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What will rise out of Beirut's ashes?

We've been here before, in 1982, NADER HASHEMI says. What will this latest conflict bring?

NADER HASHEMI

Watching the escalating conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, I have been overcome by a strong sense of déjà vu. Twenty-four years ago, the Israel Defence Forces -- responding to a similar provocation, invoking the same security arguments and supported by a similar-minded U.S. government -- entered Lebanon with the same goal of realigning the internal politics of its northern neighbour and, concomitantly, the balance of power in region.

The only difference was that, in 1982, the enemy was the PLO. And those allegedly exerting a nefarious influence from afar were not Iranian mullahs, but Soviet Communists. A quarter of a century later, we have come full circle: Beirut is again being bombed, a sophisticated Israeli army battles an Arab guerrilla movement, innocent civilians are caught in the crossfire, the death toll mounts, the UN is paralyzed, the Middle East is aflame.

Witnessing these events firsthand, both then and now, was Robert Fisk, the veteran British Middle East correspondent and long-time Beirut resident. As the parallels between 1982 and 2006 began to coalesce in my mind, I dusted off my copy of his widely cited **Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War** (Andre Deutsch, 1990) -- a substantial part of which deals with Israel's 1982 invasion and occupation of Lebanon -- and began to read. My eyes fell upon these lines:

"[In January 1983] the Israeli chief of staff during the invasion was warning that 'the war in Lebanon is formally over -- but in effect, it goes on.' Israel could expect 'another hundred years of terror.' This was not the prospect which had filled the hearts of Israeli soldiers who fought their way up to Beirut in June, 1982 [and, I might add, in July, 2006], and who had -- by the beginning of 1983 -- suffered 455 dead." The casualty figure on the Arab side during the same period, Fisk claims, was 17,825.

Pity the Nation contains information that is superfluous to understanding the current conflict (it was first published in 1990 and last updated in 2001), but the chapters on Israel's earlier invasion of Lebanon bear an eerie resemblance and provide a context to what is unfolding today. Solidly on the political left, Fisk tends to be rejected by Israeli sympathizers and those on the right to the same degree that Palestinian supporters and lefties embrace him. Those who are tired of CNN, Fox News and Prime Minister Stephen Harper will especially enjoy his meditations and musings on Middle East politics and

history, all of which are based on firsthand experience dodging bullets and bombs from the front lines.

The year 1982 is an important reference point for understanding the current Israeli-Hezbollah conflict. In a recent interview in Newsweek, former Israeli leader Ehud Barak admitted that "when we entered Lebanon [in 1982] . . . there was no Hezbollah." It was out of the ashes of the Lebanese civil war, and Israel's occupation, that this Islamic fundamentalist movement and political party were born. According to Mr. Barak: "It was our presence there that created Hezbollah."

Books on the topic are hard to come by, in part because of the difficulty in penetrating the inner core of the organization. One notable exception is Amal Saad-Ghorayeb's **Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion** (Pluto Press, 2001). Based on unique access to the senior leadership and a close scrutiny of their publications, this work focuses on Hezbollah's social and political thought.

The author, who teaches at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, seeks to investigate the tension between Hezbollah's rigid ideological positions and the very secular reality of Lebanese politics. The reformulation, accommodation and transformation of Islamist doctrine is the focus of her inquiry. This study provides an alternative reading to that of the Washington foreign-policy consensus, where Hezbollah's terrorism is frequently highlighted to the exclusion of the social welfare and political representation that it provides for Shia Muslims, historically the most marginalized and largest confessional group in Lebanon.

Saad-Ghorayeb is very honest in her discussion of Hezbollah's antipathy toward Israel. Hezbollah's problem with Israel is existential and civilizational. She writes that "even if Israel withdraws from South Lebanon, Hezbollah's abomination of Israel will remain unchanged and it will continue to withhold legitimacy from the Israeli state." It is precisely this view, which is shared among Islamist groups throughout the Muslim world, that invokes genuine security fears among Israelis. How can you make peace with someone who, on ideological grounds, rejects your existence? This is not a new question. Influential theoreticians of Zionism had to grapple with it from day one.

In **The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World** (Norton, 1999), the Iraqi-born, Israeli-raised Oxford don, Avi Shlaim, begins with a story of a group of rabbis from Vienna. After the first Zionist Congress, in 1897, they sent a delegation to Palestine to explore Theodor Herzl's idea of creating a Jewish state. A cable was sent back that read: "the bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man." According to Shlaim, this cable encapsulated *the* core problem for political Zionism: "an Arab population already lived on the land on which the Jews had set their heart." The concept of an "Iron Wall" emerged from this predicament.

Originally theorized in right-wing Jewish nationalist circles, it argued that a voluntary agreement with the Arabs of Palestine was impossible. The goals of Zionism could only be realized "behind an iron wall which they [the Arabs] will be powerless to break

down." The reliance on Jewish military power, as opposed to bargaining and negotiation, Shlaim argues, gradually was adopted by mainstream Zionism "without openly admitting it." It has guided Israeli thinking in terms of its relationship to the broader Arab world from the founding of the Jewish state.

Shlaim's treatment of Israeli policy toward the Arab world is critical, yet scholarly. It challenges conventional assumptions that have influenced thinking on the topic while contextualizing why Israel has rejected a ceasefire in Lebanon.

But one has to stop and wonder about the efficacy behind Israel's bombing of Lebanon and the destruction of the civilian infrastructure of a neighbouring Arab state. Will this really enhance Israeli security in the long term? Has this strategy not been tried before? And recalling events in the summer of 1982, even if Hezbollah is defeated on the battlefield, just as the PLO was 24 years ago, what creature will emerge from the "birth pangs" of the new Middle East that Condoleezza Rice is promising us?

Nader Hashemi is an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at Northwestern University and the author of a forthcoming book on the relationship between religion, secularism and liberal democracy.