Introduction

Despite the long-running debate in international relations as to whether state behavior is more heavily influenced by systemic or domestic pressures, there is far less discussion as to which level of analysis is more productive in understanding the behavior of nonstate actors. This perhaps stems from an assumption that nonstate actors, by their very nature, have different priorities than do states. Their goals are often the overthrow of a particular regime, the control of specific territory, or, in practice if not in theory, victory over their rival militias. None of these issues suggests that we should expect changes in regional realignment, rather than in the domestic political context, to shape their behavior. If militant organizations are concerned primarily with their conflict with their main adversary, then their alliance behavior, even at the regional and international level, should be determined by an assessment of which alliances will help them further those goals. And yet, the responses by Hamas and Hizbullah to the regional realignment produced by the Arab Spring suggest that this is not always the case. Both organizations have long framed themselves in terms of their role as “the resistance” against Israel – “Hamas” is an acronym in Arabic for “the Islamic resistance” and Hizbullah’s official slogan is “the Islamic resistance in Lebanon.” Both derive enormous legitimacy from this label. But their behavior in adjusting to the realignment produced by the Arab spring suggests that perhaps they have other concerns that trump the “resistance” project.

For decades, one of the region’s major divisions has been that between the Syrian-Iranian axis and pro-Western axis. The outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the election of Islamist governments in Tunisia and Egypt created shifts in this alignment, and presented a challenge for proto-state actors like Hizbullah and Hamas, who had previously been allied with Syria and Iran. Hamas has abandoned its relationship with Syria while Hizbullah has chosen to involve itself in the Syrian civil war. Both responses suggest that their decision-making is
informed by both broader regional issues and domestic political concerns, rather than merely the imperatives of their protracted conflict with Israel.

Moreover, both decisions are in some ways puzzling: Hamas’ new patrons are far less likely to provide it with the weaponry and support for its operations against Israel that Syria and Iran have over the years, and Hizbullah has badly damaged its political position in Lebanon by fighting openly alongside the Asad regime. Why, then, would they choose these divergent but similarly costly courses of action? I argue that these choices are rooted in the fact that both organizations see themselves not only as local nonstate actors but as regional proto-state actors. As such, their alliance decisions are based not simply on the immediate realities of their conflict with Israel, but also on regional alignment patterns and domestic political concerns – that is, on the same pressures that states face. For Hizbullah, both preserving the Asad regime in Syria and demonstrating their commitment to doing so (particularly to the regime itself) are priorities, even at a domestic cost. For Hamas, joining what appeared to be a newly emerging Islamist axis offered a potential springboard to greater regional legitimacy, even at the cost of its military effectiveness. This suggests that for both scholars and policy-makers, the tools used to understand and bargain with states may also be applicable to such organizations.

Proto-state Actors

Proto-state actors, of which Hamas and Hizbullah are two good examples, are perhaps best described as “states in waiting”; at least, this is how such organizations often see themselves. While many have political wings that engage with the existing structure of the government more or less on its own terms, they may also perform other functions that challenge the authority or even the legitimacy of the state itself. I therefore define proto-state actors as “nonstate organizations that have assumed a plurality of the functions of the state, thereby challenging its legitimacy.”

The “functions of the state” in question include a wide range of activities. Given the nature of these organizations, the most obvious are probably military functions. This type of activity clearly poses a challenge to the state, as the presence of armed militia defies the state’s monopoly over the legitimate use of force, to cite Weber’s definition of state sovereignty. But
these organizations also perform a range of nonmilitary functions. Many militias also include charitable wings that provide services on a limited scale to local constituents, but for proto-state actors these are far more developed. In some cases, they may have taken over responsibility for functions such as infrastructure maintenance, education, medical care, and even road safety. They may have highly functional bureaucracies and strong administrative capacities. In other words, they may have taken over many of the daily functions commonly associated with a state. Examples include the FARC in Colombia, the POLISARIO in Western Sahara, and the PLO.¹

While such groups are often referred to as a “state within a state”, perhaps they are better termed “states without a state”, because they clearly possess many of the characteristics of a state without the recognition afforded to the government, even if that government is less capable of governing the territory to which it lays claim. Moreover, this resemblance is not limited to their behavior inside the territory in question but extends to their behavior at the regional level. Because they see themselves as states in waiting, their foreign policy is often far more developed than simply following the instructions of their state sponsor or establishing bases in a neighboring state. Rather than seeing themselves simply in relation to their state adversary, they construct their foreign policies in response to both broad regional dynamics and the demands of domestic public opinion. The position of the adversary state is relevant, of course, but is not the only factor shaping their foreign policy preferences. The foreign policy decisions that Hamas and Hizbullah both made in the context of the Arab Spring can best be understood by recognizing that each of them makes foreign policy much the way that states do: not just in response to local political imperatives, but also to broader regional and global political pressures.

