

Letter from Lebanon

Rayyan Al-Shawaf

With the recent Israel-Lebanon war now apparently over, it is time to take stock of what happened.

The separate attacks on the Israeli military by Palestinian and Lebanese militants, both of which included the abduction of Israeli troops, appear to have been coordinated in strategy as well as timing. Both had as their official aim the release of prisoners, even as both figured in a larger and more complicated geo-political picture. Both also were clearly calculated to muzzle mounting internal criticism of Hamas and Hezbollah, by falling back on the cultural sanctification of ‘resistance’ in Palestine and Lebanon.

Hezbollah’s brazen attack was no less than a bid for outright control of the Lebanese state. By arrogating to itself the right to wage war, a prerogative reserved for sovereign states, Hezbollah effectively usurped the role of the Lebanese government. Such a gambit could admittedly result in tangible long-term dividends for the party’s secretary-general, Hassan Nasrullah, and his cohorts; if they manage to spin Israel’s destruction of Lebanon’s infrastructure as a ‘victory’ for their organisation, this will end all talk of disarming Hezbollah. The Lebanese will have to wait until a major socio-political transformation occurs in Iran for an unencumbered Lebanon to corral this renegade Shiite Islamist militia.

In Gaza, the Palestinians’ reluctance to confront reckless militants hoping for an even bigger share of power has proved catastrophic. When Israel withdrew from Gaza last year, it vowed to respond severely to any attack staged from the newly vacated lands. Palestinian militants in Gaza nevertheless chose to attack soldiers who no longer occupy them, and who were stationed on the Israeli side of the Green Line, the boundary between Israel and the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, Palestinians in the West Bank continue to condemn Israel’s construction of a barrier intended to prevent the infiltration into Israel of suicide bombers from the West Bank. If the Palestinians are beginning to sound obtuse, that’s because they flatly refuse to consider the consequences of their actions. Indeed, even after massive Israeli retaliation has taken its toll, no discernible change in attitude is apparent among most Palestinians; Gaza has been destroyed because ordinary Gazans refuse to

AL-SHAWAF | Letter from Lebanon

stand up to the swaggering militants and call them to account.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah's demands are just as interesting for what they omit as what they include. The Shebaa Farms region, which the international community does not even recognise as Lebanese territory, and which Syria refuses to acknowledge in writing as belonging to Lebanon, has gone almost without mention. Evidently, the ambiguity of the cause has made it lose some of its lustre. Instead, the focus has been on gaining the release of Lebanese and other prisoners held by Israel, without regard for the morally dubious actions for which they were imprisoned. For example, at the top of the list is Lebanese citizen Samir Qantar. Together with his comrades in the Palestine Liberation Front, Qantar murdered several Israelis, including a four-year-old girl, during a 1979 incursion into northern Israel. Hezbollah's efforts on behalf of such terrorists have caused Lebanon to be destroyed anew, as Israeli bombing has handily undone almost everything people like the late Rafiq Hariri achieved in the sixteen years since the end of the ruinous Lebanese civil war. Clearly, Palestinian and Lebanese militants believe that their grievances give them the right to attack Israel with impunity. When Israeli retaliation proves tougher than expected, all they can muster by way of defence is the feeble argument that Israel had planned its onslaught in advance, as though unaware that all countries prepare contingency plans for retaliation well in advance of any possible attack.

Tragically, the Palestinians have yet again proved that they 'never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity,' a caustic observation the late Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban once made of Arabs in general. Instead of seizing the opportunity afforded by Israel's complete withdrawal from the Gaza Strip to begin the process of building a Palestinian state, militant factions attacked Israel and kidnapped an Israeli soldier, thereby inviting retaliation and a possible partial reoccupation of Gaza. Again, the official excuse is that of prisoners. Yet the high number of Palestinian prisoners languishing in Israeli jails is itself the result of the intifada; of the approximately 9,400 Palestinians currently imprisoned by Israel, all but 555 were arrested after the start of the 2000 uprising. Engaging in more armed attacks against Israel will likely further increase this figure.

The issue of prisoners aside, both the Palestinian and Lebanese attacks served another purpose: diverting attention from the ongoing troubles of the attackers and their regional sponsors. In Gaza, pro-Syrian hardliners within Hamas and other militant factions sought to scuttle an understanding between Fateh and Hamas that would have implicitly recognised Israel. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime, still in

the crosshairs of the United Nations investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafiq Hariri, fretted and squirmed, casting about for a lifeline. In Lebanon, Hezbollah was coming under increasing pressure to disarm. And Iran, Hezbollah's creator and main sponsor, faced international isolation for its suspect nuclear program, which was to be brought before the G8 Summit as well as the UN Security Council. What better way to distract attention from all these issues than an attack on Israel? Ultimately, that is all that Lebanon and Palestine represent to the likes of Syria and Iran: a distraction. Far from actually helping Lebanon or Palestine in any constructive way, Syria and Iran seek to use their leverage with Lebanese and Palestinian militants as a means to pressure the West. We can help you solve the crisis in the Levant, the Syrians and Iranians say to the West, as long as you drop your demands of Syria and Iran.

In fact, their bombastic statements notwithstanding, neither Syria nor Iran lifted a finger to aid Lebanon. Indeed, even as Israel pummelled Lebanon, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had the audacity to declare that any Israeli attack on Syria would meet with a firm Iranian response. Attacking Syria crosses a red line, destroying Lebanon doesn't. Regionally, the only positive sign came from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, which indirectly rebuked Hezbollah and Hamas for their 'adventurism.' Hezbollah's actions, of course, are all the more inexcusable as it had already witnessed the furious Israeli response to the Palestinian militants' operation. Pointedly, the leaders of Egypt and Jordan also declared their support for the Lebanese state imposing its authority over all of Lebanon.

Many Palestinians and Lebanese, on the other hand, have become prisoners of their own anti-Israel rhetoric. For too long, they have chosen to coddle ideologically extreme and recklessly violent organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah, in deference to that sacred cow called 'resistance.' Now, they are finding it difficult to change. Indeed, the Palestinian and Lebanese governments failed to condemn the militants' attacks, despite the fact that both occurred in Israel proper, not the occupied West Bank or Shebaa Farms.

Yet in Lebanon, dissent is beginning to be voiced. Even politicians, such as maverick Druze MP Walid Junblatt, are openly questioning Hezbollah's motives. While this certainly augurs well for the future, it cannot ameliorate the current situation. Israel made good on its promise to 'turn back the clock in Lebanon by 20 years,' while Hezbollah seems poised to hijack the Lebanese state for the next 20 years, meaning that Lebanon as a country has already lost. The only remaining hope is that those

AL-SHAWAF | Letter from Lebanon

who truly care about Lebanon will eventually succeed in radically altering the dominant political culture, so that the 'resistance' is no longer enveloped in a halo of immunity, and the Lebanese can finally discuss it freely and critically.

Rayyan Al-Shawaf is a writer and freelance reviewer based in Beirut, Lebanon.