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Middle East

Twin Battles

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AK. It seems clear that Israel was just waiting for a pretext to launch its action, and Hizbollah provided it. Is that your view?

GA. Israel's goal is indeed clearer than Hizbollah's was when they mounted the July 12 operation. It seems that the operation had been prepared by Hizbollah for several months, as Hassan Nasrallah said, and they regarded it chiefly as a way of obtaining the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails through an exchange. It was not meant originally as a reaction to the events in Gaza-though it was perceived by the Arab public opinion as a gesture of solidarity with the Palestinian population. At any rate, Hizbollah was certainly not expecting an Israeli reaction on this scale.

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More than 100,000 people marched against the war in London, August 5

Israel's goal is very clear and was stated from the beginning. The July 12 operation was seized upon as a pretext to launch an offensive that had also very obviously been in preparation for a long time. The goal, of course, was to obtain Hizbollah's destruction: what the Israeli army was not able to achieve during its occupation of Lebanon, it now wanted to obtain by forcing the Lebanese to do it and pushing the country to the brink of civil war.

The Israeli government rejected the idea of an international contingent at first, insisting that only the Lebanese Army should go south, thus indicating that it wanted the Lebanese to disarm Hizbollah. The Israeli strategy was on the one hand to deal Hizbollah direct blows and on the other hand to take the whole Lebanese population hostage in order to obtain what it wanted from the Lebanese government. In light of Israel's military failure to deal Hizbollah a major blow and its political failure so far to split the Lebanese population, they have settled for a revised objective whereby European Nato forces would be deployed in south Lebanon-with or without a UN fig leaf.

Who are the main actors here? Is this a proxy war by the US? How far does this tie in with Israel's own interests and aims?

The coincidence of the objectives of the governments of Israel and the US has never historically been so transparent as it has been since 2001, when George W. Bush came to power in the US followed by Sharon in Israel. The degree of openness of their collusion is unprecedented. Never has the US so blatantly and openly endorsed an Israeli aggression. The Israeli army is doing the military work while the US is doing the diplomatic work, blocking ceasefire resolutions and buying Israel the time needed to fulfil its military objectives, while supplying it with the needed weaponry.

The US conditions for a ceasefire are identical to those defined by the Israelis and concerted with them. As Washington puts it, this is part of the Bush administration's "war on terror": Israel's aggression fits with the US-led imperialist war drive launched since 9/11 in this part of the world where two-thirds of world oil resources lie beneath the ground.

On the other side of the fence, what the US-Israel alliance is fighting through Hizbollah is Iran or the Iran-led alliance in the area, including Shiite forces in Iraq, the Syrian regime and the appeal of this alliance to Sunni fundamentalists like Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which supported Hizbollah in the recent crisis.

So there are two conflicts intertwined in the present war-the direct one consisting of Israel's aggression against Hizbollah and Lebanon, and the indirect one consisting of the US campaign against Iran. The UN Security Council has just adopted a US-sponsored resolution on the issue of Iran's nuclear program-quite impudently, given that the same Council has not yet called for the cessation of Israel's mass slaughter in Lebanon.

What role does France play in all this?

The French position has evolved. In 2004 Jacques Chirac offered the US a common front at the UN against Syrian forces in Lebanon. Their basic interests converged, contrary to what was the case with regard to Iraq. In this case, the French are mainly interested in Saudi money. Just a few days ago, they signed a deal for a big sale of weapons to the Saudi kingdom. Chirac's friendship with Hariri, father and son, fits very well within this framework-as everyone knows, the Hariri clan is closely linked to the Saudis.

So when Hariri, and the Saudis behind him, went into dispute with Syria, France offered Washington its help in sponsoring UN resolution 1559, which called for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon as well as the disarming of non-government armed groups in the country, meaning Hizbollah and the Palestinian refugee camps. Since 2004 France has thus worked in close alliance with the US on the issue of Lebanon.

But the latest offensive has caused cracks in the alliance. The Saudis denounced Hizbollah at first, but as the Israeli aggression became more obviously brutal and murderous and impacted on Arab public opinion, the Saudis, the Egyptians, the Jordanians, all Washington's Arab clients have had to shift their stance and tell Washington: Your Israeli friends are going to spoil the whole thing, we are reaching a boiling point which is quite dangerous, it is time to stop. The crisis is getting increasingly perilous for the whole stability of pro-US regimes-for example in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood is capitalising on the situation.