**The pre-Arab Spring Status Quo**

*Regional Rivalries*

As of December 17th, 2010 (the day that Muhammad Bouazizi set himself on fire in the town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia setting off the wave of regional uprisings that would become known as the Arab Spring) the regional alignment in the Middle East was characterized by several significant cleavages. Despite the frequent emphasis in the media and policy circles on

the Arab-Israeli conflict, this was only one of several important divisions. For many of the region’s Sunni monarchies, the Sunni-Shi’ite division was, and is, tremendously significant, or at least has been publicly framed as being a substantial threat. In December of 2004, King Abdullah II of Jordan warned of the potential emergence of a “Shi’ite Crescent” in the Middle East, stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria and into Lebanon:

*Chris Matthews:* Do you think that would be a danger to the region, an alliance between a Shi’a led Iraq and Iran?  
*Abdullah II:* If it was a Shi’a led Iraq that had a special relationship with Iran, and you look at that relationship with Syria and with Hizbullah in Lebanon, then we have this new crescent that appears and would be very destabilizing for the Gulf countries, and actually for the whole region.²

Abdullah’s warning is at least partly emblematic of the long-running strategic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, rooted in economic rivalry over the control of oil prices, territorial rivalry in the Persian Gulf, and a perceived security threat posed by each to the other. Both states also have more specific grievances, including Saudi limits on Hajj visas for Iranian pilgrims, perceived repression of Shi’ites in both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and alleged Iranian support for anti-regime Shi’ite organizations (armed and otherwise) in the Gulf states. These concrete grievances are arguably far more significant than the theological divisions between Sunnis and Shi’ites.

The Saudi-Iranian strategic rivalry has drawn in each state’s respective allies, forming two broad axes in the region: Iran and Syria formed one axis, and Saudi Arabia and the GCC states (plus Jordan) the other. Of particular significance in deepening and reinforcing divisions between the two camps was the Iran-Iraq war, during which most of the Arab states of the Middle East lined up behind Iraq, leaving Iran very much isolated. The lone exception was Syria, which allied with Iran. This was in part a result of the separate rivalry between the Iraqi and Syrian wings of the Baath party, and perhaps partly because of what Asad’s biographer, Patrick Seale, believes was a genuine sympathy for the position of the Iranians on Asad’s part.³ Whatever the reason, breaking ranks with the other Arab states to side with Iran placed Syria very much in the minority in the Arab world.

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² “King Abdullah II of Jordan.”
³ Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East.*
There were certainly divisions within these alliances, such as the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the late 1990s, and cases where the interests of rivals converged, such as Syria’s willingness to participate in the campaign to drive Saddam Hussein’s forces out of Kuwait during the Gulf War. Overall, however, this cleavage proved remarkably durable, and has had a powerful effect on the foreign policy of states in the region, particularly with regard to their involvement (or attempted involvement) in the politics of neighboring states and their engagement with nonstate actors.

Proxy relationships

This rivalry has shaped the approach taken by states on both sides of the divide to those states which they perceive as potential fault-lines in the regional schism. For instance, Abdullah’s warning, coming as it did in the context of the first Iraqi election, reflects a growing discomfort with Shi’ite influence in both Iraq and Lebanon. Both countries were characterized by weak or failing governments and muscular nonstate military actors with substantial political influence, as evidenced by the rapid takeover of northern Iraq by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the summer of 2014. Both of these states were seen by the Gulf monarchies as potential battlegrounds in the struggle for influence between the Iranian and Saudi axes.

Given the repressive nature of political life in many states in the region, those countries which do have space for open or semi-open political contestation are often treated as proving grounds for the region’s various ideologies. Lebanon in the 1960s is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. Nasserites, Iraqi Baathists, Syrian Baathists, communists, pan-Syrian nationalists, and all manner of other political parties set up offices, newspapers, radio stations, and other platforms for promoting their ideologies in Beirut. Many sought out local Lebanese proxies (or, as discussed below, found them among the various Palestinian militias which set up shop in Lebanon in the late 1960s and especially after the Palestinian militias’ expulsion from Jordan in 1970.)

For Syria, the Lebanese Shi’ite militia Amal was an important means of advocating for its interests in Lebanon during and after the civil war. For Iran, Hizbullah

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represented first an extension of its own political project (that is, the establishment of an Islamic republic) and then later a powerful means of projecting its power regionally. Since the end of the civil war in 1990, for Syria, Hizbullah has become an important ally in Lebanon, especially during the Syrian occupation. More recently, it has become a crucial military ally in Syria itself, helping to turn the tide in several crucial battles during the Syrian civil war in favor of the regime.\(^5\)

Palestinian politics was likewise an arena for political contestation between the region’s various ideological axes, both with regard to the “Arab Cold War” between Nasserite Egypt and the Gulf states, and the later rivalry between the Iranian and Saudi axes. This was particularly true among the refugee communities in Syria and especially Lebanon, but many states also sought to build connections inside the West Bank and Gaza. This was less due to the dynamics outlined above than to the normative power of the Palestinian cause; because of broad regional sympathy for the Palestinians, having a Palestinian client, or at least being seen to be offering support to the Palestinian parties, was a powerful source of regional and even domestic legitimacy. And, because of the soft power wielded by the Palestinian political leadership, the ability to influence that leadership and perhaps the course of the Palestinian struggle itself likewise became highly desirable.\(^6\)

This in part explains Iran’s interest in acquiring a Palestinian client organization. Immediately after the revolution, Khomeini’s government set about wooing the PLO, giving them the former Israeli embassy in Tehran as office space and welcoming Arafat with full diplomatic honors. It was considered a great betrayal when the PLO backed Saddam Hussein during Iran-Iraq war, and more problematic still when the PLO under his leadership sought to negotiate a separate peace with Israel under the Oslo accords. Hamas represented a welcome alternative to the PLO, despite their ideological differences with the leadership of the Islamic Republic.

