospect of reforms,[53] the Syrian crisis stands out due to the unprecedented number of casualties it has reached, the increasing leakages across Syrian borders it causes, the stifling international polarization it has caused, and the infinite number of grey areas that make the comprehensive understanding of the events by an outsider close to impossible.

In the majority of Western media, the Syrian crisis is explained in highly Manichean terms. More precisely, it is presented to the public as a battle between forces loyal to the Ba'ath party government ruled by President Bashar al-Assad – a largely power-hungry, aggressive, and dictatorial regime epitomizing notions of modern-day 'evil' – and the peaceful, defensive, and benign opposition forces hungry for nothing but a democratic Syria. The appeal of this dichotomy lies in its simplicity, and in the clear-cut responses from the Western world it implies. Unfortunately, however, closer scrutiny of events reveals that the Syrian reality is much more complex.

Firstly, it is incorrect to indiscriminately vilify all those supportive of the Syrian regime while placing on a pedestal forces daring to oppose it. Not everyone in the pro-regime camp is Alawite Shi'ite, nor is everyone simply a murderous supporter of authoritarianism. Instead, this constituency includes Syrians of a variety of religious backgrounds critical of the status quo yet fearful of the chaos and instability that regime change might bring.[54] In a similar vein, Syria's opposition does not represent a homogeneous Sunni block merely defending itself from Ba'athist aggression while in agreement over the future of the country. Quite the contrary; recent reports have revealed the opposition's complicity in human rights violations against innocent bystanders, and increased internal divisions have complicated any attempts at the unified management of the situation.[55]

Although a balanced perspective of the Syrian crisis is important, it would be unfair not to elaborate on how the Syrian regime's aggressive response to the uprising has bolstered extremist positions on both sides. Indeed, regardless of the fact that initially, al-Assad took small steps to coax the population, his overall choice of brutal repression has not only energized and radicalized many elements of the opposition, it has also created a dependency on the more hard-line facets of the security forces. The resulting polarization has led to dangerous stalemate, due to which increased levels of violence have become regular recurrences and an intrinsic part of the daily Syrian routine.[56]

Just as internally, the Syrian crisis is home to complex dynamics, so also the international community cannot be written off as a singular block simply standing by as thousands of Syrians are being killed. Specifically, as Iran and the Gulf States unconditionally support the regime and opposition respectively, the West has failed in its diplomatic efforts in the Annan six-point peace plan and thus increasingly flirts with the option of military intervention, and Russia and China continue to oppose attempts to agree to a United Nations resolution condemning the regime. It is fair to say the international community is highly divided as to how best to respond to the events taking place in Syria.[57]

Although non-state actors, *Hamas'* and *Hizbullah's* different responses to the Syrian crisis reveal a similar lack of unity within Islamist ranks. Indeed, and as already mentioned in this essay's introduction, whereas *Hamas* has decided to distance itself from al-Assad, *Hizbullah* has unconditionally sided itself with the regime. The next subsection analyzes such discrepancy and provides an answer to this essay's central research question.

Deciphering Islamist Disunity

Hamas' break with the al-Assad regime is predominantly displayed as a strategic realignment reflecting three considerations. Firstly, it is argued that by distancing itself from the Syrian regime, *Hamas* wanted to avoid repeating the mistake of Yassir Arafat, who in supporting Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait had diplomatically and financially isolated the PLO.[58] Secondly, *Hamas'* interest in electoral and popular support complicated standing beside an authoritarian state widely condemned in the streets of Gaza for slaughtering Syrian nationals and Palestinian refugees.[59] Finally, *Hamas* calculated to benefit from the growing powers of democratic Sunni Islamism

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in the region, especially following the accession to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.[60]

In a similar vein, *Hizbullah's* decision to remain loyal to its Syrian ally is also generally discussed in strategic terms. For one thing, the fall of the Syrian regime would almost certainly imply its replacement with a government less tightly-knit to Iran, which in turn would sever *Hizbullah's* weapons supply lines and weaken its deterrence capacities *vis-à-vis* Israel.[61] What is more, regime change in Damascus would severely constrain *Hizbullah's* ability to influence Lebanese national politics. Indeed, the fact that the uprising is increasingly spilling over into Lebanon and the Sunni-dominated north, housing oppositional activists, refugees and militants alike, which has turned into a sanctuary for Syria's armed opposition and their supply lines, is illustrative of the political blow *Hizbullah* would suffer from al-Assad's disappearance.[62]

While these rationales underlying *Hamas'* and *Hizbullah's* decision are clear, they should not obscure the fact that both positions come with many risks. As its initial attempt at upholding a somewhat neutral position showed,[63] *Hamas'* leadership was well-aware that opposition to al-Assad could precipitate strained relations with Iran, who had always strongly supported it and upon which it so depends for external funding and import of weaponry.[64] Similarly, it is well-known that *Hizbullah's* leadership is conscious of the double standard it applies in its policy towards the Arab uprisings, and the incoherence inherent to an essentially-social movement now supporting a regime that openly cracks down on its own people.[65]

Because of the dilemma that the strategic explanations of *Hamas'* and *Hizbullah's* response to the Syrian crisis have caused, a look beyond mere stratagem and into the more ideological nature of both stances is required. The scrutiny of such perspective discloses that *Hamas'* renunciation of the Syrian regime perfectly matches its foundational narrative as a movement standing up for the well-being of fellow Muslims and confirms its commitment to Muslim's Islamic emancipation from the tyrannies of secular oppression. In addition, the disavowal also signifies *Hamas'* rapprochement to its ideological brethren in the Muslim Brotherhood, in whose company – as a fellow Sunni Muslim movement – it feels more at ease than in an alliance with Shi'ite Iran, Syria, and *Hizbullah*.[66]

