

Birth Pangs or Last Rites

Democracy in Lebanon: Between the Hammer of Israel and the Anvil of Hezbollah

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Factual Prologue

More than 700 innocent civilians killed
More than 3000 innocent civilians injured
More than 1 Million innocent civilians displaced
... on both sides of the Israeli-Lebanese border!

Why?

Hezbollah says to liberate 3 prisoners held by Israel.

More than an airport hit
More than 100 bridges destroyed
More than 50,000 homes demolished
More than ¼ of Lebanon burned

Why?

Hezbollah says to liberate a sliver of land in Shebaa, occupied by Israel.

More than 5 kilo tons of Israeli bombs dropped on Lebanon
More than 3 weeks of Israeli siege of Lebanese cities
More than 10 Billion dollars in losses to the Lebanese economy
About 2000 Katyusha missiles randomly thrown at Israel

Why?

Hezbollah says its arms are protecting Lebanon.

What does Israel say?

It is protecting itself from a rogue terrorist militia that attacked its Northern border. Civilian casualties are unavoidable in a war.

What does the United States say?

"These are the birth pangs of the New Middle East."

Calls for ceasefire by the United Nations fall on deaf ears.

In Lebanon, the Siniora government seems at a complete loss as if it is growing more irrelevant day after day:

On the second day of hostilities, the Siniora cabinet disavowed Hezbollah's attack on Israel.

On the second week, Siniora thanked Hassan Nasrallah and the "men of the resistance."

Dreams and Nightmares

At the receiving end of this violence is the poor ordinary Lebanese citizen, whose hopes for a peaceful and prosperous life in Lebanon were shattered by a war in which he [the Lebanese] had no say; like a lamb that is led to slaughter. Why?

It may be that one night, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah had a dream; when he woke up, he decided it is time to kidnap an Israeli soldier. What did he see in his dream? Perhaps the aura of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad calling on him to strike at Israel: "we need to relieve the pressure off the Islamic Resistance in Gaza" he said to him; "we need to exert pressure on the West as Iran goes nuclear; come on Hassan, show me some fireworks, prove your loyalty to me." Or perhaps he just saw himself teasing the Israelis in a game of Cowboys and Indians (Heroes and Thieves as we call it in Lebanon).

Next morning a Lebanese nightmare began...

When Prime Minister Siniora condemned Hezbollah's initial act, on behalf of all Lebanese, most Lebanese stood behind him. Many of them went even further and openly questioned the motives and timing of Hezbollah. Of course none of them meant to send an open invitation to Israel to destroy Lebanon.

But now Israel has destroyed Lebanon, or most of it... in retaliation to an act of war. Or so declares its Prime Minister Ehud Olmert!

The armed "Islamic Resistance in Lebanon" failed to protect Lebanon from the F-16s of the Israeli Air Force and the kilo tons of bombs they dumped on our houses and infrastructure. Nasrallah's Katyushas, thrown randomly at Israeli towns, could not stop the Israeli death machine from killing the children of Qana. The arms of Hezbollah, peddled for long at the Lebanese collective psyche as a necessary component of our defense system against invaders, turn out to be the trigger for a large scale catastrophe the likes of which Lebanon has not seen since its civil war. This so-called "Resistance Movement" marketed proudly as the immune system that was supposed to protect us from Israeli violations of our borders became overnight an auto-immune disease that triggered unprecedented violations of our homes, cities, lands, air and sea. Thus, a radical treatment is required before this disease threatens the fabric of our nation and kills our whole body.

Three weeks into a war in which Israel has strangled the whole country and destroyed most of its infrastructure, Hezbollah's leadership insists on continuing the fight. They refuse to concede defeat and graciously bow out in order to save whatever is left of the people's dignity and their property, and insist on absurdly dragging this uneven confrontation. For the sake of those clinging to life in Lebanon, and out of respect to the few ounces of dignity left in the Lebanese society, the Lebanese people scream ENOUGH!

Enough of Hezbollah, and Hezbollah's arms; enough of Hezbollah's rhetoric and its ideology of hate; enough of Hezbollah's leadership and its affability to Syria and Iran

Enough Israeli brutality and viciousness; enough Israeli cruelty and mass murder; enough Israeli revenge upon the innocents; the Israeli targets should have been in Damascus or Teheran not in Qana and Beirut.