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For Syria, the ability to exert at least some influence over the Palestinian resistance was even more important. Given Lebanon’s proximity, Syria preferred to avoid a descent into chaos in its smaller neighbor, and therefore sought to rein in the PLO when it deemed it necessary to do so. At the same time, Syria sought the return of the Golan Heights, seized by Israel in 1967, and saw Palestinian resistance as one way of forcing Israel to negotiate a multilateral peace treaty. This became even more important after the Camp David accords in 1979 took the Egyptian military off the board. Like Iran, after the Oslo Accords Syria saw in Hamas a possible alternative to the PLO, with the added advantage that it had a sizeable presence inside the West Bank and Gaza. In short, Hamas’ presence in the “axis of resistance” served both as a source of regional legitimacy for the alliance and a powerful rebuke to those Palestinian factions which had signed on with the Oslo process, as well as a means for Iran and Syria to exert pressure on both Israel and the PLO.7

But it would be a mistake to treat all nonstate actors as simple military proxies. While some were undoubtedly little more than cat’s paws for their respective sponsors, others were powerful actors in their own right, who over time came to wield substantial influence and can perhaps almost be viewed as equal, or perhaps junior, partners in their respective alliances. These relationships were, after all, enormously beneficial for the militant groups in question, and were crucial in enabling their military campaigns against Israel.

Hizbullah has clearly benefitted militarily, politically, and financially, from its relationship with Iran. In its early years, when the Islamic Republic was young as well and led by a more militant faction, Hizbullah received training, funding, and weaponry from Iran. As early as 1982, Iran dispatched 1,500 revolutionary guards to train Hizbullah fighters in the Bekaa valley.8 Iran also provided Hizbullah with weapons, ranging from small arms like AK-47s to larger weapons like Soviet shoulder-mounted SAM-7s.9 It also, in the 1980s, provided funding that some sources estimate to have been

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7 Anders, “The Damascus Based Alliance of Palestinian Forces.”
8 Norton, Hezbollah: A Short History, 44–45.
9 “More Missiles Brought to Beirut Suburbs.”
as much as five to ten million dollars a month. This included funding for Hizbullah’s social service network (averaging 60 million dollars a year throughout the decade) and for its media outlets. This funding decreased somewhat after the death of Khomeini in 1989 and the ascendance of the more pragmatic Rafsanjani as president of Iran. However, Iran remains a significant source of both funding and weapons for Hizbullah. During the July War, it became clear that in addition to the small arms and Katyusha rockets that Hizbullah had used throughout the 1990s and 2000s, it also possessed anti-tank and anti-ship missiles, UAVs (drones), and longer range missiles capable of hitting Israeli cities as far south as Haifa and Tiberias.

Many of these weapons were likely supplied by Iran. The other important source, of course, was Syria. While Hizbullah’s relationship with Syria during the 1980s veered between suspicion and open hostility, after the end of the civil war the relationship became far more cordial. Hizbullah prospered under Syria’s rule over Lebanon, acquiring ever-greater political influence. While Syria acted as a conduit for weapons and fighters between Hizbullah in Lebanon and Iran, there is some evidence that by the 2000s, it was also directly supplying Hizbullah with weaponry, including 220mm and 302mm rockets and anti-tank missiles. In one of the cables released through Wikileaks, an official at the US embassy in Damascus suggested that “There is overwhelming evidence that shows Syria provided not just logistical and other support in moving the weapons, but was the main source of the weapons.”

Hamas also benefitted substantially from its membership in the axis of resistance. By 1992, after Iran’s relationship with the PLO had been damaged by the its backing of Iraq in the Gulf War, and Syria had begun to seek to cultivate a new “rejection front” of hardline Palestinian after the failure of its negotiations with Israel at Madrid, both states

10 Jaber, Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance, 150.
15 Hunter, “Is Now the Time to Raise Hizballah With Syria?”
had begun to provide Hamas with significant backing. Iranian aid to Hamas had increased to $20 million, from $4 million in 1989.\textsuperscript{17} Reports also began to surface in the early 1990s that Hamas fighters were receiving Iranian training.\textsuperscript{18} By the early 2000s, Hamas was sending elite members of the Al Qassem brigades, its military wing, to Iran and Syria to receive training directly from the Revolutionary Guards. This included not only military training, but also training in the manufacture of weapons as well as the development of more effective models of the Qassem rocket\textsuperscript{19} (although even the most sophisticated versions are still relatively unreliable) and the Shawas 4 landmine.\textsuperscript{20} There is also some evidence that Hamas’ sponsors at times provided more substantial weapons, including Russian-made Grad missiles, with a range of 20-40 kilometers, and Chinese-made 122mm Wei Shei rockets.\textsuperscript{21} Israeli officials believed that Hamas was also receiving Iranian-made 122mm weapons that had been designed specifically for Hamas, which could be disassembled into four pieces for easier transport into Gaza via the tunnels, as well as Russian anti-tank missiles, which Israel also believed had been provided by Iran.\textsuperscript{22}

