

LEBANON

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# Futile Victory

For the third time in less than two years, Beirut has been turned into a battleground, with Hizbollah and the opposition taking over the city. The government and its allies did not engage militarily, managing to avoid civil war and becoming a regional battlefield. The Arab League is now trying to sort things out, highlighting the regional and international dimensions.

**t**HE ARMED TAKEOVER OF LARGE PARTS OF Beirut and the Shuf mountains by Hizbollah, in reaction to a government decision to investigate its security and communications infrastructure, has wider regional and international significance. It is a challenge to international policy reflected in United Nations Security Council and Arab League resolutions. It is also to be seen in the context of an internal political debate about the reliability of the international community in protecting the country since Syria withdrew in April 2005.

The deadlock also reflects a regional balance of power where western policy is both at its strongest in Lebanon and also faces the most powerful opposition from

groups backed by Iran and Syria. But what matters with any military victory is whether it can be translated into a political one and this time Hizbollah may have crossed a line that would be a political liability.

## EXIT SYRIA?

The Franco-American initiative to challenge Syrian control over Lebanon came soon after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when relations between the two countries were at their worst. In the summer of 2004 they both sponsored what became UN Security Council Resolution 1559, targeting not only Syrian intervention in the country but also calling for the disarmament of Syrian-sponsored groups there. These include Palestinian organisations under its control and Hizbollah, a contingent of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, established at the frontline of its confrontation with the United States and Israel.

Four years later, Syria has withdrawn, but the crisis continues. There have been several assassinations of anti-Syrian politicians and journalists, a dozen Security Council resolutions and two wars in the middle of the last two years. They were caused by the same pro-Syrian groups that were targeted by Resolution 1559: the 2006 war with Israel was triggered by a Hizbollah attack, and the 2007 war against Fateh al Islam armed and facilitated by Syria through its proxies the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command and Fateh al Intifada, which was created in the 1980s to fight Syria's battle with former Palestine Liberation Organisation Chairman Yasser Arafat.

## REGIONAL STALEMATE

Western policy towards Lebanon appears to be failing, but this policy is entirely different from the approach to other areas in the Middle East like Iraq and Palestine. There is transatlantic cooperation and multilateralism on Lebanon, with European and American leadership, as well as full Arab League support – except for Syria. Three UN institutions have been created for this purpose: a UN International Investigation Commission, a UN Special Tribunal and the UNIFIL force in south Lebanon.

If the US military presence in Iraq is a coalition of the willing, then UNIFIL in southern Lebanon represents a coalition of the un-willing and a perfect example of multilateralism. US policy in Lebanon is therefore more solid than in other areas of the Middle East where it follows US president George Bush's doctrine, which is unilateral, pre-emptive, by-passes the UN and has no European or Arab support.

If western policy in Lebanon is on a sure footing, the Iranian-Syrian front opposed to it is also equally strong there. In addition to Hizbollah and the Palestinian organisations, created and backed by Syria, there is firm local opposition, which has legitimate, popular support. Opinions vary, from suspicion of the US and France, to outright hostility.

The division in Lebanon is driven by an internal



political debate which intensified after Syrian withdrawal. The question that divides the country is whether an armed resistance movement like Hizbollah is needed. Does it deter or attract attacks? And is it able to protect from Israel, or is the protection of international legality, the international community, the US, the European Union, the Arab League and the UN enough? Can



international protection help solve problems like prisoners in Israeli jails or occupied land?

Ultimately this question also has to do with which side of the regional confrontation you are on: the US and its allies, or Iran and Syria. Needless to say, the failure of the international community to stop Israeli destruction of the country in the summer of 2006, together with what

is perceived as a military victory by Hizbollah, boosted the opposition. Hence the deadlock in Lebanon.

Confrontation is at its highest there with a more or less equal balance of power: the government having a majority of only two in parliament after the assassination of six members of parliament in the last few years. It is also where western policy is strongest and where the forces opposing that policy are most powerful.

Of the regional powers, Saudi Arabia has the highest stakes and its rivalry with Iran has been building there for twenty-five years. Iran invested in Hizbollah, whose project is to create Islamic resistance; and Saudi Arabia in Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, who was assassinated in 2005, and subsequently in the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. Their project is to revive the old model of a cosmopolitan Beirut, a pro-western Riviera of the eastern Mediterranean. The Hizbollah takeover of west Beirut is therefore equivalent, in regional terms, of an Iranian assault on the Saudi Arabian capital, Riyadh.

## RESISTANCE TURNS OCCUPIER

Events leading up to the attack on Beirut by Hizbollah in the first week of May are also significant. The government challenged Hizbollah's control of security at Beirut airport and launched an investigation into security cameras on the runways and on the group's bases. Hizbollah's leader, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, said this was exposing its defense capabilities and considered it tantamount to a declaration of war.

His militia launched an attack on west Beirut, ransacking the Future TV station set up by Hariri's son, Saad, his newspaper and offices of the Future movement, with numerous casualties. This was followed by an attack on the Shuf mountains, largely dominated by the supporters of the pro-government Druze leader, Walid Jumblat.