Chirac has taken the middle ground since then-pleasing the Saudis more than Bush in calling for an immediate ceasefire and an international troop presence based on a political agreement.

In your July 15 interview with Liberazione you said that Israeli military action could radicalise the Lebanese population more against Israel than against Hizbollah. Is that happening?

It is happening indeed and beyond my expectations. The very brutality of the Israeli aggression is actually counterproductive for Israeli goals-and is unifying Lebanon in resisting the Israeli offensive. Israel's onslaught has been so murderous, so indiscriminate, that the great majority of the Lebanese have drawn the same conclusions: firstly, that the Israeli offensive was prepared long ago so that the whole discussion of the July 12 operation is somewhat irrelevant, as it was clearly used as a pretext; secondly, that Israel is not targeting Hizbollah alone and not even the Shiites only, but the whole population.

The whole country is being held hostage. The whole economy is destroyed. True, the offensive has mostly killed Lebanese Shiites-probably over 1000 already if one includes those still under the rubble-but in terms of lives affected, impoverished, and ruined, a huge number of Lebanese are affected, and Israel is clearly perceived as the enemy of the Lebanese people as a whole.

At a more general regional level, the hatred for Israel and the US is reaching new peaks. All this will undoubtedly fuel the growth of terrorist organisations of the Al Qaeda type. I'm afraid that what we have seen up to now-9/11, 7/7 and Madrid-is but a foretaste of horrors to come that will affect the civilian populations in the West.

Has the Lebanese Left been able to play much of a role in giving political shape to this national wave of anger and defiance? Or are they marginalized?

The Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) is a shadow of its former self, of what it used to be in the 70s and 80s. It was one of the most important Communist Parties in the Arab world, relative to the size of the country, and one of the major actors in the civil war of 1975-1990. The LCP was the first to launch attacks against the Israeli occupation in 1982, after the invasion settled down, in the name of the 'national resistance'.

Only later were the 'Islamic resistance' and Hizbollah launched. Hizbollah dealt with the LCP as a rival since the latter's main social base was among Shiites and in southern Lebanon, that is among Hizbollah's target constituency. Hizbollah built itself partially through fighting the LCP over this constituency and managed to prevail. In that, it was greatly helped by Iranian backing and by the fact that it played on the dominant ideological trend in the region that was in favour of Islamic fundamentalism since the 1970s, whereas the LCP lacked political boldness and was deeply affected by the unfolding crisis of the Soviet Union.

In the 1990s the LCP itself went into deep crisis, splitting and fragmenting. What remains is not completely invisible, but it is no longer in a position to play an important role-unfortunately, as it is the major left-wing grouping in the country. Hence, Lebanon is no exception to the general rule in the area: the historical failure of nationalist forces and the failure of the Left have created a vacuum that has been filled by Islamic fundamentalists.

Some on the British Left would probably like to entertain the idea that Hizbollah is capable of evolving leftwards. Is that a fantasy?

Basically, yes. Even a plebeian group like Muqtada al Sadr's organisation in Iraq is more socially threatening to the bourgeoisie than Hizbollah. The latter, of course, is radical in its opposition to Israel, as is usual with Islamic fundamentalist forces linked to Iran, but in Lebanese politics Hizbollah is integrated fully into the system. It has two ministers in the government that is dominated by Hariri-led US clients and it allies itself with quite reactionary figures.

True, it organises social services, but only as churches or charities do-they represent no social threat whatsoever to the bourgeois social order. There is not even a potential for that, given Hizbollah's ideology, its structure, its close links to Iran and to Syria. Iran, Hizbollah's model of society and state, is utterly bourgeois in its social structure. Whatever populist ranting Ahmadinejad (the Iranian president) may have given vent to, last year, in his electoral battle for the presidency against the capitalist Rafsanjani, these do not translate into any kind of concrete social measures.

In that respect, Chavez's Venezuela is a far more progressive state: Iran is not a Muslim equivalent of Venezuela. Such equivalents existed in the Middle East in the 60s, but it is out of their defeat that Islamic fundamentalism was able to grow.