In addition to funding and weapons, Hamas also received something that it required perhaps more than most militant groups: office space. After its founder, Ahmed Yassin, was arrested by Israel in 1989, Hamas’ leadership went into exile in Jordan. But in 1999, after a period of about five years during which relations between the Jordanian government and Hamas became increasingly fraught, the movement was expelled from Jordan altogether, and moved its headquarters to Damascus. While the availability of foreign headquarters has perhaps become less crucial since the Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007 following its electoral victory in 2006, the availability of a foreign base from which its leadership could openly conduct foreign policy without being arrested or assassinated by Israel remains important.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{17} “Hizballah, Hamas Delegations Hold Talks in Tehran.”
\textsuperscript{18} “Palestinian Hamas to Open Office in Tehran.”
\textsuperscript{19} “Rockets from Gaza.”
\textsuperscript{20} Colvin, “Hamas Wages Iran’s Proxy War on Israel.”
\textsuperscript{21} “Rockets from Gaza.”
\textsuperscript{22} United States Embassy, “Cable 09TELAIV422, IDF DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF DISCUSSES GAZA OPERATION.”
\textsuperscript{23} Interview, Abu al Abed, Hamas political officer, Bourj al Barajneh refugee camp, Lebanon.
Finally, both Hamas and Hizbullah benefitted from their relationship with one another. Hamas was able to expand its influence in Lebanon by operating under Hizbullah’s umbrella, and Hizbullah was able to gain greater credibility among Lebanon’s Palestinians by supporting the hardline Palestinian factions like Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC.) Outside the PFLP-GC offices in Bourj al Barajneh refugee camp, I once saw a large billboard with pictures of Hassan Nasrullah, Ahmed Yassin, and Ahmed Jibril (founder of the PFLP-GC), that said, in Arabic, “from Lebanon to Palestine, the resistance is one.”

In sum, a broader characterization of the regional alignment prior to 2011 would be Syria, Iran, Hizbullah, and Hamas (a grouping which Hizbullah now refers to as the “axis of resistance”, a term which I am using retroactively to describe the pre-2011 alliance) against the status quo forces represented by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Fatah, and their Lebanese allies in the Mustaqbal party. All parties involved clearly benefitted from membership in this axis, including Hamas and Hizbullah, both of which received resources that helped them to pursue their local goals: not only funding for their social service apparatus, but also weaponry with which to confront Israel. If those were the only concerns driving their alliance behavior, we would perhaps expect both to have remained members of this axis regardless of the changes in the region created by the Arab Spring, especially since while funding may perhaps be replaceable by another patron, weapons often are not. But as proto-state actors, both Hamas and Hizbullah have concerns that extend far beyond their own backyards. Both see themselves as regional, as well as local, actors, and as such, reacted quite differently to the regional realignment that began in the winter of 2011.

**Regional Realignment during the Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring changed the alliance structures of the Middle East in several fundamental ways. Most significantly, it created a new Sunni Islamist axis. Under the previous alignment, the various Muslim Brotherhood chapters across the region had operated largely autonomously from one another. There was certainly sympathy between them, and at times some regional chapters were able to leverage support for a neighboring movement for their own political gain. This was most true in Jordan, where
the Islamic Action Front, the political party affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, enjoyed a boost in their own fortunes when public sympathy for Hamas increased. (At least, the leadership believed this to be the case.) Similarly, they helped collect charitable donations for Palestinians in Gaza which were then distributed via Hamas’s charitable network. But for the most part, the Muslim Brotherhood branches in each country tended to function as independent organizations struggling for survival. There was a very limited degree to which they were able to coordinate at a regional level in any meaningful way. Perhaps the starkest indicator is actually Hamas’ willingness to ally with Syria in the early 1990s, despite Syria’s brutal repression of its own Muslim Brotherhood chapter during the Hama massacre in 1982.

The Arab Spring changed this. As the governments in Tunisia and Egypt fell, the Islamic opposition parties seized the opportunity and quickly ascended to political power. This was probably more reflective of broader structural and political conditions in these states than of a broad sympathy for the Islamist political project, but they were nevertheless quite successful. In Yemen, the Al Islah party quickly became the center of the pro-democracy opposition, as the most organized of the opposition parties. (It also benefitted from the leadership of Tawwakul Karman, a prominent press freedom activist and the first Arab woman to receive a Nobel peace prize.) In both Tunisia and Egypt elections were held hastily, before the progressive or secular opposition had much chance to organize. The Islamist parties, which had managed to survive underground through a combination of coordination from abroad (the primary strategy of Tunisia’s al Nahda), the use of the mosque network to organize (in both Egypt and Tunisia), and a degree of accommodation with the regime (primarily in Egypt) were better placed to compete than any of their rivals.