The surprise element in both these areas is that Hizbollah walked in largely unopposed, there were no rival militias to fight. Both Hariri and Jumblat issued instructions to their supporters not to enter into battle with Hizbollah or any other opposition forces, and to seek protection from the Lebanese army. Hizbollah, which has always justified itself as a resistance against occupation, became the occupier.

## GANDHI VS GENGHIS KHAN

The Lebanese government's priority is to manage the conflict at a political and diplomatic level and avoid military confrontation. The view is that, because of the regional and international dimensions, this cannot be resolved purely through internal politics. Maintaining the country in paralysis is thus a lesser evil than a full military confrontation and civil war, which can lead nowhere. The military option is also ruled out because of the armed superiority of Hizbollah and Syria's other proxies, which were all activated in the recent violence.

The idea is to fight politically, with international protection and explore ways of extracting the country from the regional

# Letter

Sir,

I enjoyed the oil centenary special in the May edition of The World Today, which was an original and insightful approach to the industry's history and present state.

However, I was a little disappointed not to see any mention of future issues facing the oil industry, in particular the likelihood of new oil fields in the Arctic that would tap the potentially massive oil and gas reserves below the Arctic seabed.

The impacts of the current diplomatic tussle over rights to extraction there may well be a major feature of the oil industry – and the wider international energy economy – in the coming decades, thus meriting discussion.

Hassan Joudi,  
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conflict, rather than allowing it to become a battlefield of that conflict, as in Iraq and Gaza.

The country is also perceived to be under siege from Syria, which is trying to regain its influence and neutralise the threats to its regime posed by the UN Tribunal, which is investigating Rafic Hariri's death. Beirut is now hostage to the military power of Hizbollah, which is armed by Iran and Syria and opposed to all international intervention in Lebanon.

This is a duel with the opposing forces choosing different weapons. Hizbollah reached for raw and brutal military power; the government and its allies decided on a political and diplomatic approach and did not fall into the trap of military confrontation. It is Gandhi versus Genghis Khan.

The government ultimately had to back down on the decisions on Hizbollah's infrastructure and put the matter in the hands of the army. What matters now is whether its military defeat and the victory of Hizbollah and their allies can be translated into political gains or losses, and by whom.

is that it may cause frustrated pro-government supporters to turn away to more radical positions and parties.

A division of power between the legitimate state and a state within a state is difficult to manage. What Hizbollah seems to seek is to be in charge of security – and ultimately foreign policy – while relegating the government's role to the economy and domestic issues. Hizbollah would then become like an army of occupation and is already pretending to dictate the terms to the tunes of Damascus and Tehran.

Politically, Hizbollah stands to lose much more than it gains from this operation. It has long promised that it will never turn its arms inside the country and that it is there as protection from an Israeli attack and as a resistance to occupation. That halo was lost in the occupation of Beirut and would be difficult to regain.

Hizbollah also turned the conflict into a sectarian one and there is a lot of concern about its totalitarian tendencies as a result of closing pro-government media and political party offices. But the takeover was also a failure because Hizbollah and the opposition militias could not govern the conquered territory and had to hand it back to the army. The futility of the exercise and the damage caused could backfire.

## DIALOGUE IN DOHA

The Arab League is again attempting to resolve the standoff by organising dialogue in Doha. The choices are difficult and have important wider regional implications. There are serious doubts about the effectiveness of the international community and its ability to provide credible protection and lead to stability.

It is a measure of the success of the government and its allies that it has managed to avoid civil war and to throw the ball outside the country, where the regional and international dimensions will be addressed. The region is still dealing with the ripple effects of the Iraq invasion and the US-Iranian confrontation. Lebanon is a test for a multitude of issues and principles that will affect the future of the Middle East.

The Lebanese model has a bad reputation but, relative to the region, it is the most stable and successful politically. Although there was no president in office during the crisis, there are two living ex-presidents in the country, which is unique in a region where presidency is mostly for life.

The country's political power sharing system is also the most resilient in the region. The formula has so many inbuilt checks and balances that make it impossible to have a coup d'état, or for one party, sect or group to dominate or take-over. Since independence, the country has been through several crises, but in the end the system has always got back on track, even after a fifteen-year civil war.

How the regional and international players push will determine the viability of such a model, which can only survive in a reasonably stable regional setting. The outcome will be very relevant to what happens next in Iraq, where the same questions arise with the same players, and also in Palestine and the rest of the region. All eyes are now on Doha and on what the talks produce.

## STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

The government and its allies will take credit for avoiding the trap and not allowing the country to slip into civil war. The memory of such mayhem is still very fresh in the minds of the Lebanese and there is no appetite for it. Playing the peaceful resistance and anti-war cards could win it much confidence and support. It can also claim to have done all it can to expose the illegality of the security and communications infrastructure of Hizbollah, even if it could not dismantle it. It is clear the government cannot fight Iran and Syria militarily and instead relies on international protection and Arab support.

On the other hand, the government stands to lose politically because it has proved yet again that it cannot maintain security and is not in full control. It has backed down and allowed Hizbollah to continue to control airport security. This is highly significant because two members of parliament were assassinated hours after they arrived at the airport. Belief in the old doctrine, that Lebanon's strength is in its weakness, is fast losing ground. The risk