Enough hesitation on the part of the Lebanese Parliament (Speaker Berri) and the Siniora Government: is Lebanon a party to this war or is it not? Are we one nation or are we not? The Lebanese people are entitled to know where their government and their representatives stand in this war.

Is Hezbollah fighting a war on behalf of the Lebanese constitutional government? If yes, then Lebanon (the Army and the people) must join Hezbollah and officially enter the war against Israel; declare war officially and call upon all the people to march. Either we die together or we win together. It should not be allowed for any regional power to single out a community or a group in Lebanon for war or genocide, while the rest sit and watch.

On the other hand, is Hezbollah fighting for an agenda different than that of the Lebanese Government? If yes, then perhaps it may be wise to join the war on the other side and finish Hezbollah. It should not be allowed for any local group or community to drag all of Lebanon and its communities in a war of attrition - no matter what the banners are - on behalf of a foreign agenda.

This may sound suicidal and rather simplistic to a few critics; I like to remind those critics that we live in the era of George W. Bush. Political strategy in this era is quite linear and the more aligned we are with George's view of the world, the better suited we are to win.

The Lebanese Government is called upon to make a choice:

- 1) Declare war on Israel,
- 2) Declare war on Hezbollah, or
- 3) Step aside and concede power to Hassan Nasrallah.

So far the Government has not done any of the above and does not seem to be doing anything. There is a saying in "Lebanese" that when refined translates to English as follows: "You don't do this, you don't do that and you don't step aside for others to do this or that." [*An attempt at laughter in times of sorrow*] A clear decision is needed; for this war must end and must end soon. This end had better bring a decisive victory for Lebanon.

Bad Habits

Recently, his Excellency Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah has taken to the habit of making regular appearances on TV, and "truthful promises" of longer range missiles that will strike against the heart of Israel: *First it was Haifa, then beyond Haifa, then beyond beyond Haifa ... and now Tel Aviv!*

[Incidentally, he reminds me a lot of a General who used to deliver daily war speeches some 17 years ago as he fought a war of liberation with another neighbor. The difference is, that General was not in the Islamic Resistance; so many Muslims at the time found it expedient to fight against him.] - A minor digression.

Well, the "truthful promises" of his Excellency are bringing more and more destruction on Lebanon. His random missiles on Israel may scratch a window here or burn a shrub there, but the fact is that Hezbollah has not been able to deal a direct hit to any army base inside Israel. On the other hand, for every one of Nasrallah's missiles, the Israeli Defense Forces have flattened a building or destroyed a bridge in Lebanon. The acclaimed triumphs of the Islamic Resistance have so far given Israel an open invitation to destroy more and more of Lebanon's infrastructure. The radicals in Iran, Syria and Palestine may be cheering Nasrallah but the Lebanese people want him to stop.

Mr. Nasrallah: if you truly want victory for Lebanon and for the Lebanese people, stop making empty rhetorical speeches, lay down your arms, take a sabbatical leave in Iran [take the General with you] and let the Siniora Government handle the recovery process and lead the country to a real dignified victory.

The Roadmap to Victory

The Siniora Government can lead the Lebanese people to a dignified victory by working with the international community to bring forth the following goals:

- 1- Disarmament (voluntary or by force) of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias, armed groups, resistance movements (Islamic, heretic or other) operating in Lebanon; this includes Hezbollah, the Palestinian groups outside AND inside the camps, and any other group that may have acquired or may be currently in the process of acquiring arms. If the Lebanese Government cannot do it by itself, it should call on the World to help
- 2- Withdrawal of Israeli troops from all the Lebanese occupied territories including the Shebaa farms and the Hills of Kafarshouba
- 3- Deployment of an international strike force under mandate from the United Nations Security Council to help the Lebanese Army protect the Lebanese borders from Israeli violation and Syrian infiltration
- 4- Rehabilitation of the Lebanese Army and deployment thereof over all the Lebanese international borders from South to North.
- 5- Return of all civilians displaced by war to their homes and lands
- 6- Initiation of a rebuilding plan for South Lebanon and all the devastated areas similar to the Marshall Plan that followed World War II
- 7- Exchange of prisoners between Israel and Lebanon as Lebanon asserts its sovereignty over all its territories

After implementing all of the above and setting the country on a path to recovery, it will become necessary to call for parliamentary elections and form a new government which can begin negotiations for peace with the State of Israel.