These parties were further advantaged by the support they received from the Gulf States, who presumably decided that if there were going to be elections in the Arab world, that they would at least like to influence the result. (This was hardly a new strategy; during the 2009 elections in Lebanon, the Saudi government helped pay for tens of thousands of expatriate Lebanese who were likely to vote for the Saudi-aligned March 14th coalition to fly back to Lebanon to vote.) The Qatari and Saudi governments

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24 Interview, Zaki bin Rsheid, IAF Secretary General, 2009, Amman, Jordan.
embraced the new Islamist governments in Tunisia and Egypt, insofar as they hoped to be able to advance their own agenda through them, as did the government of Turkey. In short, by the end of 2011, a new, Islamist regional axis had emerged. This represented an alternative to both the secular-nationalist, pro-Western governments in Jordan, the West Bank, and Morocco (and should it ever stabilize sufficiently to actually formulate a foreign policy, the new government in Libya), and to the Syrian-Iranian “axis of resistance.”

At the same time, given the serious challenge it posed (and still poses) to the Asad regime, the Syrian civil war also threatened a potentially serious weakening for the axis of resistance itself. The war has had a number of consequences for the regime’s place in the region. Most obviously, its control over substantial amounts of territory has been weakened, either in the short or the long term. This is particularly true in the north, along the border with Turkey. While no single new authority has risen to take its place in these areas, a number of border crossings were taken over by FSA forces, and then by ISIS. Moreover, both the US and EU have sought (with limited success) find alternative leadership that they could recognize as a government in exile.

The war has also left Syria with hostile states on two of its borders. The already-mutually-suspicious relationship between Jordan and Syria has been badly damaged, with Jordanian and Syrian troops exchanging fire over the border on multiple occasions, and FSA troops being trained on Jordanian soil, although a shared antagonism toward ISIS may provide grounds for a rapprochement in the future. Relations with Turkey, once quite warm, have become adversarial. When Syria shot down a Turkish jet over international waters in July 2012, open hostilities seemed, albeit briefly, quite possible. Both of these states have now openly lined up against the Syrian regime and in favor of the FSA.

More broadly, the war has generated a serious crisis of legitimacy for the Asad regime. This partly stems from the atrocities the Syrian military has committed against civilians, including the sieges of Aleppo, Homs, and Hama, siege and bombardment of civilian areas of Damascus (including the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp) the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta, and alleged massacres in villages across the country. (That

25 Burch and Holmes, “Syria Downs Turkish Jet, Ankara to Act Decisively.”
rebel forces have likewise committed atrocities may lessen their own legitimacy, but does not necessarily bolster that of the regime itself.) This is compounded by the increasingly sectarian tone of the conflict, in which the rhetoric of Sunnis versus Shi’ites has been enthusiastically embraced by some of the more radical takfiri factions. These groups, backed largely by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, stand in opposition to the more secular FSA, supported by Jordan and Turkey.

The narrative of a Sunni majority rising up against a minority regime has been used by regime critics in the past. In the 1970s, one particularly potent critique leveled against Hafez al Asad by political opponents was that his sect, the Alawites, were not even Muslim (and that, by implication, he and his family were unfit to rule a Muslim country.) Asad’s response was to reach out to his regional allies. Imam Musa Sadr, leader of the Shi’ite community in Lebanon, issued a fatwa stating that the Alawites were, in fact, Twelver Shi’ites. This had the effect of not only strengthening the Asad regime’s Islamic legitimacy, but also of cementing its alliance with the Shi’ites of Lebanon. That being said, however, prior to the onset of the civil war there was little by way of sectarian violence in Syria, and the Sunni-Shi’ite division as it exists in the region today did not represent a major political fault-line in Syria.

In sum, the Arab Spring has reoriented the strategic alignment of the Middle East in major ways. While prior to the uprising the two major axes were the pro-Western, Gulf-dominated axis vs. the Syrian-Iranian “axis of resistance”, the Arab Spring created a new option: a Sunni Islamist axis, backed by some parties in the Gulf States, but not conservative status quo states like Jordan or by the Fatah-dominated government in the West Bank. Insofar as these parties could credibly claim to be democratizers, they were also able to claim support from Turkey, although in Syria, Turkey has chosen to back the secular FSA. The civil war in Syria, meanwhile, has weakened the Asad regime and its atrocities against (Sunni) civilians have cost it much of the pan-Arabist legitimacy it previously was able to generate through its stance against Israel.

**Hizbullah, Hamas, and the Arab Spring**

Hamas and Hizbullah’s responses to the regional upheaval brought about by the Arab Spring have been quite different. Hizbullah’s approach has been to recommit to
their relationship with Syria and Iran. This has come at no small domestic cost, but makes sense given their understanding of their place in the larger regional alliance structure. Hamas, meanwhile, has broken with Syria and allied itself with what appeared for a time to be an emerging Muslim Brotherhood axis in Egypt.

