

Why Hezbollah's Victory may lead to peace in the Middle East

Interview with Franklin Lamb

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Question: Between May 7 to May 10, Hezbollah took over Beirut, shut down the city's TV and communications facilities, blocked the main highways, closed the airport, and surrounded the homes of the leading political leaders with armed gunman. The action was taken in response to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's decision to outlaw Hezbollah's telecommunication network and sack the head of security at Beirut airport. Although the incident has been downplayed in the western media, it appears that Hezbollah achieved a total victory and is now recognized as the strongest group operating within Lebanon. What affect will Hezbollah's victory have on the political dynamic within Lebanon?

Franklin Lamb: I don't believe Hezbollah achieved a 'total victory' as the question suggests, but its achievements were certainly strategic and that sets out the future in many respects. As you rightly imply, Hezbollah's emphatic statement by its quick move into the March 14 areas was aimed at Israel, the Bush Administration and their agents and allies in Lebanon and the Middle East.

What provoked the precise timing of the action was the fact, as Sheik Naim Qassim, Hezbollah Deputy Secretary General told this observer and a former American Ambassador and other US citizens who met with him on Monday May 10 in Dahiyeh, was a 10 hour "series of conference calls" from the Welch Club to the Serail (Government House) that immediately preceded the Siniora government decision to move against Hezbollah, its vital optic fiber phone system and the Airport security office. According to Hezbollah sources there were other US planned assaults on the Opposition which have not been made public.

According to Qassim during this frenetic series of conference calls involving several countries, the decision was made in Washington to move against Hezbollah. Hezbollah believes the Lebanese government is virtually occupied by the Bush Administration and all substantive decisions now announced in Beirut come from Washington.

The outcome of the May events as you implied in your question was devastating for the Bush administration and its allies. It not only led to withdrawal of the two government decisions against Hezbollah, it led to the Dora agreement and the current serious efforts to form a unity government and share power. For nearly two years the Opposition tried to achieve a unity government for Lebanon and may now have done so with its counterstrike against the Welch club move against it.

The May events led to agreement on holding a democratic election next year and the veto

power of the opposition over US initiatives sent to the 'majority'.

Hezbollah's Sheik Naim Qassim stated to a US Delegation two days ago that the party and its allies expect to win 64 of the 128 seats in next years election. Others think the current opposition may win as many as 70 seats in the new Parliament. In either case Hezbollah and their allies will effectively be the next government of Lebanon.

Will the predicted Hezbollah electoral victory be the forth Democratic election in the Middle East rejected by the Bush administrations new Middle East project? Will the Bush administration accept the fact that Hezbollah will likely have the Ministries of Defense, Exterior and Finance (the others don't matter much) and be true to its daily claims that it wants to help Lebanon have a democratic and stable government which the Hezbollah government will bring? Very doubtful.

Hezbollah will face many challenges but the Party will also have the opportunity to demonstrate what it is capable of delivering in terms of social services to Lebanon's increasingly desperate population. Hezbollah's much anticipated Economic Plan may reshape the Middle East and the populations of Egypt, Jordan, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia may demand a local version of the same.

On the downside of the May events, Hezbollah has yet to convincingly explain to the people of Lebanon why a convoy of its fighters advanced on Sweifeit and other villages in the lower Chouf. People died needlessly including this observers neighbor, Marwan Jurdi. Marwan was a teacher and had no business dusting off his rifle to fight Hezbollah who had no business entering Sweifeit. A tragedy which Hezbollah leader Nasrallah correctly stated at a rally a couple of weeks ago caused deep wounds which must be healed.

Presumably the fast strike was to neutralize Walid Jumblatt who during two recent interviews with Harvard students and the US Council for the National Interest is reported to be in bad shape and scanning the horizon for a new 'alliance'.

Hezbollah will likely not touch Walid because he is not reliable or predictable and is thought to be owned by the CIA. The 'socialist' Jumblatt has amassed a huge fortune (which Lebanese warlord has not?)of land holdings with expansive vineyards above Khalde and may retire to survey and manage his estates. He knows he is a marked man from many quarters(who isn't around here these day?) In Beirut Jumblatt is known as the 'walking dead man'.

Question: How will it affect relations with Israel and the US? Does Hezbollah now pose a credible deterrent to a future Israeli invasion?

Franklin Lamb: Yes. There has been a fundamental shift in this respect. Hezbollah actually achieved its deterrent capacity following the July 2006 War. Some say as early as 1996 or 2000 when it forced Israel out of most of Lebanon.

Several times in the past 20 months Israel has "probed" Lebanon and Hezbollah has signaled thru back channels that it was ready for a ferocious response if Israel again attacked Lebanon.