Many points in the Roadmap to Victory may sound extreme to a few, particularly the disarmament voluntarily or by force of all groups outside the Lebanese army. Sadly, the feared disaster has already happened; Hezbollah has forced the choice upon Lebanon. For more than a year, the Siniora government has been walking the road of soft diplomacy with Hezbollah to protect it and bring it within mainstream Lebanese politics. Siniora's Government was forced time and again to absorb blame and alienation for not spreading Lebanese sovereignty into South Lebanon. Well, the time for soft diplomacy with Hezbollah is over. Lebanon cannot survive with a rogue militia on its territory sporadically spreading terror on its neighbors under the rubrics and banners of the Islamic Resistance. Our history with these rogue groups has been one of disaster.

Lebanon will not survive if the rhetoric of Hassan Nasrallah and his random missiles are to prevail. Hezbollah's arms have taken us so far into a quagmire of destruction, isolation and attrition; if left unchecked, they will drag us into the hell of a new civil war. Al-Qaeda elements are reportedly getting ready to move from Baghdad to Beirut; Syria officially declared them present in Lebanon. The Sunnite-Shiite war that Mr. Siniora may be trying to avoid by appeasing Hezbollah is already on its way from Iraq. The best way to prevent it is to be tough on radical groups of all sides. We cannot control the behavior of Israel or Iran and certainly not of the United States, but we should be able to control the behavior of our own. The arms of Hezbollah, if not taken away following this external show of terror (balance of terror!), will have to be taken away later in an internal balance.

A Glimpse of Hope... and a Word of Caution

Through the darkness of this ugly war, shines the beauty of the Lebanese spirit: an unprecedented solidarity of the Lebanese people, across all religious and civil walks of life, with their displaced brethren from South Lebanon and the Southern Suburb. Lebanese all over the world are up in arms to help their fellow Lebanese in their plight. In all the previous wars over the past 30 years, large scale evacuation and assistance plans followed sectarian lines; not this time!

This solidarity among the people and against the Israeli aggression should never be mistaken as solidarity behind the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon or its agenda. In fact, many Lebanese have mixed emotions about this war: on one hand they abhor what Israel has done to their country and dread a defeat at the hands of the Israeli army, but on the other they realize that this is the only way to "tame the shrew." A final showdown with Hezbollah is unavoidable in order to disarm it.

A Message to President Bush

The civilians in Lebanon have suffered a lot in recent history. They had barely begun to breathe the air of freedom from 30 years of Syrian occupation when they found themselves again hostages of a war not of their choice. The toll in civilian casualties is huge; mass destruction of the country is unbelievably gargantuan and the promise of more destruction seems inevitable. It is certainly an unusually heavy price for any people to pay for their freedom. Many blame the United States for flaming the fires of this war; the declared position of the Bush administration seems to support this proposition.

If the United States indeed views this war as the "birth pangs of a new Middle East" and of democracy and freedom in Lebanon then it must see to it that the job is finished properly along the goals set forth in the Roadmap to Victory. The United States must initiate a plan to help rebuild Lebanon's infrastructure and economy and must shoulder the heaviest burden in financing it. After all, it is the United States ally and protégé in the Middle East, Israel, which directly caused the destruction.

It will be a travesty of political strategy and a tragedy of gigantic proportions if this war were to stop without a clear and decisive plan to build the peace. One of the ironic twists of history is that the Lebanese people are dragged every now and then into international and regional conflicts and Lebanon is turned into a stage to settle foreign disputes: Lebanon has been a hot stage for the cold war, a stage for Israeli-Arab conflicts, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Israeli-Syrian arm wrestle, and today many fear it has become a stage to settle American-Iranian accounts. It is the role of the Bush administration to dissipate these fears and disprove the cynics.

Unless the United States has every intention of finishing what it pushed for in Lebanon and seeing to it that a true and free democracy emerges from underneath the rubble, it must do the humane thing and push Israel to stop and spare Lebanon further destruction. Maybe then the Lebanese people could have a moment of peace to give their hopes and aspirations for freedom, peace and democracy their proper last rites.

For the sake of posterity, let's hope it is birth pangs of a new, sovereign and final Democracy.

** The voice of one... or may be of thousands.*