When fighting first broke out in Syria, Hizbullah expressed support for the Asad regime, but refrained from openly committing Hizbullah’s forces. From the early days of the civil war, Hassan Nasrullah, Hizbullah’s charismatic leader, sought to bolster the Asad regime’s flagging Arab nationalist legitimacy, speaking of the need to preserve the Asad regime as part of the axis of resistance against Israel. By the summer of 2012, rumors were already circulating in Beirut of coffins containing the bodies of fallen Hizbullah fighters coming back through the Bekaa valley from Syria. But for the first two years of the war, Hizbullah’s leadership refused to acknowledge their fighters’ involvement.

Their reasons for doing so make sense in the context of Lebanese politics. Despite the power-sharing agreement signed in Doha in 2008, tensions in Lebanon remain high between the Hizbullah-dominated March 8th bloc and the Sunni-dominated March-14th bloc. These tensions have only been exacerbated by the civil war in Syria, in which the two Lebanese factions have backed opposite sides, though both have publicly pledged to keep Lebanon uninvolved. The massive flood of Syrian refugees into Lebanon (at present constituting something like 25% of the country’s population) has further destabilized the situation, especially given that many have sought refuge in the northern city of Tripoli, whose predominantly Sunni population has long harbored a grudge against the Asad dynasty for the atrocities committed there by the Syrian army in the 1970s. Clashes had already occurred between the Sunni neighborhood of Bab al Tabbaneh and the neighboring Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen even prior to the onset of the war in Syria, and the war itself served to further escalate tensions, leading to escalating clashes between the two.

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26 Some of these rumors were recounted to me personally that summer by journalists and local political figures in Beirut.
27 The Daily Star, “Two Grenades Fired into Tripoli’s Jabal Mohsen District.”
28 BBC, “Deadly Clashes over Syria in Lebanese City of Tripoli.”
Meanwhile, Hizbullah was facing a number of other challenges. By 2012, it was experiencing new levels of internal opposition from within the Shi’ite community, from clans in the Bekaa who were increasingly reluctant to accept Hizbullah’s authority over their business dealings (both legitimate and otherwise) in Beirut. The indictments of several of its members by the international tribunal investigating the Hariri assassination were looming. And much of the legitimacy it had gained as a result of its performance in the 2006 July War against Israel had been wiped out by its takeover of West Beirut in 2008 and what many saw as its increasingly heavy-handed political tactics in Lebanon. In the midst of all this, then, it is perhaps understandable that the organization’s leadership would seek to maintain, at the very least, plausible deniability regarding its involvement in Syria.

But in late April 2013, this policy was abandoned. Hasan Nasrullah gave a speech in which he confirmed for the first time that Hizbullah’s fighters were active in Syria, fighting alongside the Syrian military. Soon afterward, Hizbullah openly acknowledged its fighters’ critical role in recapturing Qusayr, a strategic village on the border, from the FSA. Hizbullah’s involvement was framed by both its leadership and its media apparatus (in particular al Manar, its satellite station) as a necessary step in preserving the Axis of Resistance for the fight against Israel, but it was also clear that this was about preserving the Asad regime itself. Hizbullah had clearly doubled down on its alliance with Asad, committing itself more strongly than ever to maintaining its alliance with Syria and Iran. Its fighters have clearly proved to be a significant military asset to the Syrian regime (at least in part because they are far less likely to defect than are Syrian soldiers,) and at least in the short term, the gamble may have paid off.

Hamas’ response was very different. Whereas Hizbullah recommitted to its alliance with Syria and Iran, Hamas abandoned this alliance entirely. In February of 2012, less than a year after the onset of the civil war, Hamas formally broke with the Asad regime (although it had unofficially moved its headquarters from Damascus to Doha and Cairo months earlier). This constituted a major rebuke to the Asad regime, and cost it dearly in terms of its wider Arab legitimacy. In a speech at the Al Azhar mosque in Cairo, Ismail Haniyeh, prime minister of the

29 As reported by residents of Dahiyeh in informal conversations with the author in July 2012.
30 BBC, “Deadly Clashes over Syria in Lebanese City of Tripoli.”
Hamas government of Gaza, said “I salute all people of the Arab Spring, or Islamic winter, and I salute the Syrian people who seek freedom, democracy and reform.” In the streets, Egyptians chanted against the Syrian government, Iran, and Hizbullah. Hamas’ stance only hardened over the following year, as fighting in Syria continued. Repeated attacks on the Yarmouk refugee camp by regime forces (claiming that FSA fighters were using the camps as a base) further heightened tension between the two. After shelling by the army led to “dozens” of casualties, the Al Qassem brigades, Hamas’ military wing, posted a statement condemning the attacks on its website.

There are clearly domestic political factors that contributed to this choice (see below). Association with the Asad regime was no longer an asset in Palestinian domestic politics, given the increasingly sectarian rhetoric surrounding the conflict and particularly the attacks on the refugee camps. But this decision did not come without significant costs, which also harmed its local political interests. One of Hamas’ main domestic priorities is to keep its government apparatus in Gaza up and running, which obviously includes being able to pay civil servants, members of the security forces, and other public employees. A second major priority is maintaining the ability to launch retaliatory attacks against Israel. Though it has generally chosen not to do so in recent years, being able to do so more effectively than its domestic rivals, like Islamic Jihad and the various would-be-Al Qaeda mini-factions currently proliferating in Gaza is a key advantage in maintaining its dominance in Gaza. For both of these priorities, it has leaned quite heavily on Iran in recent years. But the break with Syria also meant a break with the “Axis of Resistance” more broadly, which included a marked cooling in the relationship between Hamas and Iran – the movement’s offices in Tehran no longer even have a permanent representative.