Ben Gurion had the idea that Israel's frontiers should be natural- the Litani river in the North and the river Jordan in the East. Is this what links the attacks on Lebanon and the Palestinians?

The Greater Israel schemes are obsolete and have been so for a very long time. Hizbollah's rockets are a further proof of the fact that 'natural boundaries' do not mean much. Even after it invaded Lebanon in 1982, Israel could not keep the newly occupied territory under its direct control for long.

These are mountainous areas suitable for guerrilla struggle, and the Lebanese population has undergone military

training through several years of civil war. Hence the huge caution of Israeli troops in penetrating south Lebanon after July 12. The Israeli Defence Force took just three villages in the first two weeks and at relatively high cost; it met fierce resistance. It decided to resort to flattening the little town of Bint Jubail after proving unable to control it. The Israelis keep saying they do not want to occupy south Lebanon again-for good reason.

In Palestine, when the cost of keeping direct control over the Palestinian-populated territories became too high after the first Intifada of 1987-88, Israel ended up relinquishing that direct control. But it plans to maintain the bulk of its colonial settlements in the West Bank as well as its direct control over the borders between the Palestinian-populated areas and neighbouring countries, whether Gaza's border with Egypt or the stretch of land along the Jordan river isolating the West Bank from Jordan.

Is Israel more vulnerable now?

This question relates to a point long made by Jewish critics of Zionism. Far from becoming the sanctuary for the Jews of the world that the Zionists promised, Israel is more and more turning into a deadly trap for its Jewish inhabitants. The old warning by anti-Zionist Jews is getting more and more relevant because of the evolution in destructive techniques and weaponry. Israel is exposing its own population to huge risks.

Israel's ruthless, barbaric way of dealing with the Palestinians and the Lebanese feeds hatred against it in the whole area. This will certainly result in many people wanting to inflict on the Israelis the most painful damage possible, compared to which Hizbollah's Katyusha rockets might look quite benign. It takes some 50 Hizbollah rockets to kill one Israeli on average in the ongoing confrontation. But what if devices could be made to inflict mass destruction on Israel? That is what Israel is inciting against itself.

Zawahiri, Bin Laden's second-in-command, made a statement calling for strikes against Israel as if he wanted to outbid Hizbollah. Israel is presently inflicting a terrible nightmare on the Lebanese, it has been inflicting a permanent nightmare on the Palestinians, but it is also preparing an appalling nightmare for its own people.

What are the prospects for building a new Arab socialist Left? What can socialists and anti-imperialists do?

In the Arab world nowadays the space for building a socialist Left is quite marginal, the Left is ideologically isolated. Nonetheless there should be a permanent effort at rebuilding a socialist Left and that cannot be done by tail-ending Islamic fundamentalism. Left-wing activists should not let the fundamentalists occupy alone the terrain of the fight against imperialism and the Zionist state, as some sections of them tend to do, but it is clear that the Left won't become a match for the religious forces in this respect anytime soon.

In many other fields, however, the fundamentalists are no competitors-when they are not foes: in the fight for workers' and peasants' rights and interests, the rights of the unemployed, women's rights, the fight against sexual oppression, for secularism, liberty of conscience and freedom from the rule of religion in social life, etc. These are issues around which the Left in the Arab world should intensely campaign-but it should do so without expecting to achieve a breakthrough in the near future, lest it get rapidly demoralized.

The building of a new Socialist Left in the Arab region can be helped by the international Left. Even though Latin America is quite far away, the Left turn there is inspiring. But the main influence on the development of a socialist force in the Middle East will come from Europe, where there is a significant socialist Left.

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The antiwar movement in Western countries has been very important in educating the Arab public that this is not a clash of civilisations or of religions, but an imperialist war drive serving capitalist interests and opposed as such by social movements in the West. The progress of the social movement in Europe can only have beneficial effects in the Middle East. For that, it is also crucial for the European socialist Left to stand at the forefront of the struggle against Islamophobia, thus undermining the Islamic fundamentalist propaganda that is nurtured by this very same Islamophobia.

This interview will appear in the September edition of Socialist Outlook.