

Lebanon, Before and After the Israel-Hizballah War

Sep 29, 2006



In-Depth Reports

On September 16, 2006, Jamil Mroue and Misbah al-Ahdab addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Misbah al-Ahdab is a member of the Lebanese parliament, and Jamil Mroue is editor in chief of the Beirut Daily Star. The following is a brief summary of their remarks.

JAMIL MROUE Between 1990 and 2000, Lebanon had no chance to build a functioning state. The Syrian operatives, lead by Ghazi Kanaan, worked on political cleansing, and once the Lebanese formed their own government, they realized how problematic the operating system actually was. One example was the Taif Accord, which brought an end to the Lebanese civil war. The Taif agreement was full of loopholes that were meant to be addressed later, but U.S. president George H. W. Bush and Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad traded Syrian participation in the first Gulf War for Asad's takeover of Lebanon -- without addressing the need for reform.

Lebanon was resurrected after the departure of the Syrians, who had been in Lebanon with U.S. and Israeli approval. After they formed a government, the Lebanese realized what the Syrians had done to the Lebanese power structure. Today, Hizballah is not a "state within a state" because Lebanon is not a true state to begin with. Business cannot continue as usual because there is no business to continue. And after the tragic Hizballah-Israel war this summer, Lebanon must go back to the drawing board.

One positive outcome of the war is that there is now an international framework and diplomatic umbrella that places a wall between Lebanon and its aggressive southern neighbor, Israel. Between June 2000 and June 2006, after the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000, Israel entered Lebanon 11,984 times, according to United Nations observers.

Another positive outcome is that Lebanon showed that it has a real prime minister who proved himself capable of running the state. But the risk at this stage is a slippery slope toward the tragic. To avoid this, Lebanon needs to convince the international community -- and above all, the United States -- that the Lebanese government needs a breather. The government is only six months old and cannot take the responsibility of disarming Hizballah. A reminder: Hizballah grew under the noses of the Israelis; its military wing prospered under the Israeli occupation.

Hizballah looks at Israel with distrust. Every Christian military group has worked with and was armed by Israel, the United States, and Saudi Arabia. The South Lebanese Army, headed by Antoine Lahad, collaborated with the Israelis for twenty years during the Israeli occupation of the South. When the Israelis withdrew in 2000, Lahad was reduced to selling falafel in Tel Aviv, and the Lebanese soldiers were marginalized by Israeli society. This group of Lebanese living in Israel today serves as a lesson about how Israel treats its friends. And it should serve as a reminder that Hizballah is not blindly anti-Israel; they welcomed Israel in 1982 against the Palestine Liberation Organization.

MISBAH AL-AHDAB Former prime minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated on February 14, 2005. On March 8, there was a rally organized by Hizballah asking the Syrians to stay in Lebanon. A subsequent protest on March 14 was a reaction to this rally and not solely to the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. These two rallies revealed division in the country between two views.

Lebanon is facing two possible paths. One path leads Lebanon to remain a proxy battlefield for all confrontations in the Middle East, including both the Israeli-Arab conflict and the Syrian and Iranian agenda. The other possible path is the one focused on building up the institutions of the state and the economy. These two diverging paths were made evident by the two rallies of March 8 and March 14.

Since then, the March 8 coalition represented by Syria and Hizballah has been stronger than the March 14 coalition because the former have been "on the ground," using their own people to run the country according to their own interests. They have been concentrating on creating new societal divisions based on religious identity. But Lebanon is not divided "Iraq style." Not all Shiites agree with Hizballah. Yes, some want to link Lebanon to other agendas; but others want to have a modern country open to the world and deprived of conflict. It should be noted that there were Shiite participants at the 2005 Bristol Hotel conference asking Syria to leave Lebanon and Hizballah to give up their arms. These Shiites did not have millions of dollars to spend, nor did they have government favors to pass out to those backing them. It was a mistake not to provide protection to these people, for they began disappearing, little by little, and now they are no longer part of the coalition.

The March 14 coalition needs the backing of a cross-confessional group not linked to the old corruption. And the problem of corruption still needs to be addressed by presenting an alternative. Hizballah has gained sympathy in the Arab world, but it was also shaken by the destruction of its infrastructure, which triggered criticism from religious Shiites in southern Lebanon who now question the notion of "victory."

In the short run, Hizballah will be focused on reconstruction. But the Lebanese government cannot disarm Hizballah by force. Hizballah's weapons are linked to the Lebanese consensus that as long as their territory is occupied, they have the right to resist. The Israeli-occupied Shebaa Farms serve as justification for Hizballah's weapons. But if Shebaa Farms were to be freed and the hostages were to be freed, would Hizballah actually render its weapons? The Israeli attacks have given Hizballah a stronger reason to keep their weapons and to accuse the March 14 coalition of plotting with Israel.

Three main points are key to Lebanon's future. First, Lebanon needs the international community to support the central government and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. At the Stockholm Conference, Lebanon received twice the amount of money it was expecting -- a clear message of support for the Lebanese government. But, in addition to financial assistance, the international community should talk to the Lebanese in a constructive way. Israel says it supports the Siniora government, but, to put it bluntly, what they did this summer was not the best way to express that support.

Second, the Lebanese political structure should begin to include new Shiite politicians. During the last twenty years, the Syrians dismantled the family and clan structures, but those structures are still present in the memory of the people. Young Shiite politicians who share views with the March 14 coalition should be promoted and backed.

Third, a fund supported by Lebanese abroad and, hopefully, international institutions is being created. This fund will function with a private-sector mechanism to avoid the corruption inherent in government channels. This fund will be important in job creation and in improving the economic situation overall.

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