The severing of this relationship carried substantial costs for Hamas. Iranian funding, amounting to as much as $25 million a month, was crucial to the continued operations of the Hamas government in Gaza, particularly given the and was sharply reduced after the break with Syria. There is recent evidence, as of July 2014, that Iran has resumed weapons sales to

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31 Akram, “Hamas Supports Syrian Opposition.”
32 “Hamas Condemns Syrian Aerial Bombing of Yarmouk Refugee Camp - Ezzedeen Al-Qassam Brigades.”
33 Tait, “Iran Cuts Hamas Funding over Syria.”
34 Ibid.
35 Akram, “Hamas Supports Syrian Opposition.”
Hamas, in the form of M-302 missiles launched at Israeli targets during Operation Defensive Edge, but funding remains much reduced. While it is conceivable, and even likely, that Hamas was confident of finding a new patron to provide them with funding, it is extremely unlikely that any other sponsor will be as generous in providing the military assets, such as arms and training, which Iran has historically provided.

In sum, both Hamas and Hizbullah made decisions which make very little sense if we assume that they are motivated primarily by the demands of their respective conflicts with Israel. Hizbullah has weakened its already fragile position in Lebanon and Hamas has lost a major source of funding and weapons. But this decision is far less surprising if we view both organizations not as purely local nonstate actors, but as regional proto-state actors instead.

Explaining proto-state actor realignment in the context of the Arab Spring

Both Hizbullah and Hamas’ alliance behavior makes far more sense if we accept that each organization sees itself as more than simply a resistance or insurgent group. While some militias may be so focused on their conflict with their primary adversary that it constitutes the sole determinant of their alliance behavior, larger, more complex organizations like Hamas and Hizbullah balance a range of domestic concerns with equally complex issues of foreign policy. In this, they resemble states far more than purely national or local gangs or rebel movements.

For Hizbullah, despite the domestic costs of not only remaining loyal to Asad but also fighting openly alongside the Syrian military, remaining within the axis of resistance makes foreign policy sense for a number of reasons. The first is that Syria constitutes an important corridor for the transfer of arms from Iran to Hizbullah; the loss of that route would be very damaging. But that alone does not explain Hizbullah’s commitment to the alliance. Perhaps most importantly, it allows Hizbullah to remain part of a wider regional alliance. Despite an attempt to frame the liberation of Palestine (and specifically Jerusalem) as a pan-Islamic (and in the case of Hizbullah, pan-Arab) issue, as a means of building bridges to the non-Shi’ite Arab world, both Iran and Hizbullah have historically felt somewhat isolated regionally. Syria, despite being ruled by an Alawite dynasty, has far more substantial pan-Arab credentials, rooted in its (albeit brief) membership in United Arab Republic, Hafez al Asad’s support for various
Palestinian militias, and its consistent leadership role in military confrontation with Israel. Preserving the Asad regime in Syria is therefore important in maintaining a wider, more credible, “axis of resistance”, rather than a mere alliance among Shi’ites. It is also about a commitment to the ideology of resistance as a broader project, one that is not the exclusive property of the Sunni Arab world that the alliance with Syria represents.

It was also important for Hizbullah to demonstrate this commitment openly, both to the Asad regime itself and to its adversaries in the civil war. The serious domestic political consequences attached to fighting openly alongside the Syrian military, rather than trying to maintain plausible deniability, meant that in doing so Hizbullah was able to signal the seriousness of its commitment.

This is not to suggest, however, that Hizbullah’s support for the regime constitutes a purely symbolic gesture. To the contrary, it has proved to be a major military asset. While the Syrian army itself has been plagued by desertion and the defection of high ranking officers to the FSA, Hizbullah fighters are essentially guaranteed to remain loyal. As a highly competent guerrilla force, they may serve as an example to the regime’s own irregular forces, which had been accused of brutalizing and therefore alienating the civilian population. And, perhaps most importantly, in engaging militarily in Syria Hizbullah has been able to lessen the regime’s isolation by demonstrating that it has allies – without the need to involve Iran. While Hizbullah may be a Shi’ite organization (which, as noted above, brings with it its own challenges) it is also an Arab organization, with a strong record against Israel. While reports on Al Jazeera of Hizbullah fighters clashing with Syrian rebels may not do the regime many favors in some quarters, as the crowds in Cairo chanting anti-Hizbullah slogans after Haniyeh’s speech suggest, this is still far less damaging than images of Iranian revolutionary guards firing on Syrians would be. In fighting openly alongside the Syrian army, Hizbullah demonstrates its commitment to both the Asad regime and to the “axis of resistance” as a wider alliance. It also makes it somewhat more likely that both will be preserved. For Hizbullah, these regional foreign policy issues are clearly just as important as more local political concerns. Moreover, despite attempts to link the fighting in Syria to its larger resistance project, at least for the time being the war in Syria has clearly eclipsed its conflict with Israel in importance. Just as states pursue different priorities at different times, so, apparently, does Hizbullah.
Hamas’ decision to flee its alliance with Syria likewise reflects a concern with regional politics that balances against the imperatives of domestic politics. Abandoning Syria has cost Hamas dearly in terms of its alliance with Iran and the weapons, funding, and training that came with it, a significant sacrifice given their local priorities. But ultimately, the desire to be a part of an emerging regional axis which felt like a more natural “fit” for Hamas trumped either gratitude to Iran or practical considerations regarding access to weapons in the future. The chance to join a new, Islamist axis proved far more appealing for Hamas than remaining with its existing allies.