Most recently Hezbollah's deterrence capacity was exhibited when Israel cancelled its attack

on May 11 which was green lighted in Washington to assist the Siniora government allies in West Beirut. Frankly put. Israel is no longer able to attack an Arab country, Lebanon, with impunity. A historic first. Rather, it knows that it faces massive retaliation when it next attacks Lebanon. Recently there was a Report that Tel Aviv would receive 600 missiles each day following an Israeli attack on Lebanon. US Congressional sources have challenged that figure and have estimated the number at 1000 Hezbollah missiles per day against Tel Aviv is war breaks out.

Question: Hezbollah's takeover of Beirut was an amazingly swift and efficient military operation, and yet, it is nearly impossible to find any details about the operation itself. What really happened on the ground and how is it that a armed militia was able to carry out such a sophisticated "Green Beret" type operation (on a city-wide scale) with so few casualties? Can we expect that the "Hezbollah model" of resistance will be exported to other neighboring countries like Iraq, Jordan or Saudi Arabia?

Franklin Lamb: Contrary to Israeli reports, those who moved into Beirut did not come from the South of Lebanon, from the Bekaa nor were they necessarily the 'first team.' Most were reserves with regular full time jobs in Beirut and the surrounding area.

Most came in cars and vans just three miles south of Hamra from the Jnah, Ouzai, Ghoberi, Dahiyeh area. They moved along the seafront past the Coral Beach Hotel, along the only free public beach in Beirut, Ramlet al Baida, along Corniche Mazra and fanned out up the inclines to the right into West Beirut streets.

It did not require much more than 20 minutes to reach their forward positions. Others, including Amal and the National Syrian Socialist Party came from the new airport road and from the southeast and east.

Potentially the 'Hezbollah model' has application in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, if oppositions there can replicate the Hezbollah model of study, analysis, caution, patience and determined, disciplined execution. Hezbollah is not essentially a Shia phenomenon, it is a rapidly expanding resistance and justice movement and that it what makes it so lethal to colonialism and occupation enterprises such as Zionist Israel and hegemonistic America during the current period.

Question: Even before the takeover, Hezbollah chairman, Hassan Nasrallah was the most popular Arab leader in the world. Is Nasrallah really the "terrorist-extremist" he is made out to be in the western press? What affect has Nasrallah had on Arabs living in the region?

Franklin Lamb: Hezbollah under the leadership of Hasan Nasrallah has given the Arabs of the region restored self-respect following 60 years of humiliation and 41 years of repeated and voracious occupation and aggression. Hezbollah's sometimes spectacular success has inspired many in the younger generation throughout Lebanon among all the sects as well as the Middle East and far beyond. One sees this in the faces of the old and young.....in the market places and play grounds in the universities and middle schools.,,in the course also of interviews. The Middle East is standing up and reclaiming it pre-Crusade unity, spirit, purpose and culture. Nasrallah is the new Salaadin, Nassar and regional hope.

Question: Nasrallah has shown that he is capable of thinking strategically and politically. This appears to have put him at an advantage in dealing with both Israel and the United States. Israel's 34 Day war was not just a humiliating defeat; it was also seriously mismanaged from the beginning. In battles in cities and towns throughout southern Lebanon, Hezbollah fighters went toe to toe with the better-equipped IDF and turned them away. Is it possible that the real path to peace in the Middle East is a strong army-like Hezbollah- on Israel's northern flank to discourage further military adventurism?

Franklin Lamb: I see it certainly as one of the major elements because it takes away the first option that Israel has used in the past. Israel has committed aggression more than 40 times on the ground against Lebanon starting in 1967 to July 2006. This era is over. Soon even Israel's air force will be in peril from Hezbollah missiles as it attempts to add to its more than 6000 violations of Lebanese airspace and sovereignty since the 1960's.

Question: How do you respond to people who believe that Hassan Nasrallah is a religious fanatic who wants to install a "Iran-type" theocratic regime in Lebanon?

Franklin Lamb: I would ask them to study the subject a little more closely and they would learn that Hezbollah, in the words of PLO founder and longtime representative of the PLO in Lebanon, Shafiq al-Hout, recently discussed with this observer, Hezbollah is probably the most secular of the Parties in Lebanon. What he meant is that Hezbollah and its leaders rely on reason, dialogue, and empirical analysis not on what we often think in the West as blind application of Sharia.

Hezbollah believes in one God as you know. Having said that they are very secular in the ways they tolerate and respect others beliefs and rights to differ on issues of politics, philosophy, sociology, and personal beliefs. I personally know many Shia and Hezbollah members who are very secular and keep their religious views to themselves. Just yesterday, when my motorcycle was in the shop I hopped a taxi to Hamra and the Shia driver brought up the subject of religion and presented several of his arguments for why he has real doubts there is a God. Unfortunately there is deep and vast misinformation/disinformation about Hezbollah and their religious beliefs. They are very secular on a day by day basis and they are very tolerant of others views. In Dahilyeh, after a short period one does not feel that one is in a religious enclave.