Also in the case of *Hizbullah*, only the inclusion of a largely ideological argument can fully explain the sturdiness of its alliance to al-Assad. Accordingly, *Hizbullah's* perception of the Syrian crisis is tied to its adversity to the 'Zionist entity' occupying Muslim territory, and the supposed indispensability of al-Assad to the preservation and maintenance of the Palestinian cause.[67] It sees the crisis as a collusion of outside powers to replace al-Assad with a new government that succumbs to US-Israeli whims, and praises the regime for resisting numerous pressures to capitulate to such dictates.[68]

As this final sub-section has revealed, the notion of Islamist 'actorness' adequately accounts for *Hamas'* and *Hizbullah's* responses to the Syrian crisis. Indeed, by rejecting partial analyses and by instead highlighting the interplay of strategic as well as ideological arguments, it has explained both movements' reasons for either opposing or supporting the Syrian regime. Importantly, just as the Syrian crisis continues to evolve on a daily basis, so the political positions taken in today by *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* do not preclude the possibility of their radical alteration in the (near) future. Nonetheless, in whichever way the movements will respond to Syrian developments in a later stage, it is certain their arguments to do so will be underpinned by strategic as well as ideological elements.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed the responses of *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* to the currently-unfolding crisis in Syria. Particularly, it has looked into why *Hizbullah* has decided to stand by the al-Assad regime while *Hamas* has chosen to oppose it. It was thereby argued that the movements' particular responses to the Syrian crisis were the result of the interplay between strategic as well as ideological considerations, reflecting the concept of Islamist 'actorness'.

To answer its research question, this essay was divided into three main sections. Firstly, theoretical insight has been given into the academic categorization of Islamist movements as either ideologically- or strategically-driven actors. Importantly, to overcome allusions to idiosyncratic and Orientalist perceptions of Islamist 'otherness', this section has introduced the concept of Islamist 'actorness', highlighting the heterogeneity inherent to political Islam, and

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emphasizing the interaction of Islamist movements' ideological underpinnings with their strategic responses to specific social and political realities. The second section of this essay incorporated Islamist 'actorness' to reveal how *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* simultaneously adhere to Islamic dogma and as well as behave strategically. Finally, section three combined these theoretical and empirical bases to reveal how *Hamas'* and *Hizbullah's* divergent responses to the Syrian crises were similarly embedded in both strategic as ideological rationales, and how they were thus emblematic of Islamist 'actorness'.

Although this essay's analysis has revealed the validity of its central claim, it is important to pinpoint some of the limitations it has faced. In addition to the challenges already addressed in their appropriate sections, the academic rigor of this project has suffered from its exclusive reliance on secondary sources. More specifically, time and size constraints have impeded the conduct of any form of primary research or fieldwork. Additionally, due to the fact that the Syrian crisis is still heavily evolving on a daily basis, the account provided hereon in this essay might soon be outdated. These issues will have to be addressed in further research on this topic.

Aware of its limitations, this essay has nonetheless come to some overall conclusions. The concept of Islamist 'actorness' has proven of utmost use in providing an overall characterization of the nature of *Hamas* and *Hizbullah*. Particularly, its central tenets have adequately elucidated these movements' undertakings in and outside the context of the crisis in Syria. Altogether, this essay has therefore disclosed that the rationales underpinning many of *Hamas'* and *Hizbullah's* undertakings are not reflexive of mere Islamic zealotry, but often interact with highly pragmatic and strategic decision-making processes.

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[12] The term 'actorness' analyzes the European Union's (EU) behavior based on its internal dynamics and its interplay with the external environment (Sjörstedt, 1977, p.16). Traditionally centered on the dichotomy between the EU as either an actor driven by ideological conviction or strategic interests (Manners, 2002; Hyde-Price, 2006), the discussion on EU 'actorness' has recently come to include a holistic perspective in which ideology and strategy interact (Smith, 2011, p.144). Seeing the similarities characterizing research on Islamism, this author upholds that the concept of 'actorness', albeit tailored to fit the particularities of Islamism, is also applicable to an extra-European context.

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[27] *ibid.*, p. 73.

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[30] *ibid.*, p. 84.

[31] *ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

[32] J Harik. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2005, p. 16.

[33] G Kepel, *cit. op.*, p. 126.

[34] A Saouli, *cit. op.*, pp. 72-73.

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[37] A Saouli, *cit. op.*, p. 74.

[38] N Hamzeh, *cit. op.*, p. 324.

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2012, p. 27.

[41] *ibid.*

[42] *ibid.*, p. 28.

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[48] *ibid.*, p. 810.

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[51] E Mohns & A Bank, *op. cit.*, p.28.

[52] Due to the Syrian authorities' policies of banning of foreign reporters, the Syrian crisis is clouded in much mystery. Consequently, the author of this essay recommends researchers set to evaluate the validity of this account to engage in their assessment equipped with additional informational resources.

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[56] ICG, 2012a, *cit. op.*

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[62] *ibid.*

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[65] E Mohns & A Bank, *cit. op.*, p. 30.

[66] ICG, 2012d, *cit. op.*, p. 10.

[67] A Saad-Ghorayeb. *Understanding Hizbullah's Support for the Asad Regime*. A Conflicts Forum Monograph. Beirut: Conflicts Forum, 2011, pp. 5-8.

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