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LEBANON: RETURN TO THE DARK AGES

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RAFIQ Hariri International Airport took me completely by surprise when I set foot there in early June. Attacked twice by Israeli forces, the airport had risen phoenix-like into a world-class facility. Earlier, I strolled through affluent Achrafiyeh in Beirut lined with elegant architecture. I saw the happy faces of Beirutis jogging or smoking shisha along the Corniche by the eastern Mediterranean. Beirut, it seemed, was on its way to regaining its reputation as the Paris of the Middle East.

But the images I now see on television seem so surreal. Airport hit again. The lighthouse at the Corniche hit. Even the Christian neighbourhood of Achrafiyeh has not been spared: two water-drills in a disused carpark blown up ... Lebanon is back in the dark ages.

Myths and realities

The key premise underlying most analyses of the ongoing crisis in the Levant is that Lebanon is a mere theatre for proxy wars or an extension of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Such a perspective, sadly, mistakes a symptom for a cause. In addition, the unidimensional and static view of Hizbollah, the Shi'a militia whose cross-border adventure on 12 July provoked the ferocious Israeli retaliation, blinds observers to some of the realities on the ground.

The conventional wisdom among many political pundits is that Hizbollah is a mere puppet of Syria and Iran and that Hizbollah staged its cross-border raid to capture Israeli soldiers at the behest of one of these powers. Such views rest on a fuzzy logic little different from extrapolating that the US dictates policy to Israel simply because it shares Israel's antipathy towards Hizbollah and supplies massive economic and military aid to Israel, including a shipment of precision-guided munitions that is being rushed out now.

There is indeed a congruence of interests between Hizbollah and Iran and Syria with respect to Israel, and both countries have strongly backed Hizbollah, Iran in particular with training and military hardware. Nonetheless, Hizbollah is a force in its own right. Thus, even if the Arab-Israeli conflict were somehow resolved and Syria and Iran were to cease using Lebanon for a proxy war against Israel, the Hizbollah factor would remain.

Casting Hizbollah simply as a terrorist organisation ignores the popular perception of Hizbollah within Lebanon and beyond. The Shi'a militia – ironically, a product of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon – enjoys widespread support as a national resistance force that had successfully “liberated” Lebanon from Israeli occupation.

True, Hizbollah is widely believed to retain a vast intelligence and terrorist network overseas and may even have planned to attack Israeli and US interests in Singapore in 1998, as the Internal Security Department disclosed in 2002. Nonetheless, its record since Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 has been overwhelmingly one of occasionally lobbing its famously inaccurate Katyusha rockets into northern Israel; it is not known to have engaged in any terror attack outside the Israel-Lebanon theatre.

Over the years, Hizbollah has developed another persona -- it is well embedded within Lebanese society through a network of hospitals, schools and other charities. And, since 1992, it has been gradually metamorphosing into a political party, with 14 seats in Parliament today and two Cabinet seats. A Hizbollah-managed municipality in Beirut has even won a UN Best Practices Award.

Nonetheless, Hizbollah is suffering from an identity crisis, having been deprived of its main *raison d'être* since May 2000. It is facing external pressure to discard its familiar role as a militia and is unfamiliar with its new political avatar. It is also torn between being a Lebanese national entity and an international Islamist movement championing the Palestinian and pan-Islamic causes.

It is in the face of mounting international pressures for disarmament that Hizbollah has been fixated on looking for new pretexts to retain arms. One popular cause that Hizbollah found was championing the release of Lebanese prisoners from Israeli jails by using kidnapped Israelis as hostages. Thus, by launching its cross-border adventure on 12 July, Hizbollah was only repeating what it considered a tried and tested formula.

Tribal politics

Although the Israeli invasion was the catalyst that led to the birth of Hizbollah as a militia, it is the internal dynamics of Lebanon that will determine Hizbollah's future. Since independence, Lebanon has been polarised along sectarian lines. Politics is based on a confessional system whereby parliamentary seats and government posts are allocated on an agreed ratio to Christians and Muslims, who respectively carve them up further by sect – Shi'a, Sunni, Druze Muslim, Maronite Christian, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, etc. This has resulted in a weak centre. It has also led to intense conflict between religious groups, sects and rival dynasties within the sects. And, it is these divisions that have made Lebanon prone to external intervention, whether by Syria, Iran or Israel.

The 1989 Ta'if accord that ended the civil war changed the lopsided power-sharing formula that had favoured the Christians to a 50:50 ratio and enhanced the powers of the Sunni prime minister over those of the Christian president. But no census has been taken for decades, and Muslims, especially the Shi'as, had already outnumbered the Christians well before the Tai'f accord. The presence of Syrian troops, who entered the country in the early days of the civil war, had helped maintain some degree of political stability in the country.

But when Syrian troops were forced out last year in the wake of the so-called Cedar Revolution, the old sectarian tensions resurfaced for no systemic change had taken place. The elections that were held subsequently were based on the same flawed Ta'if formula, which yielded a controversial majority for a Western-backed Sunni coalition. Against this background, the mounting pressures for disbanding Hizbollah are viewed not just by

Hizbollah but by many Shi'as as tantamount to disenfranchising the Shi'as.

It's worth recalling here that the Shi'as had initially welcomed the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon as they mistakenly assumed that Israeli forces would rid Lebanon of the Sunni Palestinians, whose entry into Lebanon in the 1970s, had upset the demographic balance. However, the Shi'as soon realised not only that the Israelis had no intention of leaving the country yet but that they were also allied with the Maronite Christians. Likewise, Hizbollah's sensational attack on the US marine headquarters in Beirut in October 1983 had a context to it. The Shi'as perceived that the US peacekeeping force had lost its neutrality by training the Maronite forces of then President Amin Gemayel.

The way forward

If the Hizbollah problem is to be solved, Lebanon needs systemic political change; it is not sufficient for the international community simply to pressure Hizbollah to disband. The long-term goal should be to urge Lebanon to replace its-current system of sectarian-based political allocation with a merit-based one. But this should be done by first adjusting the flawed confessional system to make sectarian representation fairer rather than by doing away with it in one fell swoop, which could disenfranchise the minorities and cause greater unhappiness.

Hizbollah's split personality should be a trigger for change. The West should engage rather than isolate it so that it has greater incentive to evolve into a full-fledged political entity. Disarmament should involve gradually integrating its forces into the Lebanese army and be accompanied by political guarantees for the Shi'as. Simultaneously, Israel should disengage from the unoccupied Sheb'a Farms area abutting southern Lebanon. Israel had seized this parcel of land from Syria in 1967 but Hizbollah and many Lebanese -- and, interestingly, Syria itself -- claim this to be Lebanese territory. Such a withdrawal would deprive Hizbollah of another "liberation" cause and force it into Lebanese army barracks.

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