Nasrallah and Hezbollah, as Naim Qassim told former US Ambassador Richard Viets and his delegation a couple of days ago that there is no interest in an Islamic Republic in Lebanon. That idea was expressed back in 1985 in Hezbollah's 'open letter' announcing its formation. The relevant language was influenced by Ayatollah Khomeini and the then recent success of the Iranian revolution.

For years, Nasrallah has regularly stated that Lebanon is not Iran and never will be and if Lebanon wants an Islamic republic let 90% of the people vote for it and only then could it be considered. The Islamic Republic of Lebanon idea was a fantasy and virtually no one but the Zionist lobby and their pals even mention the concept anymore.

Question: General Michel Suleiman, Lebanon's army chief of staff, was sworn in as the country's new president last Sunday. The Bush administration did not send a delegation,

which indicates the level of frustration with recent developments. It's clear now that the real center of power has shifted away from Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his allies in the "US backed" March 14th Coalition to Hezbollah. Nasrallah said in a recent speech that he has no interest in meddling in Lebanon's political affairs but will not disarm his militia. With Hezbollah currently at full strength and confident after their victory; do you think an Israeli attack on Iran less likely? If Israel attacks Iran's nuclear facilities, will Nasrallah launch missile strikes on Tel Aviv?

Franklin Lamb: My personal belief is that Hezbollah would attack Tel Aviv if Israel or the US attacked Iran and perhaps even Syria.

I do not think either the US or Israel will attack Iran before Bush leaves office although both would very much like to.

The \$4 per gallon gas prices in the States could rise to \$12 per gallon if Iran shuts down the Gulf of Hormuz which it would almost certainly do.

Israel does not have the military power to take on Iran by itself and the still drowsy American public has no appetite for yet another war. Such a conflict might well destroy the State of Israel and it knows it.

Such an attack would likely cause Iraq to explode in a massive violence against American forces that would make the 1968 Tet Offensive appear mild in comparison. The populations of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia would likely attempt to overthrow their governments.

This would be for starters and things would escalate from there. The results are unpredictable but surely would be catastrophic on a scale never seen since World War II.

The United States is on its way out of the Middle East. Attacking Iran would quite simply accelerate its departure.

Question: The Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz is reporting that Hezbollah and the Olmert administration are close to a deal on a prisoner exchange. There are also reports that Israel is negotiating secretly with Syria on the Golan Heights and that the Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas has opened talks with Hamas. Is Olmert trying to divert attention from his own problems (bribery charges) or is Israel attempting to neutralize its potential enemies in the event of an attack on Iran?

Franklin Lamb: I think you are exactly correct on this point.

Question: Hezbollah has been supportive of labor strikes in Beirut. Are Lebanon's troubles really the result of sectarian problems (as the media suggests) or class divisions? Is this really a struggle between the wealthy Sunnis and Christians versus the poor Shia?

Franklin Lamb: More class divisions and the economy I would say. Skyrocketing prices increasing power cuts, poor job market, shortage of housing are all increasing tension and conflict. Plus outside actors continuing to meddle in Lebanese internal affairs and promote conflict. The exacerbation tensions here is cause less by whether one is Armenian, Druze, Chaldean, Maronite, Shia, Sunni etc. that the yawning economic gap.

With respect to the Saudi/Hariri owned Solidere Corp. This week it announced profits of \$

157 million dollars for the most recent reporting period. These are astounding and record figures when consumer good prices are rising. Under Rafik Hariri premiership, Lebanon borrowed more than \$ 40 billion to rebuild parts of Beirut (now effectively owned by Solidere/Hariri Family and Friends). This interest alone on these loans payable partly to Hariri and Saudi banks keeps Lebanon stagnate and barely above water. Without a new economic plan Lebanon is lost. Hezbollah claims it has a plan and we will soon see what it looks like and if Hezbollah can transform Lebanon economically.

Question: Are the prospects for peace in the region better or worse with a well-armed Hezbollah?

Franklin Lamb: Better in the sense that there is for the first time in modern history an Arab/Muslim deterrence to Zionist and Western colonialism. Worse in the sense that the US and Israel are rapidly losing influence and viability in the Middle East and may once again resort to war to stem the breach.

Franklin Lamb, PhD is an author and Director of "Americans Concerned for Middle East Peace" who works from Beirut. His newest book "Hezbollah: A Brief Guide for Beginners" is expected soon in Arabic and English

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