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Prelude to Occupation? Implications of Israel's War on Hizbullah in Lebanon

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ON July 12, Hizbullah started their "Operation Truthful Promise" and seized two Israeli soldiers. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) countered with "Operation Just Reward", which was soon renamed "Operation Change of Direction". Hizbullah's attacks came just two weeks after Israel's Gaza offensive, officially aimed at freeing the IDF soldier Gilad Shalit who had been captured by Hamas militants. The disproportionate military response against Hizbullah by the IDF has caused a humanitarian crisis amongst Lebanon's civilian population – a crisis of unprecedented proportions for the country since the traumatic 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon which resulted in thousands of casualties, mostly civilians. Israel's present operation has so far resulted in the deaths of about 400 people, including those who perished when Israeli forces used cluster bombs on Hizbullah facilities located amidst civilian populations. Several hundred thousand more Lebanese have been displaced, whereas several thousand foreigners are still waiting to be evacuated.

The tragedy caused by the Israeli invasion has already had its repercussions in Southeast Asia: in Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur, demonstrations outside the American embassy have occurred – apparently organized by the Islamic opposition party PAS, a Sunni organization. Interestingly, television news coverage showed also demonstrators carrying pictures of the later Shi'a leader Ayatollah Khomeini.

The "Real Thing": Lebanon, not Gaza

Lebanon, like Singapore a multi-religious – and to a limited extent even multi-ethnic – country, was just about to return to prosperity as the "Switzerland of the Levant". It is now being bombed back to the 1970s. Fouad Siniora, Prime Minister of Lebanon since July 2005, has called for an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hizbullah, saying that his country "has been torn to shreds". UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, too, has criticized Israel's indifferent shelling of mostly civilian areas. So far, Western countries have kept silent, a silence which enables Israel to continue its offensive. Britain's Tony Blair has supported Israel's actions, implying that Israel's full-scale war – a war that is currently taking hostage millions of Lebanese civilians - appears to be "justified" by the official aim to free Israeli soldiers now held by Hizbullah.

However, the sheer scale of Israel's military engagement in Lebanon seems to tell otherwise: compared with the Lebanese war, the Gaza issue appears to have lost its prime importance to Israel. Many military observers see in the Israeli air bombardments only a prelude to a much

larger, ground offensive. If “Operation Change of Direction” is aimed at rooting-out Hizbullah from Lebanon once and for all, it has so far clearly failed. But it has a larger strategic goal, and it appears to be not so much military in nature.

Many, if not most Lebanese, whatever their denominational background, tend to see Hizbullah not as a “terrorist organization”, but rather a “resistance movement” that is growing in stature. Siniora, a Sunni and usually seen as a close ally of the US, once said that he and his government consider the “resistance” in the South “a natural and honest expression of the Lebanese people’s national rights to liberate their land and defend their honour against Israeli aggression and threats”. Similar sentiments had been expressed back in 2001 by the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in a BBC interview with Tim Sebastian. Consequently, Hariri refused to hand over Hizbullah activists accused by the US of being terrorists. One should keep in mind that since the 1967 war, a stretch of Lebanese territory known as the “Shebaa Farms” is still occupied by Israel. Moreover, although Hizbullah’s activities are mainly military in nature, it has also been a successful social movement involved in the building of schools, clinics and hospitals in the impoverished south of Lebanon. It is also a political party that won an unprecedented 23 seats nationwide in the 2005 general election. All this seems to explain the deep-rooted support for Hizbullah in the South and beyond. The situation is thus different from that of 1982 when Israel could count on the support of local Christians in its fight against the PLO forces in the country who were seen by many Lebanese – even by the Shi’ite Amal movement – as an alien factor.

The Larger Picture: The US Return to Lebanon?

The “silence of the West” might also be an indicator for a fundamental shift in US Middle East policy towards a more “holistic”, “long-term” solution for the entire Middle East. US President Bush said explicitly on July 18 that “the world” should address Hizbullah as the “cause” of the current Lebanon crisis. He also accused Syria for allegedly staging a comeback in Lebanon. John Bolton, the US ambassador to the UN, said recently that “we see more clearly the role Syria has and has been playing in frustrating efforts to bring this [i.e. the Hizbullah “issue”] to a resolution”.

According to the New York Times, the US plans to “give Israel another week more” for its bombardments. Only after that would Condoleezza Rice travel to the region to “negotiate” the (re-)establishment of a “buffer zone” and the stationing of international troops intended to be a bit more than mere “peace-keepers”. On July 19, Bush announced the sending of US troops to Lebanon – the first since Hizbullah drove them out in 1984 – officially in order to “evacuate Americans and to protect American property”. Interestingly, those troops are planned to operate from Cyprus where Britain still maintains the Royal Air Force airbases Akrotiri and Dhekelia.

Could this be the prelude to a permanent US presence in the Levant? Given the fact that US forces are already over-stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan, the likelihood of this happening is remote, for now. Yet, if this scenario eventuates, Israel would have acted as a proxy to “clear the field”. Western, mostly NATO troops, would be present in Lebanon while US troops would be free to settle accounts with Syria (and with Hamas in its rear, for that matter). Although this rather gloomy picture looks somehow fantastic at first glance, it is a possibility that cannot be totally ruled out.

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