This was likely motivated at least in part by concerns with domestic public opinion. The Asad regime has become unpopular in the Sunni Arab world more broadly, including among Palestinians -- a public opinion poll in March 2012 put Palestinian support for the Syrian opposition at 83%. This likely made the decision easier than it would have been, for example, when Hizbullah’s stock was at an all-time high following the July War, and an alliance with them carried significant domestic political cache. Moreover, Hamas’ leadership certainly must have believed that with an Islamist government in Egypt, there was a real chance that the siege of Gaza might be relieved through a more open border with Egypt (although in fact, conditions at the Rafah border did not appreciably improve after Morsi’s rise to power.)

But there were also apparently broader regional considerations at play. Part of this likely stems from a basic ideological preference on the part of Hamas’s leadership, as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, to join an alliance of like-minded states, even at the expense of access to arms in the long run. (Even when the Muslim Brotherhood was in power, it was quite clear that they had little interest in initiating a conflict with Israel by openly arming Hamas.) But perhaps more importantly, joining an alliance composed of more “mainstream” Arab states, like Egypt and Qatar, held the promise of greater legitimacy for Hamas. This is appealing not only because it improves their position vis a vis their rivalry with Fatah, but because it holds the promise of greater leverage in any eventual negotiations with Israel as well as greater recognition.

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36 PSR Poll No. 43 - Press Release. Interestingly, in the same poll, which was held after Haniyeh’s speech in Egypt, only 44% of respondents said they believed that Hamas supported the Syrian opposition, while 24% said they believed they were still allied with Asad, and 24% were uncertain.

37 “Hamas Official Asks Morsi to Lift Restrictions on Gaza Border - Al-Monitor.”
of their government in Gaza. In short, the demands that Hamas faced as a government ultimately outweighed its priorities as a militia.

**Conclusion**

None of this is meant to suggest that either Hamas or Hizbullah have ceased to be motivated by the imperatives of their protracted conflict with Israel. For Hamas in particular, this is a reality that remains a major part of their political calculus. But it is equally clear that both organizations have grown beyond their local origins. Hamas began life as the armed wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza, largely concerned with launching attacks against Israel and exploiting the upheaval of the first intifada to wrest a larger share of the Palestinian political market from the PLO. Hizbullah, in its early years, was largely focused on attacking the IDF forces based in southern Lebanon, kidnapping Westerners as bargaining chips, and setting fire to the occasional liquor store in West Beirut. Both have evolved over the years into far more complex organizations, which in some of their decision making resemble states more than nonstate actors. Their responses to the Arab Spring reflect these complex priorities.

This carries interesting implications for our understanding of such organizations. It suggests that some of the analytical tools we use to explain foreign policy decision-making by states may also be useful for understanding proto-state actors, in the Middle East and elsewhere. Work that seeks to understand foreign policy making as the outcome of local political competition or intra-party rivalries can help us understand how factional competition within the proto-state actor shapes its policy-making. In particular, work on bureaucratic politics may be especially useful, from Allison’s classic work to more recent work that suggests that a marketplace of ideas may actually produce better policies. Secondly, work on rentier states may also have some interesting implications for the behavior of proto-state actors who are heavily dependent on funding by foreign sponsors, and therefore less beholden to public opinion than those who rely on donations or local “taxes.”

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having to fundraise locally are more likely to end up with fighters motivated by greed, and more likely to brutalize civilians.)^{39}

It also suggests that for states seeking to formulate responses to these organizations’ operations, a framework that takes into account their multiple motivations may be more useful than one which assumes a singular focus on “resistance”, regardless of the organization’s own rhetoric. And, finally, it suggests that as alignment in the region continues to shift, Hamas in particular may find itself seeking new ways to balance its domestic and regional imperatives. The region’s Islamic parties, which seemed ascendant only a year ago, are now in difficult straits. Mohammed Morsi has been deposed in Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood once again outlawed following massacres of its members by the military. In Tunisia, protests against Al Nahda have forced the party to agree to a transfer of power to a neutral caretaker government and a new constitution, balancing secular-liberal and Islamic principles, has been passed. Even in Turkey, corruption scandals and street protests have placed Recep Tayyep Erdogan’s AKP party on the defensive. Hamas may find that it needs to once again adjust its alliances. It remains clear, however, that the Arab Spring, and particularly the Syrian civil war, has had a strong impact on alliance patterns in the region, for both states and proto-state actors.

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